

Central European History 38 (2005)

The Romantic Conception of Life: Science and Philosophy in the Age of Goethe. By Robert J. Richards. Chicago and London. The University of Chicago Press, 2002. Pp. 587. Price: \$35.00. ISBN 0-226-71210-9.

Early German Romantic philosophy and literature are not usually regarded as mainsprings of scientific thought. Against the current, Robert Richards, the author of two previous studies on Darwin, endeavors in his lively new book to find the roots of evolutionary theory in the early German Romantic conception of life, in the process making a Romantic out of Goethe. As a result, the book is a polemic throughout, but fortunately for the reader, of the quiet, scholarly sort. In the first part of his book, Richards describes at length the early Romantic movement in Jena around August Wilhelm and Friedrich Schlegel, Novalis, and Schelling, flanked by Fichte and Schiller, and very briefly the Berlin salons and Schleiermacher. This is followed by a discussion of the scientific foundations of their conception of life as formulated by Blumenbach, Kielmayer, and Reil, followed in the third part by a lengthy demonstration of what Richards considers Goethe's decisive contribution to morphology.

Over them all hovers the figure of Kant, not a Romantic himself, of course, but whose epistemology facilitated their endeavor in the first place. He was the "master," as Richards repeatedly calls him, whom the Romantics in their aesthetics, politics, and science "rounded to a completion" (p. 61). In general, the historical direction for Richards is from Kant's mechanistic notion of science, from which biology was excluded (because it did not have necessary laws comparable to Newtonian mechanics), to the Romantic's organic notions of nature, art, and science culminating in Schelling's dynamic evolutionism. Whereas Kant only allowed for the heuristic use of the concept of the design of an organism, *as if* the idea of the whole operated to organize the parts, the Romantic recognized actual teleological processes (the *Bildungstrieb*) governing organisms and valid laws formulating their relationships. In art and literature, they developed a similar notion inasmuch as the work of the artistic genius displays a designing mind even if, in contrast to the scientist, he or she cannot specify the rules by which the work of art or literary work is produced.

Richards' lucid descriptions and explanations are engaging, but much depends on what he understands by Romanticism and science. According to Richards, Schelling meant his brand of philosophy not as a replacement for, but as a complement to, experimental Baconian science, while Goethe came to see observation as itself theory-laden. Theirs was good science because they had "fruitful ideas that had the authority of empirical confirmation" (p. 457). Having first stamped them as bona fide scientists, there is, for Richards, no doubt that both Schelling and Goethe were also credible biological evolutionists. "Their conceptions straightened the path for German zoologists to advance more quickly and easily the Lamarckian and Darwinian theories than could their counterparts in England and France" (p. 211, cf. p. 435). Richards argues his bold case well, although whether convincingly enough is for historians of science to decide.

A peculiar aspect of this book is the integration of the biographies of its main characters. The personal lives of his protagonists, their friendships, and feuds, Richards believes, were basic to the literary and philosophical theories they formulated. So he is willing to interpret literature biographically as he states several times. The device makes for entertaining reading, but on only one occasion does he actually show a direct influence of personal life on philosophy. Richards surmises that it was Schelling's love affair with Caroline Schlegel, August Wilhelm's wife, and in particular his feelings of guilt related to his amateur medical attention and the subsequent death in 1801 of Auguste, Caroline's fifteen-year-old daughter from an earlier marriage, which caused him to abandon Fichte's subjectivism and to formulate his own *Identitätsphilosophie*. Fichte's subjective individualism made the ego "somehow" responsible for his actions, whereas Schelling's ultimate identity of ego (intelligence) and nature in a Spinozistic absolute reason had the effect that it "might mitigate the responsibility for love and death" (p. 179). So much for the Romantic conception of "life."

However that may be, more problematic is Richards' dealing with the early German Romantic movement as a self-contained phenomenon. He seems to share, or at least does not question, the Jena circle's irreverence for their immediate predecessors and

makes no effort to explain the reasons for this Romantic self-assessment. But Enlightenment thought and culture were not “ancient,” as the Romantic imagination presented it, on the contrary. And the Romantic rebellion was not directed against “encrusted” and “corroded” traditions, as these early Romantics and Richards would have it (without telling exactly which traditions they had in mind). Rather, they were opposed to the *new* threat of the historization of the world that took hold from the middle of the eighteenth century on. Enlightenment philosophers and historians had coped with this problem by incorporating contingency in historical thought without destroying history as a systematic discipline. The early Romantics ingenuously neutralized it by incorporating time in their conception of life itself. They posed a deeper, permanent order behind the surface of chaotic, empirical nature and explained the constant transformation of natural phenomena as the archetype realizing itself in time. In doing so, they substituted the Enlightenment triad of philosophy, history, and literature for their own triad of philosophy, science, and art. Not recognizing the problem of historization as something larger than the early Romantic movement, in my view, mars Richards’ otherwise outstanding book.

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