

Book Review

ROBERT J. RICHARDS. *The Romantic Conception of Life: Science and Philosophy in the Age of Goethe*. Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2002. xix, 587 pp., illus. (No price given).

Reviewed by M. J. S. HODGE, Ph.D., Division of the History and Philosophy of Science, Department of Philosophy, University of Leeds, Leeds, LS2 9JT, United Kingdom.

This book is a remarkable achievement, and it is appropriate to begin by saluting not only the author, Robert Richards, but also the press and the editors responsible for its publication. For a couple of decades now the University of Chicago Press has set standards for the world in publishing major monographs in the history of science. In recognizing this contribution to our field, special mention should always be made of the late Susan Abrams at the press itself and of the historian and philosopher of biology David Hull, now in active retirement at Northwestern University and formerly the editor of the flagship series “Science and Its Conceptual Foundations.” The collaboration between Abrams and Hull is a daunting act to follow, but there are welcome signs that the tradition is to be upheld in the coming years. Authors with positions at the University of Chicago, such as Richards, who has now produced three volumes in that series, are contributing decisively to this prospect and will be cheered on by all who care for the interests of our field.

The present study spreads itself very widely, but the ideas that dominate are those of Schelling and even more so of Goethe. Historians of medicine will find most relevant a chapter on Johann Christian Reil. There is an epilogue—mostly quite unconvincing to this reviewer, at least, but always splendidly and valuably provocative—on Darwin, reinterpreted here as a German romantic.

The challenges to be met in any study of German romantic science and philosophy are notorious enough. The German language was not then well adapted to such highbrow uses—Kant’s cures for this weakness being so counterproductive that, even in Germany, scholars today regularly resort to Kemp Smith’s English translation of the *Critique of Pure Reason*. Post-Kantian romantics were in any case in revolt against all the older ideals of clarity and distinctness in ideas, often insisting that discourse was

metaphorical and allusive all the way down, and that one can never say but only show what one means by diverse failures to say it (an insistence upheld in our own time by the later Wittgenstein and his follower Thomas Kuhn in his characterization of scientific revolutions).

Most of the time Richards resists the temptation to join his heroes in this tendency, and gives us the help we so badly need in understanding, in a good old-fashioned Enlightenment manner, what were their beliefs and their reasons for holding them. From time to time, however, he exercises his right to resonate and pulsate along with their imaginings, their sentiments, and their preference for poetic over prosaic expressions of their inner selves. As for contexts, Richards consistently and explicitly goes for the personal rather than the political or economic. He dwells illuminatingly on individuals' hopes and fears, families' harmonies and discords, colleagues' solidarities and feudings and, especially and inevitably, on almost everyone's amorous yearnings, entanglements, crushes, tiffs, and jiltings. For some readers, one effect of this decision may be to confirm the old notion that whatever else it was about, the Romantic movement in Germany and elsewhere was a celebration of maturation rather than of maturity, of adolescence rather than adulthood, of artistic creativity over conventional morality, and hence of grown men fancying women young enough to be their children, and so generally, in academic settings, of the professors' license to be as sophomoric as their students.

This choice of contextual emphasis is never allowed to be overwhelmingly pervasive, however, and so one can take it or leave it while still learning greatly and gratefully about a wonderful range of instructive and influential topics: Schelling's philosophy of nature; Reil's psychiatry; Kant's teleology; Goethe's morphology; and concepts of irritability, sensibility, and vital force from Haller to Humboldt. On all these and many related subjects, there is no better Anglophone teacher in our time than Robert Richards. This book takes a truly exemplary place in a uniquely distinguished series.

doi:10.1093/jhmas/jrl032