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Experimental Life: Vitalism in Romantic Science and Literature by Robert Mitchell (review)

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Book Reviews

Robert Mitchell, *Experimental Life: Vitalism in Romantic Science and Literature*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013, 320 pp. \$55.00 cloth.

It is now typical to disdain vitalism, if not for its lack of scientific rigor, then for its disregard for biological diversity or its anthropocentrism. However, in *Experimental Life*, Robert Mitchell challenges this impulse as he envisions a neo-vitalism that, rather than “affirm[ing] a transcendent principle of life that rules over matter or is contained within matter,” instead views life as “the ultimate value” (p. 220). Mitchell argues that such neo-vitalism has the potential to provide an effective foundation for an affirmative twenty-first-century biopolitics.

Mitchell’s endorsement of an affirmative neo-vitalism is informed by his analysis of a diverse array of Romantic-era vitalist literary and scientific works. Over the past several decades, a growing body of scholarship has endeavored to show that, in spite of Romantic skepticism regarding scientific enthusiasm, many British authors of the Romantic period maintained a great affinity for science, and even took substantial inspiration from scientific practices. *Experimental Life* offers an important contribution to this ongoing endeavor. Reading Romantic-era literary works alongside contemporaneous scientific works through the framework of “experimental vitalism,” Mitchell develops a distinctively nuanced and suggestive analysis of key dynamic interchanges of science and literature in the era of Romanticism. His exploration demonstrates that a number of central Romantic authors sought vitality by adapting scientific experimentalism to literary contexts.

Mitchell’s concept of *experimental vitalism* is central to his approach. He rightly acknowledges that “for much of the twentieth and into the twenty-first century, the term ‘vitalism’ has functioned within the life sciences primarily as a gatekeeping term,” applied to those who fail to meet the high standards of a rigorous scientific approach (p. 5). However, as he also explains, there is a lack of scholarly consensus regarding how exactly *vitalism* should be defined. Mitchell coins the phrase *experimental vitalism* to “avoid both the ambiguity of, and the automatic gatekeeping function associated with, the more generic term ‘vitalism’” (p. 7). In doing so, he aims to cultivate greater historical and conceptual specificity. According to his definition, experimental vitalism refers to the “specific set of social and technical practices” associated with the “experimental life” that emerged through the work of fellows in the early Royal Society. It is distinguished by “a *sense* that life cannot be fully explained by current scientific concepts and assumptions” and a commitment to “develop[ing] experiments in order to provoke new questions and concepts about life and living beings,” and thus to “mak[e] more complex and nuanced our understanding of the nature of living beings’ potentials” (pp. 7–8; emphasis in original).

For many readers, Mitchell's definition of vitalism may initially appear to take great, if not unwarranted, liberties. For instance, if there is one belief that most, if not all, scholars of vitalism associate with the term, it is the belief in a "superadded" substance. Superadded substance does not, or at least not explicitly, figure into Mitchell's definition. In this respect, his explanation of experimental vitalism might be seen to risk opening up the definition of vitalism so far that the term loses its signifying capacity. However, as he goes on to employ the concept in his analysis of Romantic literature and science, he makes a convincing case for its legitimacy. *Experimental Life* demonstrates that, while the phrase *experimental vitalism* did not hold currency in the Romantic era, the beliefs and practices that it signifies did. In fact, Mitchell makes a convincing argument that it was a key distinguishing feature of the period, and that it informed a number of Romantic literary, as well as scientific, endeavors.

Experimental Life is divided into six chapters. In the first, Mitchell provides an effective foundation for theorizing the complex relationship between artistic and scientific experimentation. He argues in this chapter that, with the 1798 publication of *Lyrical Ballads*, the Romantic era ushered in a new "perpetually provisional . . . network-image of Art" that helped establish experimental vitalism as a prerequisite for artistic success, and that continues to inform artistic production today (p. 38). The second chapter investigates Percy Bysshe Shelley's and John Keats's engagements with experimental vitalism, arguing that both authors affirm life by, somewhat ironically, cultivating states of suspension that resemble death. In the third chapter, Mitchell offers a case study of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's ultimately failed attempt at a collaboration with physician James Gillman. This study reveals that, inspired by his collaboration with Gillman, Coleridge attempted to develop a new genre, the "life-manual," as a means by which to affirm and facilitate experimental vitalism.

In chapter 4, Mitchell coins the term *collapsurgence* to signify "those dynamics, both affective and epistemological, of the process by which one system for understanding the world collapses, and another, purportedly deeper, understanding of order surges forth" (p. 105). Exploring three "literary experiments" with "chylopoietic discourse"—Coleridge's antislavery lectures from the 1790s, William Godwin's political novel *Caleb Williams* (1794), and Thomas Trotter's *A View of the Nervous Temperament* (1807)—Mitchell shows how Romantic-era authors "use literature to free the living and thinking body from its entrapment by systems" by harnessing the power of *collapsurgence* (p. 106). In this chapter, he demonstrates that, for at least some Romantic authors, experimental vitalism enabled not only dramatic literary and/or scientific change, but also radical sociopolitical change.

Both chapters 5 and 6 investigate the Romantic preoccupation with and investment in the experimental nature of life itself. In the fifth chapter, Mitchell analyzes Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* through the frameworks of Romantic-era philosophy, zoology, and physiology (specifically, the works of Étienne Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire and Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling). He argues that Shelley's novel emphasizes the creative potential inherent in life, and demonstrates the availability of such potential, and the freedom it implies, to humanity—a "generative" potential that experimental vitalism helps reveal and even ignite (p. 174). Finally, in chapter 6, Mitchell explores "the Romantic fascination with the strange life of plants"—what he refers to as "cryptogamia"—and the complex "mutual atmospheres" and plant/human "hybridizations" that this fascination produces (pp. 191–192). He shows that, as Romantic authors, including Percy Bysshe Shelley, John Clare, and William Wordsworth, attend to "the darker and more cryptic forms of [botanical] becoming," they come to view life as not simply experimental and "generative," but "explosively" so, even in the context of apparent passivity (pp. 195, 199).

Although *Experimental Life* concerns itself primarily with the experimental vitalism of British Romanticism, as it acknowledges, albeit in fairly cursory ways, the historical persistence and current relevance of the Romantic trends it explores, it finds its way into current biopolitical debates. Observing an intriguing correspondence between the Romantic era's experimental vitalism that *Experimental Life* explores and the neovitalism that Roberto Esposito promotes in his *Bios: Biopolitics and Philosophy* (2008), Mitchell counters the powerful critique of vitalism and Esposito that Cary Wolfe presents in his *Before the Law: Humans and Other Animals in a Biopolitical Frame* (2013). Given the persuasiveness of Wolfe's critique, it is difficult to be fully convinced by Mitchell's rebuttal to Wolfe. However, as he engages with Esposito and Wolfe, Mitchell effectively demonstrates his success at fulfilling what are the two central goals of *Experimental Life*: to expand and renew our understanding of *experiment* by taking inspiration from Romantic-era experimental vitalism, and to show that the Romantics' development of vitalist concepts, such as *suspended animation* and *media*, are relevant to current biopolitical debates. As a result, *Experimental Life* ultimately offers a satisfying and highly suggestive encounter with Romantic literature and culture that, in the spirit of experimental vitalism, generates exciting new possibilities for further investigation within the Romantic era and beyond.

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Sally Shuttleworth, *The Mind of the Child: Child Development in Literature, Science, and Medicine, 1840–1900*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010, 512 pp. \$79.00 cloth, \$36.00 paper.

For the twenty-first-century reader, the scene in *The Mill on the Floss* in which 8-year-old Maggie Tulliver retreats to the attic to vent her childish frustrations by abusing her doll can be shocking. The episode is so unexpected because it feels so modern. Anxieties about little girls and their dolls seem a quintessentially modern obsession, inextricably linked to constantly shifting gender politics. But as *The Mind of the Child*, Sally Shuttleworth's most recent study of the intersections between Victorian science culture and literature demonstrates, long before we were asking what it means when little girls destroy their Barbies,¹ Victorians were deeply invested in similar questions about the psychology underlying children's behavior and development.

The Mind of the Child provides an interdisciplinary exploration of the largely overlooked history of pre-twentieth-century child psychology. As she states in her introduction, Shuttleworth seeks to overturn some common misperceptions: that before Freud there was little scientific interest in the inner workings of the child's mind, and that during the Victorian era, the prevailing attitude toward children was that they should be seen and not heard. Her research reveals a much more complex picture of Victorian attitudes toward child development expressed throughout the era in medical and scientific publications, as well as in works of literature and the popular press. Each of the book's four sections interweaves archival research with in-depth literary analysis. Shuttleworth's incorporation of discussions of literary works into her study

1. "Why Do We Destroy Our Barbie Dolls?," a 2009 article published by the pop-feminist online magazine *Jezebel*, is just one recent example of this phenomenon as a quick Google search reveals. See Hortense Smith, "Why Do We Destroy Our Barbie Dolls?" *Jezebel*, March 8, 2009. <http://jezebel.com/5166340/why-do-we-destroy-our-barbie-dolls>.