

RECONSTRUCTING GERMAN IDEALISM AND ROMANTICISM: HISTORICISM AND PRESENTISM

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Frederick Beiser, *German Idealism: The Struggle Against Subjectivism, 1781–1801* (Cambridge, MA/London: Harvard University Press, 2002)

Robert Richards, *The Romantic Conception of Life: Science and Philosophy in the Age of Goethe* (Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press, 2002)

All art should become science and all science art; poetry and philosophy should be made one. Friedrich Schlegel, *Kritische Fragmente*¹

When two major studies on the same thematic appear roughly simultaneously, integrating not only their authors' respective careers but the revisions of a whole generation of scholarship, the moment cries out for stock-taking, both substantively and methodologically. At a minimum, we need to recognize the key theses of our two protagonists and the frameworks they erect to uphold them. But we need even more to step back from that endeavor to wider considerations. I advance two claims in that light. First, something has been unearthed in these studies which speaks to urgent philosophical concerns of our day, namely the rise of naturalized epistemology and the need for a more encompassing naturalism. Indeed, I suspect this current interest may have incited (if only subliminally) discernment of just those aspects of the earlier age. That signals something essential about the point and practice of intellectual history, namely (my second claim) the *mutuality*, not opposition, of historicism and presentism.

1 Friedrich Schlegel, *Kritische Fragmente* (Richards cites Schlegel's maxim at 466).

I

With *German Idealism* Frederick Beiser has now published three major works which chart the wider wake of Kantian enlightenment in Germany.² With *The Romantic Conception of Life*, Robert Richards brings to culmination a series of works on the roots of Darwinian theory and its subsequent mutations.³ These two admirable arcs of scholarly productivity intersect in the epoch of Idealism and Romanticism, but they enter it with radically different vectors. Beiser wants to know how this epoch can possibly be *intelligible* in the light of Kant. Richards seeks to show how the epoch was necessarily *inaugural* for the vision of Darwin. Beiser wishes, with skeptical caution, to appraise *continuities* from the Kantian project to that of Idealism and Romanticism. Richards wishes, with a notable passion, to affirm creative *innovation* in that epoch without which Darwin would be hard to imagine. The motives have no small impact upon the methods each employs. The austerity and “internalist” strategy of Beiser’s history of philosophy stand in stark contrast to the aesthetic and intimate strategy of Richards’s biographical contextualism (see Section II below). All that makes the fact that Beiser and Richards find the *same new thing* signally important.

A generation ago, and for generations by then, a construction of the history of philosophy prevailed which held that Kant was a great philosopher, worthy of the most intense engagement, but that *after* Kant German philosophy plummeted into folly. Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel were names for widening circles of tenebrous abyss. Bertrand Russell’s canard, *A History of Western Philosophy*, can stand token for all that. And so those many generations—until the last. The scene needs to open still wider. Idealism has been linked systematically with another anathema: Romanticism. From Irving Babbitt to Isaiah Berlin, generations of grand critics pounced upon Goethe’s dictum, “the classical I call healthy and the Romantic sick,” to blame Romanticism for every malady of the modern world.⁴

2 See Beiser’s earlier books: *The Fate of Reason: German Philosophy from Kant to Fichte* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), and *Enlightenment, Revolution, and Romanticism: The Genesis of Modern German Political Thought, 1790–1800* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992).

3 See Richards’s earlier books: *Darwin and the Emergence of Evolutionary Theories of Mind and Behavior* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), and *The Meaning of Evolution: The Morphological Construction and Ideological Reconstruction of Darwin’s Theory* (Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

4 Irving Babbitt, *Rousseau and Romanticism* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1919); Isaiah Berlin, *The Roots of Romanticism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999). The dictum is from Goethe’s *Dialogues with Eckermann*, dated to April, 1829, and, as Richards observes, “what is usually overlooked . . . is that . . . Goethe was reacting to Romantic literature in France after the turn of the century, not to the literature of the early Romantic movement” (458).

The dream of reason and its “transcendental ego” appeared to have joined with all-too-human empirical egos to engender monsters on all sides. But the very worst thing of all was when Idealism and Romanticism together intruded upon the holiest of holies: the domain of natural science. *Naturphilosophie* has always been the ultimate scandal. Even scholars sensitive to the richness of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century science have been unable to find in *Naturphilosophie* anything but how not to do science. Nothing—literally nothing—of value could come of it: such was the wisdom of the positivist age.

A generation of revisionist work has challenged these dogmas bit by bit. As a result, Idealism has seen a considerable revival. Of the Hegel “renaissance” there can be no doubt (accordingly, precious little is made of him in Beiser or Richards).⁵ Fichte, too, has won serious reconsideration.⁶ Perhaps the most striking feature of the revisionism of the last generation has been that the early Romantics—Friedrich Hölderlin, Friedrich Schlegel, Novalis—assume major stature in German Idealism as *philosophers*, not merely as poets. The scholars presiding over this revolution in interpretation are Dieter Henrich and Manfred Frank.⁷ The most succinct articulation of the ambition binding Romanticism and Idealism came in what is known as the “Earliest System Program of German Idealism,” authorship of which has been ascribed to Hegel, Schelling, and Hölderlin, but which could stand as well for the project of the Schlegels and Novalis, as the epigraph from Schlegel at the head of this essay attests.⁸

Now, with Beiser and Richards, *Schelling* is joining in the revival at last. He, more than any other figure, represents the confluence of Idealism, Romanticism and *Naturphilosophie*. The striking novelty of Beiser and Richards is their joint affirmation of the centrality of Schelling and *Naturphilosophie* in Idealism. For both interpreters, as well, *aesthetics*—above all, artistic insight—emerges as the crucial catalyst. Instead of seeing *Naturphilosophie* as an aberration, or Romantic aestheticism as a counter-movement, these two interpretations mark them as

5 One might scruple whether Hegel can so easily be excluded from a reconstruction of Idealism. Is it mere coincidence that his philosophy commanded the heights for a generation and appeared to all contemporaries as the consummation of the movement?

6 Neither of these works appears to have had time to take into consideration Anthony La Vopa’s distinguished *Fichte: The Self and the Calling of Philosophy, 1762–1799* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), which would have complemented (and complicated) their arguments admirably.

7 Dieter Henrich, *Konstellationen: Probleme und Debatten am Ursprung der idealistischen Philosophie (1789–1795)* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1991); Manfred Frank, ‘Unendliche Annäherung’: *Die Anfänge der philosophischen Romantik* (Frankfurt/M: Suhrkamp, 1997).

8 For the most extensive recent treatment of the system program, see Frank-Peter Hansen, *Das älteste Systemprogramm des deutschen Idealismus: Rezeptionsgeschichte und Interpretation* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1989).

quintessential for “absolute idealism,” construing Schelling as the evidencing instance. But they get to this insight on different paths and for somewhat different reasons.

Beiser devotes almost half his book to Kant and Fichte in advancing his provocative thesis of an Idealist “struggle against subjectivism.” The essential divide he wishes both to recognize and to bridge is between Kant and Fichte as “subjective idealists,” at least in the eyes of their critics, and the absolute idealists epitomized by Schelling. The essentially contested question was whether rationality was a human imposition on reality or something actual in the world which informed even its human expression. To uphold the reality of the world, to carry forward the “struggle against subjectivism” that Kant had inaugurated, Beiser argues, Schelling’s cohort recentered rationality in nature as a whole, deriving human reason as a (preeminent) part of this larger whole. The metaphysical heart of absolute idealism was *Naturphilosophie*: a conception of “the universe as a whole, nature in itself, which subsists apart from consciousness and explains its very possibility according to necessary laws” (p. 557). To articulate it, the Idealists resorted to “intellectual intuition,” seeking precedent in Spinoza’s *amor intellectualis Dei* and warrant in Kant’s own writings about the *intellectus archetypus*. But an equally strong source of their confidence was *aesthetic insight*, the cognitive implications of beauty and sublimity. Here is where Romanticism intervened. The upshot is what Beiser terms, with explicit attention to contemporary discourse, a *naturalism* (see Section III below). Still, Beiser remains ultimately unconvinced that the metaphysical adventure of absolute idealism can overcome the epistemological scruples of Kantian philosophy. He recognizes *Naturphilosophie* (historically) but he will not affirm it (philosophically).

From this sobriety we pass, in turning to Richards, to an almost Dionysiac revel. In Richards’s narrative we learn first of the emergence of the early Romantic circle around the endlessly fascinating Caroline and the fractiously brilliant Friedrich Schegel. Out of these intimacies Richards retrieves myriad webs of poetry and philosophy, each woven in a personalized filigree. Into that skein burst Friedrich Schelling to wrench both the erotic and the intellectual heart away to weave a fabric of his own—or, indeed, a bewildering sequence of fabrics. Schelling, for better or worse, had more a philosopher’s than a poet’s gift, and he fashioned Romanticism into a philosophy of nature.

Mentor and model in this metamorphosis was Goethe, who serves as Richards’s other grand protagonist. He reconstructs Schelling and Goethe as *universal evolutionists* whose conceptions brought later German life scientists more readily into attunement with Lamarckian and Darwinian theories than their counterparts in France or England. Indeed, Richards believes that Darwin himself was steeped in the Romantic idea of life—through the mediation of Alexander

von Humboldt. That is why he ends his work with an “Epilogue” on Darwin as Romantic biologist. Richards holds that Romantic biology developed not only a theory of evolution, but a holistic (aesthetic and ethical, not just cognitive) vision of nature as well. Because Darwin clearly demonstrated these impulses—at least in the generative phases of his work—the role of Romanticism in shaping nineteenth-century life science becomes pivotal. One of Richards’s most adamant claims is that Goethe’s biological science was seminal for the nineteenth century. That view bucks the bulk of the scholarship, which has not found Goethe’s scientific pretensions very credible. Moreover, Richards stresses the philosophical solidarity of Goethe and Schelling against many who seek to extricate Goethe from *Naturphilosophie* the better to disparage it and, perhaps, to rescue him for a sanitized science. In Richards’s account, Schelling and Goethe emerge as committed collaborators crucial for the genesis of life science. Situating them in a wider context of the emergent life sciences in Germany, his reconstruction proves quite convincing.

What, then, can we harvest from these two new works for our grasp of the epoch of German Idealism and Romanticism? Above all, the unity of *Naturphilosophie* and Romantic aesthetics in the “absolute idealism” of Schelling. The role of the artist proved crucial for Schelling in his crystallization of *Naturphilosophie*. Goethe was his model, aesthetic intuition (*anschauende Urteilskraft*) was his exemplar of deepest insight, and Schlegel’s maxim (see epigraph) his driving impulse. It has been commonplace to write Schelling off as utterly remote from “real science.”⁹ Schelling allegedly disregarded empirical science to concoct speculative “deductive” science from his armchair. Yet he conducted extensive surveys of the latest scientific work in his books on *Naturphilosophie*. He was explicit, moreover, that *Naturphilosophie* was not intended to replace but to complement and complete empirical science, and he expressed enormous respect for experimental research, maintaining that all knowledge arose initially through experience.

Naturphilosophie proposed that certain formidable metaphysical boundaries be torn down. There ought to be no categorical divide between the inanimate and the animate, between animal and human, between body and “spirit.” And this *not* because spirit should be *reduced* to body—or humans to (“mere”) animals,

9 Richards points (464n.) to Nicholas Boyle, *Goethe: The Poet and the Age*, vol. 2 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), to H. A. M. Snelders, “Romanticism and *Naturphilosophie*,” *Studies in Romanticism* 9 (1970), 193–215, and to Walter Wetzels, “Aspects of Natural Science in German Romanticism,” *Studies in Romanticism* 10 (1971), 44–59, as instances. He notes: “Snelders, along with others, . . . believes that Schelling regarded empirical work as trivial and opposed it – a belief . . . for which there are no grounds in Schelling’s work” (128n.).

or animate to inanimate—in some mechanical-determinist physicalism, but because the animate *emerged* from the inanimate, hence the latter must have contained that potentiality in its original nature, plus the dynamism to actualize it. So, too, humans emerged from the rest of the animal order, hence, again, the latter must have had that emergent possibility. So, ultimately, the physical world must not be sundered metaphysically from spirit, but the latter instead reinterpreted as an expression of inherent possibilities in nature itself. Nature was taken to be inherently creative. Self-production in nature moved from the simpler to the more complex; it took on historical-developmental form.

In his full-blown *Naturphilosophie*, Schelling conceived of all nature as one living organism, a vast continuum of variously developed levels of organization and “living force.” Kant had admonished those who would undertake such a “daring adventure of reason” to observe his distinction between regulative and constitutive principles: what might serve as a fruitful heuristic must never be ascribed literally to actuality.¹⁰ Our natural disposition is to share Kant’s view, but from the vantage of the philosophy of science and the practical constitution of life science at the time, Kant’s regulative/constitutive distinction proved far less congenial to inquiry than it would appear.¹¹ Kant’s “Copernican Revolution” did not go far enough, because it accepted too much of the seventeenth-century transparency of subjectivity and of the seventeenth-century inertness in matter. Above all, the new sciences needed to reconsider the relation between matter and force, to reanimate the physical world. For the absolute idealists nature was “living activity or productivity itself (*natura naturans*)” (Beiser, p. 530).

Thus, with reference to pivotal issues in the history and philosophy of science around 1800, both Beiser and Richards reject the efforts of Timothy Lenoir to see Kant’s regulative/constitutive distinction as essential to the emergent life sciences.¹² Conversely, the boldly metaphysical recourse of *Naturphilosophie* turns

10 Kant, *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, in *Kants gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Preussische Akademie der Wissenschaften (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1902–56), 5:419n. English in Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), 305n.

11 Richards puts it succinctly: “The impact of Kant’s *Kritik der Urteilskraft* on the disciplines of biology has, I believe, been radically misunderstood by many contemporary historians. . . . Those biologists who found something congenial in Kant’s third *Critique* either misunderstood his project (Blumenbach and Goethe) or reconstructed certain ideas to have very different consequences from those Kant originally intended (Kielmeyer and Schelling)” (229). See my “‘This Inscrutable *Principle* of an Original *Organization*’: Epigenesis and ‘Looseness of Fit’ in Kant’s Philosophy of Science,” *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science* 34 (2003), 73–109; and Robert Richards, “Kant and Blumenbach on the *Bildungstrieb*: A Historical Misunderstanding,” *Studies in the History and Philosophy of Biology and the Biomedical Sciences* 31 (2000), 11–32.

12 See Beiser, 507–8 and 684 n. 7; Richards, 210n., 216n. See also Lenoir, *The Strategy of Life: Teleology and Mechanism in Nineteenth-Century German Biology* (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1982).

out to have been genuinely fruitful for scientific practice. The central impetus was to recognize philosophically what Beiser calls the “autonomy of nature,” that is “that the basic forces of nature must be sought within it” (p. 530). Above all, nature needed to be reinterpreted from a set of determinate things (products) to the immanent process that generated them: in philosophical terms, from *natura naturata* to *natura naturans*. This had a radical, “Spinozistic” metaphysical implication, as Richards indicates: “fecund, creative nature could replace God; and man would find himself an intrinsic part of nature and able to exercise . . . her same creative power” (p. 405). But it also brought concrete scientific advances. Richards highlights the development of morphology, linking embryology to species transformation, more widely still linking geological history to the proliferation of organic forms and these to still broader patterns of chemical metamorphosis. *Emergence* and *process* became central to natural scientific theory.

No less meticulous a practicing scientist than Alexander von Humboldt publicly asserted in Schelling’s defense: “I am far from the view that the study of authentic *Naturphilosophie* should be damaging to empirical philosophers and that empiricists and nature-philosophers should forever repel one another as opposite poles of a magnet.”¹³ When Schelling undertook to create a comprehensive system of nature, of course, just like Descartes he overreached badly. Still, to theorize *is* simply to seek to synthesize a principle that unites and explains the particulars of empirical observation, or brings particular generalizations into a more encompassing order. To seek to unify theories—to find a grand unified theory—is an ambition hardly forsaken by our own science.¹⁴ Schelling’s *Naturphilosophie* further suggested the possibility of primacy for *biology* as foundational science. That, too, has powerful contemporary resonance (see Section III below).¹⁵

II

Beiser is a historian of philosophy, and Richards a historian of science. Each makes decisions about methods of historical reconstruction which are instructive for intellectual historians more generally. What consonance, what dissonance do their respective performances present when brought into juxtaposition? What

13 Alexander von Humboldt, *Ideen einer Geographie der Pflanzen* (1807), cited in Richards, 134n.

14 Steven Weinberg, *Dreams of a Final Theory: The Scientific Search for the Ultimate Laws of Nature* (New York: Vintage, 1992).

15 See David Hull and Michael Ruse, eds., *The Philosophy of Biology* (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 1998); David Depew and Bruce Weber, eds., *Evolution at the Crossroads: The New Biology and the New Philosophy of Science* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985).

are the implications of these two works for the current practices of intellectual history?

Beiser asserts firmly that the intrinsic philosophical problems of German Idealism are so thorny that it would be premature to venture into contextual study. Relative to standard practice among historians of philosophy, his earlier work was very attentive to contextual issues, hence it is striking that he finds it self-evident here that contextualization could provide no insight into the arguments. It appears, for Beiser, a luxury, not an essential element, in his conception of the history of philosophy. That view determines the severity of focus upon texts and arguments *alone* which marks the work. The chronological sequentialism of his argument—one text expounded meticulously after and on the basis of its predecessor, one philosopher expounded methodically after and on the basis of his predecessor—marks Beiser’s ambition to test the limits of continuity in *concept* strictly through array in *time*. There would appear to be *no* intervening variables worthy of historical reconstruction until after this philosophical exegesis is concluded.

In striking contrast to Beiser, Richards leaves all expectations of diachronic order in disarray. Something quite other is at play in his organization. Originality is his target, and he suspects he will find ideas “in the making” where the passionate intersections of lives spark them off. All this gives Richards’s study a different emotional valence from Beiser’s; it is itself Romantic in tone and substance. The endeavor to fuse the personal with the theoretical shapes its strange emplotment. The book’s parts form no chronological or philosophical progression, but rather an aesthetic one: each part rises to a climax, almost like a musical movement. Figures and arguments appear and reappear, taking on ampler resonance with each layering of context.

Richards is clearly caught up in the passions of his protagonists.¹⁶ Hence his thrust is always *bivalent*: to reconstruct—almost vicariously to *relive*—their febrile *immediacy* and to vindicate its theoretical expression in a *science* of life. There are two cardinal instances of Richards’s bivalent approach. The first frames his whole volume: the epiphanic fusion of eroticism and poetic creativity in Goethe’s fifth Roman elegy. The second is more singular and jolting. Richards draws the climactic moment of Schelling’s break with Fichte into intimate relation with his anguish over the death of Auguste Böhmer, the daughter of his lover Caroline and the object, Richards believes, of no less of Schelling’s ardor. In the

16 He makes no bones of having fallen in love with Caroline: “Caroline’s magical, erotic power—the kind of power only a beautiful woman with a wonderfully creative intelligence can effect—has pulled writers into her embrace over the last two hundred years. . . . [Kuno] Fischer fell in love with her from a distance, and this historian, too, has succumbed” (Richards, 44n.).

context of Schelling's grief and guilt, Richards writes, "only the abandonment of Fichtean egoism and the adoption of an austere and deterministic absolutism might mitigate the responsibility for love and death" (p. 179). It is jolting that in conventional histories of philosophy—Beiser, for example—we get no inkling of the simultaneity of these crises, no opportunity to consider the connection between what Richards terms the "emotive dialectic" and the philosophical one.

Richards privileges the erotic and passionate aspects of life and character as decisive for the creative process, whether in art, in science, or in philosophy. He bitingly rejects a formalist approach even to poetry, terming it "the critical equivalent of endorsing the virgin birth" (p. 350). On the other hand, Richards pays little attention to social and political forces. For him it is the individual in his or her passions that galvanizes everything. That is his "emotive dialectic." It is not obvious that it could alone have brought about the split with Fichte, but it adds substantially to the historical richness of that passage. More pointedly, it highlights the methodological issue of explaining intellectual choices as between what we have conventionally termed "internalist" and "externalist" or contextual accounts. Intellectual history must, in my view, stand or fall with the contextual approach. It is not that we can or should not engage the arguments or ideas in themselves, but rather that our *métier* is precisely the situation of claims and the analysis of such situations for their impulse and import.

Should we then simply supplement Beiser's severe "internalism" with Richards's intimate dialectic to achieve the contextualization that Beiser defers? Would that suffice? Or, to get at the overall dialectic of German Idealism, might we not need to conduct a far more systematic integration of institutional and political life, along the lines Anthony La Vopa pursued in his intellectual biography of Fichte? For the movement as a whole, would that be a manageable endeavor, given how extensive these two studies, with their restriction of theme and method, already are? Is contextual intellectual history on that scale simply too ambitious for an epoch as complex as Idealism and Romanticism? To write an intellectual history of Idealism and Romanticism is to insert yet another point of view into a thicket of competing, often monumental, accounts. That two major new ones should have been produced is heartening for the endeavor, yet at the same time they raise the question, both methodologically and substantively, what avenues yet remain to achieve commensurate insight.

III

Beiser and Richards offer major historical reconstructions of the German Idealists and Romantics. But one can still ask what their retrieval of Romantic *Naturphilosophie* has to do with philosophy today. What could we possibly learn

from—indeed, why should we even take seriously—the ideas of German Idealism and Romanticism? What is *history* of philosophy for?¹⁷ What if past thought were not always surpassed thought? Might we be challenged in our complacencies by—might a real space of transformative possibility be inserted from—the past?

Historicism is *not* antiquarianism; intellectual history is always as presentist as it is historicist. More important by far than the famous idea that each age is immediate to God, what Ranke was after in insisting upon *wie es eigentlich gewesen* was the idea that if we are ever to cope with our present we must *learn* from the past, and learn precisely from the encounter with its difference. Always, that encounter is mediated by our present; that is what the hermeneutic circle is all about. Yet it is an enabling, not ultimately a vicious, circle. It enables not merely through the concepts with which it empowers even as it restricts us (the meaning of *discipline*), but even more through the *interests* with which it motivates our inquiry. Such presentism does not undermine, it vitalizes historical reconstruction. But conversely, there is something in the past that demands recognition in its stubborn strangeness, that *requires* the adjustment of our categorizations. The historian of science Peter Galison writes of “constraint,” and the postmodern sociologist of science Andy Pickering writes of “resistance,” but what they both indicate is that we need to make local compromises with alterity in our language, to invent and to speak “pidgin.”¹⁸ That is what historicism has always maintained: that we must and that we can.

I want to suggest that shifts in our current problem constellations bring us nearer to or farther from constellations of other epochs, make these more or less urgent to appreciate and appropriate. There have been signal shifts in historical “taste” for other periods, and we have clearly witnessed such a shift in the treatment of German Idealism and Romanticism over the last generation. This is not merely because of the rise of postmodernist literary theory but even more because of the collapse of positivism on all fronts—from philosophy of science to epistemology to (tacit) metaphysics. That collapse has highlighted all the aporias in Kant (whom the positivists had enshrined) and simultaneously rendered the

17 See the discussions in *Philosophy in History*, ed. Richard Rorty, J. B. Schneewind and Quentin Skinner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984). In his own contribution, “The Historiography of Philosophy: Four Genres” (49–76), Richard Rorty finds history of philosophy little more than a vehicle of condescension toward the hapless dead. Assuming one’s taste for such “irony” is limited, might we learn something from history other than its benightedness?

18 I discuss these ideas in my forthcoming study, *A Nice Derangement of Epistemes: Post-Positivism in the Study of Science from Quine to Latour* (Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

concerns of the post-Kantian generation more meaningful. To understand how we can understand anew, we have to reopen questions of categorization of the world and acknowledge aesthetic resources of meaning-constitution (e.g. metaphor) which the positivist epoch disdained. And that makes us suddenly, searchingly open to the Idealists and Romantics.

At issue is the limit of human reason. More pointedly, what is at stake is *metaphysics* and its place in *our* thought. Metaphysics may *enable* inquiry and comprehension. We are struggling, under such rubrics as “scientific realism,” “naturalized epistemology,” etc., to come up with new categories through which to order our sense of the hybridity of the world, not just our categories. From systems theory to “complexity” theory to “deep ecology,” we endeavor to reconsider our place in nature. In that context, philosophy of science must reach beyond the strictly formal; there is a place for philosophy of nature. It may be just what we are looking for to conceptualize and cope with the current dissolution of every boundary between humans, machines and the organic world.¹⁹

Naturalism has had a problematic history in philosophy, where it has served as a foil for the assertion of the autonomy of reason and especially of norms. The natural was conceived essentially as the inert, empty of value or of autonomy. Human “spirit” was always defended against the threat of reductionism associated with “mere” nature. German Idealism proposed a radically different idea. Rather than evacuate all the dynamism, creativity, and meaning from nature for deposit in the spiritual world—first of God, then of man—the German Idealists read back into nature all the spirit that two thousand years of thought had tried to dissociate from it. Rather than isolating man “above” nature, they sought to see in human spirit the ultimate distillation of nature’s own essence. Today, no less than in the era of Idealism, the question of our place in nature is thrust upon us—made perhaps even more urgent with our increased awareness of the extraordinary interdependence and mutability of natural systems at higher orders of complexity and with our headlong plunge into biotechnology, smashing through traditional boundaries simply because we can.

Beiser offers us a remarkable prospect on our moment by bringing despised *Naturphilosophie* explicitly into connection with highly fashionable contemporary ideas regarding naturalistic epistemology, and Richards tacitly seconds this with his demand that *Naturphilosophie* be taken seriously today for its philosophy of science. The key to contemporary naturalism is its placement not only of

19 On this “hybridity” in contemporary thought see, e.g., Pierre Baldi, *The Shattered Self: The End of Natural Evolution* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001) and Donna Haraway’s classic “Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century” (1985; reprinted in Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* [New York: Routledge, 1991], 149–181, nn. 243–8).

the object but of the *subject* of knowledge as well within natural processes.²⁰ This imputes both a spontaneity to nature and a determinate emergence to human capacities which overturn longstanding pieties in epistemology. More, it suggests that fundamental problems in epistemology may not be soluble without metaphysics. How *is* metaphysics possible in an anti-foundationalist age? With its stress on process and emergence, naturalistic epistemology might well have a place for ideas drawn from *Naturphilosophie*. Certainly a contemporary metaphysics cannot resort to foundationalism, either the traditional faith in a priori logical form or the confidence in some primordial “given” of positivist empiricism. Instead, we have to reckon with finitude and fallibility without surrendering reasonable hope for empirical knowledge. It will be contingent but not arbitrary: nature resists, and that resistance constrains our hypothesizing. But that negative element is complemented by a positive one: nature develops, achieving higher orders of emergence in an ongoing process. We are not only products of this positive element, we are participants. That is the metaphysical stimulus of naturalism.

20 See Abner Shimony and Debra Nails, eds., *Naturalistic Epistemology: A Symposium of Two Decades* (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1987); Werner Callebaut and Rix Pinxten, eds., *Evolutionary Epistemology: A Multiparadigm Program* (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1987); Nicholas Rescher, ed., *Evolution, Cognition, and Realism: Studies in Evolutionary Epistemology* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1990).