German Studies

The Romantic Conception of Life: Science and Philosophy in the Age of Goethe. By Robert J. Richards. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2002. Pp. xix + 587. £24.50.

The word 'life' in the title of this book refers to two distinct conceptions—'life' in the existential, biographical sense, and 'life' in the scientific, biological sense. As Robert J. Richards seeks to show in *The Romantic Conception of Life,* however,

personal experience and philosophical/ scientific theory intermingled to a significant extent in Romantic circles, including Fichte, Novalis, Schelling, Schleiermacher, A. W. and Friedrich Schlegel, not to mention the fascinating Caroline Michaelis (married in turn to Georg Böhmer, then to A. W. Schlegel, then to Schelling). Richards relates the turmoil of personalities and relationships in early Romanticism, particularly the impact of the deaths of Sophie von Kühn and of Auguste Böhmer on Novalis and Schelling respectively; but he also offers accounts of the transcendental idealism of Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre* – 'Kantianism properly understood', so Fichte maintained – and of Schelling's *Naturphilosophie* and *Identitätsphilosophie,* a fundamental feature of which, Richards claims, is the idea of 'organicism', that is, 'the idea that consciousness and, consequently, nature have a fundamentally organic structure' (p. 157). The text around which Fichte and Schelling positioned themselves was Kant's *ThirdCritique* (1790), with its distinction between 'determinative' and 'reflective' judgements, its discussion of the ideas of an i*ntellectus archetypus,* teleology and genius, and its introduction of aesthetic judgement as 'a way of making intelligible the relation between determinate nature and free human behavior' (p. 69). In this work, Kant also speculated about the possibility of evolution, describing it as 'a daring adventure of reason' *(Critique of Judgment,* §80; cf. 233). Now, precisely this phrase was taken up by Goethe in his essay 'Intuitive Judgment' (1820), and Richard's story here moves in two directions. On the one hand, mindful of his subtitle, he devotes two long chapters to Goethe, 'us[ing] love and poetry as threads by which to follow the course of his scientific relations with nature and to demonstrate the erotic authority that nature exercised over him' (p. 327). Richards pays much attention to the latter, sometimes vividly, as in his evocation of Gretchen, the first object of Goethe's affections, as 'the kind of girl who today would be wearing a tank top, sporting a light tan, and displaying a small tattoo on her shoulder' (p. 333). Together, Richards argues, the impact of Spinoza and the evidence of Goethe's senses, aided by imagination (the 'mental eye'), in Italy, led to his conception of the archetypal plant *(Urpflanze),* indeed, the archetype *(Urbild):* 'The eternal feminine and the eternal plant were for Goethe both ideals of beauty and models for the comprehension of their many empirical instantiations' (p. 396). And morphology? Here Richard's account intersects with the second thread of his account, Goethe's anticipation of later evolutionary theory. Richards starts with Blumenbach's notion of *Bildungstrieb,* the conception of vital powers in Herder's religious cosmology – 'ideas so monstrous that reason shudders before them', Kant complained in his review of

Herder's *Ideen* – and such later thinkers as C. F. Kielmeyer and J. C. Reil (the latter, one learns in a fascinating excursus, envisaged the possibility of a *Katzenclavier* – that's right, a piano made from cats . . .). From there, Richards draws a direct line to the 'Romantic biology' of Darwin, on whom Humboldt had particular influence; far from offering a mechanistic account of natural selection, Darwin's conception had 'sprung from the head of a divinized nature', 'a morally saturated nature', such that, in homage to Milton's *Paradise Lost,* 'the purpose of nature will be fulfilled, the transformation of the lowly and debased into higher beings': nothing less than a form of *Steigerung* (pp. 535. 539, 538). Here the author connects with his previous books (*Darwin and the Emergence of Evolutionary Theories of Mind and Behavior,* 1987; *The Meaning of Evolution,* 1992), but he also signals the way to further research into the origins in the Romantic movement of nineteenth-century biology, and Ernst Haeckel in particular.

Contrary to the strictures of much literary theory, Richard believes that the lives of the Romantics affected their work, and vice versa, and he rescues from bankruptcy the kind of biographical interpretation rejected by, for example, David Wellbery (pp. xviii, 350–1). Controversially, too, Richards claims outright that Goethe was a Romantic – 'a Romantic biologist', no less (p. 330) – thereby aligning himself with an earlier literary historical view and against such recent critics as Dietrich von Engelhardt, Nicholas Boyle, and R. H. Stephenson. Although Lorenz Oken is comprehensively cleared of having appropriated Goethe's discovery of the vertebral construction of the skull, on another, crucial question of who influenced whom (Goethe Schelling, or Schelling Goethe), Richards tries to have it both ways. So he argues that Schelling's 'discussions with [Goethe] might also have helped stimulate the seductive new proposals that made art the means to reveal the secret union of the poetically created self and the scientifically perceived world' (p. 161), but he also insists 'there should be little doubt of Goethe's admiration for Schelling or his enthusiasm for the new philosophy', for 'this "dominating and powerful mode of thought"' (as Goethe described his conversations about idealism with Friedrich Niethammer) (p. 469). Schelling's letter to Goethe of 26 January 1801, however, asserts that Goethe's 'metamorphosis of plants' had proved 'indispensable' to him as 'the fundamental scheme for the origin of all organic beings', and when Richards writes that Goethe's conception of species transformation 'only differed from his young friend's by reason of the latter's deeply metaphysical grounding' (p. 306), precisely that grounding, which facilitated Schelling's eventual slide into mysticism, might be seen to represent a fundamental, and insurmountable, difference between the two men. For all the inherent difficulty of many of the texts

involved, Richards' book without doubt succeeds in bringing alive the personalities and issues of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and in demonstrating the relevance of their discussions and debates for subsequent scientific thought.

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