

Robert J. Richards, *The Romantic Conception of Life: Science and philosophy in the age of Goethe*, (University of Chicago Press, 2002).

Reviewed for *Organisation and Environment* 17:4 2004.

In both length and depth this book is a substantial contribution to the growing debate reassessing the Romantic thinkers' contribution to the biological sciences. Richards sets out to substantiate two major claims that have been sidelined in mainstream history of ideas. First, that an author's life shapes their work or rather that there is a reciprocal relationship between the shape an author's life takes and the shape of their thinking. Secondly, that biological ideas within Romantic thought had a continuing influence on the development of nineteenth century biology.

These major themes are pursued through a careful study of the interactions of all 'the usual suspects' and more, and the reader is given a lively sense of what it must have been like to eavesdrop on the student quarters shared by Holderlin, Hegel and Schelling or to attend one of the intellectual soirees of the Schlegel's. That said the book is no social diarist's description; always the philosophical/scientific import of the meetings, the disagreements and even the love affairs are brought to the fore.

Very occasionally Richards warms to his first theme of the impact of the lives on the ideas and rather over states his case. For example, in the account of the death of Sophie von Kuhn one might be drawn to think that without the fifteen year old's tragic death and Friedrich von Hardenberg's unrestrained grief we might never have had a Romantic movement. And with the second theme, of the impact of Romantic biology, he constructs an interesting case for Charles Darwin as a Romantic, but it rather overemphasises the impact of Alexander von Humbolt on Darwin to the detriment of many other influences that contributed to his theory of natural selection. However, in achieving a new, more balanced account, it is perhaps the prerogative of the anti-orthodox to weight the scales slightly in their own favour.

Where the book really excels is its thorough treatment of the range, scope and, most importantly, fecund interweaving of ideas that play into Romantic biology. Richards tackles the interweaving of aesthetic, moral and epistemological issues and instead of doing so to demonstrate a lack of scientific rigour he builds on what thinkers, such as Goethe, understood themselves to be doing in order to present their ideas to the reader in a thoroughly sympathetic light. This necessarily involves a degree of complexity, it is not an easy read, but the author does produce clarity where one might have assumed there was none. For an example of getting the picture straight before delving into the intricacies we have:

Based on their respective histories and the constituent ideas with which they are associated, I wish to suggest that Romantic biology be taken as a species of the wider genus of German nature philosophy. Thus all Romantic biologists were *Naturphilosophen*, but not all *Naturphilosophen*

were Romantics, at least in the way I propose to use the terms. Romantic thinkers added aesthetic and moral elements to the content of ideas travelling under the name of *Naturphilosophie*. p.8.

Given that the book will be taking you through some very difficult philosophical terrain, e.g., the exact difference between Fichte and Kant on the action of consciousness and its implication for Schiller, Richards is a clear and convincing guide.

The book is organised in four parts. Part one covers the early Romantic movement and introduces us to Novalis, Friedrich and Wilhelm Schlegel, Schleiermacher and Fichte, and sets the scene for the development of ideas that run through the whole. It then gives an extended treatment to Schelling that sets in place (the development of one interpretation of) the role of aesthetic intuition in bringing about the kind of intellectual intuition necessary for philosophy and, of course, for science. Part two deals in exemplary detail in the development of a Romantic conception of life. This covers Blumenbach, Kant, Keilmeyer, Reil and again Schelling, but not as static proponents of fixed views rather as responsive thinkers, debating the same central problems and resisting abstract idealism or overly mechanistic imagery of how things come to be. Part three is given over to Goethe as an exemplar of the kind of scientific thinking that can conceptualise morphology in its necessarily dynamic form. Moreover, by setting out Goethe's thinking as it develops over his life through his encounters with the other thinkers and with life itself, Richards is able to exemplify his themes of life experiences shaping thought and there being more to the evolutionary theories of the Romantic biologists than we might have thought. Part four is the most challenging to orthodox interpretations of Romantic biology and of Darwinism, it is here that Richards brings to bear the light he has shed on the former to reinterpret the latter. Darwin emerges from this as a Romantic biologist rather than someone making a clean break with that particular past as he is so often represented. It is in the last chapter that Richards could be accused of stretching his thesis beyond what it can bare. However, it is a fascinating thesis nevertheless. And indeed one could try out the idea by rereading *Origin of Species* with this idea in mind, or perhaps just an open mind to really test it out.

As a whole (and this is surely how we should treat a book on this subject) this is a remarkable piece of scholarship. It is an insightful guide to Romantic thought and what emerges from that grand project is an approach to the world and to nature that is not anti-thought or anti-reason, and thus ill equipped to approach epistemological or natural scientific problems, but the concerted attempt to think with nature about nature. In the contemporary context, with the growing interest in developing a rigorous environmental philosophy that wants to see organisms as organisms not machines and aesthetic and ethical concerns as a part of, not just how we understand the world, but how the world is, there is much that could be gained from revisiting Romantic biology. And for a lengthy visit, rather than a tourist trip, I know of no better text than this.

Dr Isis Brook