

Book Review

The Romantic Conception of Life: Science and Philosophy in the Age of Goethe. By Robert J. Richards. *Science and Its Conceptual Foundations*. Edited by David L. Hull. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002. Pp. xix+587. \$35.00.

Robert J. Richards's *The Romantic Conception of Life* begins with an "up close and personal" history of the German early romantic movement, setting its thought within a spirited evocation of the "intimate friendships, consuming loves, and despoiling enmities" that formed the movement in the mid-1790s in Jena and imploded it in Berlin at the turn of the century. The book ends with the audacious claim that the "romantic biology" generated by the movement inspired Charles Darwin's quest for a theory of evolution and provided the "deep logic" of both his *Origin of Species* (1859) and *Descent of Man* (1871). Along the way we are offered discussions of the philosophies of Kant, Fichte, and Schelling; explanations of the biological thought of Johann Friedrich Blumenbach, Carl Friedrich Kielmeyer, and Johann Christian Reill; and three pivotal chapters that form a kind of intellectual biography of Goethe, explaining his scientific thought as an integral part of his creative life. It is a long and sometimes giddy excursion, with more than a few byways, but it is well worth the reader's effort. Richards wants us to rethink fundamentally the origins and development of nineteenth-century biology. He aims to recover the personal, philosophical, aesthetic, and moral meanings that its pioneers invested in it but that the history of science, practiced narrowly, excises from the conventional narrative. He has shaped his book as a rebuke to disciplinary overspecialization, challenging practitioners in three fields—the history of science, philosophy, and literary studies—to do justice to the complexities of "romantic" biology and its offshoots by engaging each other seriously. And, in a principled dismissal of "a more abstemious attitude that rejects a biographically motivated interpretive practice" (350), he seeks to demonstrate that an empathic reconstruction of biographical experience, and particularly of intimate relationships, is indispensable to understanding the scientific thought of his subjects. The three agendas make for a boldly original book, and one that should provoke lively—and healthy—debate in and across several scholarly jurisdictions.

Richards's argument progresses through an intricate chain of influences and adaptations among a wide range of thinkers. To trace the argument backwards: "the heart of Darwin's theory pulsed with ideas drawn from the Romantic movement"—so much so, in fact, that "in important respects Darwin was a Romantic biologist" (513). The key romantic legacies were the concept of nature as organically vital, its myriad parts having inherently dynamic and developmental deep structures, or archetypal forms, in no need of explanation by appeal to a sustaining or intervening deity; the belief that those forms had their counterparts in the aesthetic forms of art as an ideal representation of nature; that in the mind of the biologist the two realms of form were linked by "isomorphisms of judgment," deep affinities apparent to the "inward eye" (454), so that the science of biology could be conceived as a kind of poetry of nature; and that underlying it all, in science as well as art, was an "eroticization of nature" (406) that had its experiential groundings in

"passional concerns" and "personal entanglements" (512). Darwin's immediate source for this vision was Alexander von Humboldt's *Personal Narrative* (1818–29), but it was Goethe's biological science of "morphology," positing a "dynamic course of development" driven by telic archetypes with an underlying affinity between archetypal forms in nature and in consciousness, that provided the vital link between romanticism and evolutionary science. In Goethe's intellectual career Richards traces the making of a remarkable creative synthesis, always shaped by personal experience, but also absorbing, among other things, Spinozism, Kant's epistemology as mediated by Friedrich Schiller, and above all the "new poetics of nature" (164) adumbrated in Schelling's *Naturphilosophie*. Schelling's role leads us back to the book's point of departure, the circle of early German romantics in Jena, and to a "romantic biology" that has one of its eighteenth-century lineages in Blumenbach's theory of the *Bildungstrieb*, or "formative drive."

This plot traverses large patches of difficult and sometimes abstruse ideas, but Richards has an admirable gift for explaining philosophical and scientific thought in clear and lively prose. Even Fichte and Schelling become (relatively) accessible. Precisely because the book is quite readable, you can easily forget that it is asking you to swallow huge gulps of rather jolting revisionism. "Romantic" biology, Richards argues, cannot be dismissed as the amateurish fluff of aesthetes; it had strong philosophical as well as observational underpinnings, and it had a central formative role in the development of nineteenth-century biology as a scientific discipline. Goethe was not an armchair theorist of pseudoscience, but "a good scientist for the time" and indeed "for all time," whose conceptions in morphology had "a solid empirical footing" (408). Perhaps most disconcerting, we have to come to terms with a Darwin who will strike many as virtually unrecognizable. *Pace* conventional wisdom, Darwin was not an "unflinching mechanist who deprived nature of her soul of loveliness," but a romantic organicist intent on recovering moral meaning as well as beauty for a detheologized nature.

I find a great deal of this revisionism persuasive. When the links in Richards's chain are not strong (and they often are), they at least point to arguable connections. That in itself attests to his impressive command of a sprawling body of texts, and to his sharp eye for intellectual affinities and interactions that would escape a less informed reader. The qualified exception is his reinterpretation of Darwin. Using the young Darwin's notes taken before and during the *Beagle* voyage, Richards makes a strong case that Humboldtian romanticism "aided him in the discovery of natural selection." It is one thing, however, to make such a claim about how Darwin began to think through the theory, and quite another to extend it to what, in the end, he came up with. Richards's culminating argument that "that early [romantic] experience ... settled deeply into the conceptual structure of the *Origins of Species* and the *Descent of Man*" (553) is more asserted than textually demonstrated. It posits a "deep logic" to those texts that I did not find made visible. But even if Richards's revisionism is overextended—if it illuminates an early stage in Darwin's process of discovery but does not reveal a subtext in the product completed years later—the descent of ideas it traces has an impressive sweep and carries large implications.

My other reservation speaks to Richards's contextual explanation for how the ideas were formed and transmitted. His opening commitment to a "biographical emphasis" (5) is restated at several key points. The need to establish this dimension of context explains why he begins with the detailed account of the volatile circle of friends and lovers in which Schelling became involved in Jena, though it is not until chapter 11 that we finally see how Schelling's

Naturphilosophie was absorbed into Goethe's science. Central to this strategy is his belief that we must "catch ideas in the making" (5) in the emotional and erotic dynamic of intimate relationships. Whether this interpretive strategy opens the door to psychological (and sexual) reductionism is not my concern here. I find that the execution of the strategy sometimes falls well short of its promise. Richards's biographical contextualism is most effective when it is applied to male friendships—for example, between Goethe and Schiller, or between Goethe and Schelling—in which the exchange of ideas is well documented and our awareness of the terms of friendship helps us understand the intellectual substance of the interaction. But when he speaks of the "eroticization of nature" in romantic biology, he wants to ground his argument in "amorous" heterosexual relationships whose significance for the ideas in question is far less apparent. A case in point is his treatment of Goethe's love affairs and erotically charged friendships with women. When Richards tells us that Goethe's awareness of form in art and nature reflected his sensual experience of the female form, we have his reading of the fifth poem of his *Römische Elegien*—a kind of meditation on his sexual intimacy with a woman in Rome—to make that claim credible (398–400). But when he writes that "just as [Charlotte] von Stein was teaching him calmness in his life, so did calmness enter his science," we are left wondering what the claim actually is and how it might help us understand how Goethe's scientific ideas formed and what they meant.

I do not mean to deny that erotic relationships often were what Richards calls "instigating circumstances" (350) in the formation and transmission of ideas. The contextual question is what we can learn about how the terms of the relationships contributed to shaping the meaning of the ideas. On this issue Richards's contextualism often rests, curiously, on an unhistorical assumption. It seems to suffice to know that a man and a woman fell passionately in love or were consumed by desire for each other, as has always happened, when in fact, if we are going to understand how that experience helped shape ideas, we need to know what passionate (and erotic) love meant to his subjects in that particular historical context. Perhaps most striking in this regard is the absence of a discussion of the contextually specific ways in which gender distinctions informed the experience of passion and the erotic—and hence, we can reasonably expect from the very logic of Richards's strategy, also informed the ideas about art and nature they helped instigate. Dorothea Veit's remark to Friedrich Schleiermacher that Schelling "is not inclined toward [Caroline Schlegel], or toward any mentally significant woman" (170) may have been laced with spite; but it is indicative of the larger problem that Richards sees no need to pursue the implications of the remark for his subject. In lieu of such an inquiry, he tends to rely on a prose that is meant to convey the emotional intensity of the relationships in question, but is often itself in danger of being romanticized to the point of banality. Insights from recent work on selfhood and gender in early romanticism, and particularly from Gerald Izenberg's *Impossible Individuality* (Princeton, NJ, 1992), would have been of considerable help.

The book works better as a mapping of an intellectual line of descent than as a contextual explanation of the genesis and mutation of ideas. Even if we limit Richards's achievement to the former level, however, it is remarkable for its imaginative breadth and depth of historical vision, its conceptual lucidity, and its rigorously argued panache.

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