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reads

Life: Organic Form and Romanticism

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by Denise Gigante

THE QUESTION "WHAT IS LIFE?" has long been considered to touch upon the key issues of the Romantic period: "The question is asked a thousand times in a thousand ways by all the major British Romantic poets writing in the period from 1760 through 1830" (2). In recent years, important publications in the field of Romantic studies, such as Sharon Ruston's *Shelley and Vitality* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), have placed a strong emphasis on the importance of the life sciences not only for the emergence of the modern scientific system but also for literature written at the turn of the nineteenth century. During the whole eighteenth century, the nature of life was a matter of debate, involving such different systems of belief as mechanism, galvanism, vitalism, and materialism. In this period, dualist concepts of the body and the mind or soul gradually made way for a holistic understanding of the body, a process at whose end stands the concept of life as based on the organism and the emergence of biology as *the* science of life. At the same time, the notion of a harmonious unity is applied in literature and philosophy as well. Coleridge and Shelley wrote treatises on the nature of life, and most other Romantics were either keenly interested in the developments of science, or were, like Keats, even trained in the medical sciences. Furthermore, the concept of the organic artefact is closely related to the developments in the life sciences, or rather, it is unthinkable without the fundamentally new understanding of life as it slowly becomes an accepted scientific doctrine in the course of the nineteenth century.

Denise Gigante's recent book *Life* is one of the most substantial and important contributions to this ongoing debate. Gigante investigates four main texts in order to explore the impact of the life sciences on Romantic literature: Christopher Smart's *Jubilate Agno*, William Blake's *Jerusalem*, Percy Bysshe Shelley's *The Witch of Atlas*, and finally John Keats's *Lamia*. Each chapter may stand as an autonomous essay but taken together they still add up to a coherent whole.

In her extensive introduction, Gigante provides an overview of the scope and the importance of the life sciences in Romantic aesthetics. She demonstrates how the notion of the organic artefact depends on the contemporary research made in the life sciences:

> As the concept of vital power sparked a preoccupation with self-generating and self-maintaining form, it quickened the category of the aesthetic, elevating natural researchers into natural philosophers attempting to account for a mysterious power buried deep within the structures of nature. Life scientists focused on the

> dynamics of organic form in an effort to explain how form emerged and maintained itself, despite the physical laws of an environment that worked, meanwhile, to reduce it to its constituent parts. (5)

The vitalist and—later—biological idea of the self-sustaining organism is then applied to poetry and the imagination. Coleridge's famous definition of the organic artefact—"unity in multëity"—is a phrase that he used to describe both life and poetry in his *Theory of Life* and *Biographia Literaria* respectively. In her overview, Gigante pays special attention to German philosophical and aesthetic writings at the turn of the 19th century—especially to Schelling and Schiller. The numerous spelling mistakes in the German quotations are annoying given the importance of these authors and their texts.

In the decades around 1800, as Gigante is able to show, literature and the life sciences cannot be seen as separate: although later generations soon were embarrassed by the Romantic *Naturphilosophie* of the likes of Schelling, the quest for the secret of life is a joint endeavour that is given up only at the end the Romantic period—which ultimately leads to the separation of the arts and the hard sciences. Nevertheless, Gigante stresses the lasting impact of this holistic approach:

> Although Romantic life science, obsessed with the idea of life as *power,* has been considered a dubious episode in the history of science, it made possible the analogy between aesthetic and biological form upon which we still rely. (3)

At the close of the Romantic period, life science and aesthetics parted ways, and Gigante very convincingly explains this development in terms of a shift of focus in the scientific gaze—away from the whole human organism to ever smaller units and details. In 1839, Theodor Schwann published his *Mikroskopische Untersuchungen über die Übereinstimmung in der Struktur und dem Wachstum der Tiere und Pflanzen*, and this text marked a paradigm shift—a movement towards the cell as a much smaller unit of life. This had a decisive influence on Romantic aesthetics, as Gigante notes:

> But the turn in scientific investigation from living form to cellular biology signalled a corresponding turn away from the natural philosophical concern with organic form, or life seen as vaguely equivalent to self. No longer was the central object of life science an organic whole requiring a unifying principle and linking the study of nature inescapably to aesthetics. (40)

The four main chapters provide an overview of the scope of this joint endeavour of life science and literature in the Romantic period. The first poet that Gigante reads seems an unlikely choice, but only at first sight: Christopher Smart. Jubilate Agno is a highly idiosyncratic fragmentary poem written in a

mental asylum, and Gigante interprets this long religious poem as a "critique of natural historical language" (65) in the tradition of Newton and Linnaeus:

> Smart's multiple and interacting references to mechanical science, from optics and acoustics to mechanics, pneumatics, and hydrostatics, are all aimed at converting the basic branches of natural philosophy into a genuine philosophy of nature. (101)

In Gigante's analysis, Smart's fragments are opposed to the classificatory system of natural philosophy in that they are shaped organically. In this sense, the poem is also a "meditation on the materiality of the poetic form" (62). In the ensuing chapter on William Blake's *Jerusalem*, Gigante explicitly refers to this form of self-reflexivity as a link between Smart's and Blake's works.

Although she builds on former achievements in Blake studies, Gigante points out that hers is a radically new approach:

> While critics have come to understand Blake's direct attacks on experimental science as a response to Newton, his deployment of the specific properties of living matter, namely generation (the production of new living forms) and vegetation (the growth of living forms), which figure at the core of his visionary system, remains relatively under thought out and untheorized. (108-9)

Based on the instability of both Blake's visual iconography and the linguistic text, Gigante is able to show that Blake's illuminated book does not build upon the idea of the organic work of art but rather bears resemblance to the vitalist concept of epigenesis as it was developed by Blumenbach and others: "As a living form, *Jerusalem* is no closed system, and its orders enact the ongoing cycle of formative activity that defines epigenetic matter." (117)

In her chapter on Shelley, Gigante does not focus, as one might expect, on *The Triumph of Life* but rather on *The Witch of Atlas*. Here she puts emphasis on the self-generating aspect of Shelley's poetry she calls "ontopoiesis", a term for which she feels the need to write a brief apology—bringing the term life back into the proximity of its Aristotelian origins, the vital soul:

> The terms may seem off-putting, but in the Romantic era "life" involved a species of soulish consciousness, defined through the transcendental biology of the time and enacted in the metaphorical language of Shelley's poetry and poetics. (159)

In her juxtaposition of Percy Shelley's poetry and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, which explores the mysteries of life in a similar yet different vein, it is interesting to note that both Mary and Percy seem to agree that only poetry may become an equivalent of living form. The novel, however we as readers and critics might disagree, is subject to the "machinery of a story" (163) and may therefore never be self-sustaining and fully organic.

The final chapter focuses on *Lamia*, John Keats's poem on the serpent turned into a nymph. In order to explain the monstrosity of the poem's eponymous creature, Gigante does not refer to the usual psychological explanations but rather stresses the importance of vitalism. Referring to the writings of the important natural philosopher John Hunter, Gigante points out that the monster in fantastic literature may well be understood as the result of an excess of vitality. Therefore, she concludes, the Romantics' notion of monstrosity differs radically from the Enlightenment concept of deformity. Rather, Romantic monsters such as Lamia, but also the creature in Frankenstein or Polidori's Byronic vampire Lord Ruthven are the outcome of an excess of life-force; Lamia's "gordian shape of dazzling hue" thus is literally the outcome of too much life. Hence, she concludes her book with a call for a fundamental re-evaluation of Romantic literature in general:

> Perhaps, though, the great tragedy for the Romantics was not the reduction of the human being to a mechanism of heavy limbs, a body stripped of the living principle like Newton's rainbow deprived of its poetry. ... Instead, I would suggest that the real source of despair was the fact that to imagine life as anything more—more than given forms and organizations, biological or cultural—was to risk becoming monstrous in the eyes of a calculating world. (245-6)

Gigante's book, thus, proves to be a thought-provoking and all-encompassing re-reading of the Romantic project in general. Although most of the discourses she refers to are well known, such as the Hunterian debate between Abernethy and Lawrence or the Blumenbachian concept of epigenesis, she is able to explore new ground and shed a different light on the common endeavour of life science and poetry in the Romantic age.