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*German Romanticism and Science. The Procreative Poetics of
Goethe, Novalis, and Ritter* (review)

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between the three writers, their texts, and their strategies, especially their different modes of relating to and coping with the passions of the sign, the extimate, asemanic kernel, and the extra-legal, violent foundation of the symbolic order. While Kant employs an aesthetics of the sublime to rationalize this force in his analysis of the German passion/enthusiasm for the French Revolution, thus channeling it into symbolic structures, including those of his own philosophical text, Goethe's *Conversations* explore the possibility of transforming the anarchical energies of the desire for freedom into the freedom from desire via strategies of renunciation and, moreover, aesthetic sublimation. Kleist's novella *Michael Kohlhaas*, finally, with its multiple narrative strands and double ending explores the conditions of possibility for an historically effective speech, for, as it were, the triumph of art and the authority of literary speech over the symbolism of political power by means of the vitalization and energizing of signs as celebrated in the aesthetic staging of Kohlhaas's execution/sacrifice to the energized rule of law and his poetic ingestion and materialization of the sign in the two finales of the novella (141–49).

Passions of the Sign, then, presents itself to the reader as an important, significant, and, in the best sense of the word, passionate analysis of a configuration of philosophical and literary responses to the French Revolution which, when read through the prism of central contemporary discussions in theory and criticism, yield an alternative perspective on our established, traditional reception of the German cultural reaction to the challenge of the French Revolution, an alternative which is also, as Gailus points out, the seed for an alternative, critical response to the crisis of modernity. *Passions of the Sign* is therefore not only the example of an engaged and energizing literary criticism, but also an indispensable illustration for the reaction of a cultural and symbolic system that seeks to embrace and understand rather than repress and shy away from its own historical, structural, foundational crisis.

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Jocelyn Holland, *German Romanticism and Science. The Procreative Poetics of Goethe, Novalis, and Ritter*. New York: Routledge, 2009. 221pp.

Jocelyn Holland opens her book with two epigraphs: the first from Goethe, the second from Ritter (the passage with which she also concludes the book). Both epigraphs indicate the centrality of the idea of procreation for Goethe, Ritter, and German romanticism in general, and, as Holland puts it, emphasize that procreation was *the* mystery of the day (5). In focusing her study on the conception of procreation, contextualizing it within the science of the time, and showing how procreation serves as a discursive phenomenon with distinctive “patterns, tendencies, and rhetorical features” (2), Holland makes an important contribution to scholarship on romanticism, most especially to the nascent field of the history of romantic science.

Holland's book is divided into six chapters. The first chapter introduces her project and describes the intellectual (specifically scientific) context around 1800. Her discussion of the various competing theories at the time (epigenesis and preformation) is coupled with a consideration of the influence of these theories on Goethe, Novalis, and Ritter. In the same way that Blumenbach and Kiemeyer saw the force of reproduction as “central to all organic processes of the body,” so, she argues, “a more generalized understanding of procreation is

central to an early Romantic interest in connecting different branches of scientific thought and considering them in relation to the poetic" (5). In this way, Holland sketches the program of the book: she plans to examine the role that the scientific notion of procreation played in the development of romantic notions about language and thought. Thus, chapter two, whose focus is Goethe, places special emphasis on the elegy, "The Metamorphosis of the Plants," pointing out significant parallels between the scientific conception of procreation and the language and structure of the poem (48). Chapters three and four similarly illustrate the foundational role of "procreation" in the development of Novalis's understanding of language. Holland emphasizes Novalis's use of the idea of a "procreative tool [*Werkzeug*]," that cannot be reduced to either an organic or mechanistic worldview, and argues that for Novalis the novel and fairy tale function as "instruments [*Werkzeuge*] of the idea" (98–105). The final two chapters examine Ritter's use of the procreative metaphor in his autobiographical work (124ff.). In this way, Holland's study provides an incisive and detailed examination of the literary uses of procreation, and the ways in which procreation enabled a revision and expansion of discourse, thought, and observation in general.

Holland's sensitive reading of these texts, and her capacity to point to the nuanced linguistic and contextual uses of procreation enable her to highlight the various ways in which the metaphor of procreation is put to use and explore its profound role in romantic thought. Yet, the themes she draws out—the influence of procreation on conceptions of knowledge and intellectual activity for example—require further investigation and clarification.

Throughout the book, Holland makes gestures toward a connection between biological procreation and intellectual activity. Thus, with regard to Goethe, she writes "My reading focuses the poem as a vehicle for discussing procreation in the broader context of Goethe's scientific work and for raising questions pertinent to the study as a whole. These include the relationship between physiological change, the productive observation of the natural world, and the acquisition of knowledge" (14; see also 20–21). Similarly, Holland illustrates the way in which Novalis's writings thematize the "relation between the observer and the world and between the physical and intellectual modes of production," adding that "Hardenberg underscores the relation between processes of mind and body—between intellectual making and physical generation—when he integrates mathematical notation with the language of procreation" (71–72; see also 59). Finally, noting the same parallel in Ritter's thought, she states that "with regard to the turn from narrative chronology to methodology . . . the coupling between knowledge and procreation is now cast in even sharper relief" (132).

The metaphor of procreation and its use in literature and philosophy introduced a new conception of thought, and of the relation between nature and thought. However, Holland does not elaborate this new conception nor does she compare it with earlier views of intellectual activity. What does procreative intellectual activity look like, and how does it differ from non-procreative intellectual activity, are the first questions that come to mind. Yet, more fundamental is the question concerning the exact status of the metaphor of procreation. Is it merely heuristic? Or, does it say something about the ontological relation between nature and thought, such that it is constitutive as well? In other words, does intellectual activity not merely *mirror* nature ("as if" it were like nature, following Kant) but *partake* of the activity of nature in some way?

Holland's response to this question seems to be an uncertain "yes." It is uncertain because she seems to argue that the metaphor instantiated a (new) ontological relation between mind and nature, but she does not elaborate this relation. In her discussion of Goethe's notion of intuition, for example, an original identity between intellectual activity and the activity of nature is implied, but not made explicit (39–40). Similarly, in her discussion of Ritter she writes that the metaphor is not merely heuristic, but must, in some fundamental way, be connected to reality—must be "predictive" as she puts it elsewhere (156; 158; 24). However, the exact sense in which this metaphor is ontological and constitutive remains unclear.

Holland's failure to provide an analysis of the status of the metaphor—and of the ontological aspect of the romantic project—leads to some contradictory claims with regard to the relation between knower and known in romantic thought. In her consideration of Novalis's notion of a procreative instrument (*Werkzeug*), she claims that Novalis's conception of nature was anthropocentric (108). Though this is not an unknown thesis, given Novalis's emphasis on the I in the *Fichte-Studien*, it does not obtain upon a close examination of Novalis's later works (and already in some parts of the *Fichte-Studien*). Like Goethe and Schelling, Novalis was working out of a monist ontology which does not posit the self as primary in relation to nature (*Fichte*) or as opposed to and absolutely incapable of knowing nature (*Kant*). Rather, Novalis elaborates a notion of an Absolute in which all distinctions between subject and object are derivative. Thus, although Novalis speaks of nature as a "*Werkzeug und Medium des Einverständnisses vernünftiger Wesen*," he goes on to explain that in seeking to know nature, "[d]er denkende Mensch kehrt zur ursprünglichen Funktion seines Daseins, zur schaffenden Betrachtung zu jenem Punkte zurück, wo Hervorbringen und Wissen in der wundervollsten Wechselverbindung standen, zu jenem schöpferischen Moment des eigentlichen Genusses, des innern Selbstempfängnisses" (107). While the first part of the passage may appear anthropocentric, in light of what follows it is not. A person who wishes to know nature must return to that original moment of creation, in which static distinctions between subject and object, producer and product, knower and known, act and content do not exist. Such distinctions arise within a vision of an *already created* world, in which things appears as separated and distinct *objects*, rather than as moments of creativity entailing and entailed by one another (reciprocally determining one another). This vision of infinite creation is what Goethe saw in metamorphosis, and it is what Novalis expounds in this passage. Therefore, for Novalis, whatever path one takes—"[m]annigfache Wege gehen die Menschen" as he puts it in the first line of *Die Lebrlinge zu Sais*—whether it be inward or outward, one will arrive at the place of original creation in which nature and mind are not distinct (thus the apprentices in the novel pursue various paths which ultimately lead them to the same place). Turning inward, then, by no means implies anthropocentrism, but a return to the moment of original creativity, or, to speak with Holland, procreation.

It is only on the basis of such an ontology of identity between knower and known, that Goethe, Novalis, and Ritter can make the claims that Holland perceptively elaborates. It is also only on the basis of such an ontology that the epigraph with which she begins and ends her book becomes fully intelligible. It is with this epigraph that I too will conclude:

“Alles zeigt, daß das Wesen der Zeugung durchaus tiefer zu suchen ist, als in den bloßen Gestalten der Materie” (163).

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John A. McCarthy, *Remapping Reality: Chaos and Creativity in Science and Literature*. (Goethe—Nietzsche—Grass). Amsterdam/New York: Rodopi, 2006. 373 pp.

In contrast to so much scholarly work today, McCarthy's latest book is a refreshing and welcome alternative. It also provides a model of what the academy might well seek to emulate. Eschewing already clichéd, in-vogue topics, not to mention second-rate texts as his subjects of study, McCarthy takes on major works and big questions. As a result, his new study is exceedingly ambitious, large in scope and strategically complex. John McCarthy offers an unusual conceptual framework quite different from typical disciplinary fare, but that is what makes this book especially worth reading and thinking about.

With this volume, McCarthy attempts to span the enduring divide between the natural sciences and the humanities. Or in terms long familiar to Germanists, he re-aligns and links the worlds of *Natur* and *Geist* in a new and valuable way. Not only has he brought together such seemingly disparate fields as physics and literature, he also spans the centuries of modern scientific and literary thought. McCarthy's ability to reach across and connect such expanses proves both useful and instructive. While Goethe, Nietzsche, and Grass constitute his literary focal points, his discussions also bring Cusanus, Spinoza, Leibniz, Breiteringer, Wieland, and Kant into play. In similar fashion, his scientific focus extends beyond an introduction and explanation of chaos and complexity theory to include in the considerations such luminaries as Copernicus, Galileo, Poincaré, Penrose, Prigogine/Stengers, Bohm/Peat, Schrödinger, and E. O. Wilson, to name only a few. McCarthy's reach extends back to the Enlightenment and renaissance humanism through all the intervening years up into the present, making connections all along the way. His book is a work of remarkable erudition.

In the first part of the study, McCarthy so to speak establishes his scientific credentials. He may be a literary scholar, but he also knows his science and speaks knowledgeably about modern physics in particular. His expertise is not simply limited to the history of science, for he lays out the actual physics much as Brian Greene does in his books about superstring theory. This undertaking is consequently not for the faint-hearted, as it places demands on its readers and may even require them to venture into uncharted territory truly foreign to literary scholars. The rewards are worth the efforts, however. The text is essentially jargon-free (characteristic for McCarthy's writing in any event), but occasionally challenging because of terminology very likely unfamiliar to many in the humanities. In some instances, a little more background is helpful, even necessary for readers to follow the explanations and argument. Solitons, the strong force, and the ergodic theorem are probably concepts new and unknown to many readers, but a good dictionary (or Google) should suffice. An index listing and defining terms would have been a good addition, a useful aid, and a remedy for that minor infelicity. At times, the first section of the book presents concepts without an entirely adequate context so that they remained, at least for this reviewer, a little too abstract. Otherwise, McCarthy's presentation of the science (and everything