

aware and from which they cannot escape, arguing for a more fragmented view of the Enlightenment and for conflicting languages of nature in the eighteenth century. Yet he finds Foucault's characterization adequate for the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, overlooking the complex of Aristotelian, hermetic, magical, experimental and natural philosophies that historians have shown coexisted and were intertwined with mechanical philosophies in this period. Similarly, in the later period of what Reill terms 'Romantic *Naturphilosophie*', not only can many of the ideas he finds characteristic of Enlightenment vitalism be found in the later era's texts, but philosophical, scientific and Romantic ideas also vary radically with individuals, locales and time. His appropriation of the Humboldt brothers, both of whom lived well into the nineteenth century, to Enlightenment vitalism is also problematic. His highly sympathetic reading of their works contrasts with an unsympathetic reading of Schelling and Oken which rehearses a traditional view of their descent into unreason. Finally, although Reill emphasizes that there is not a single Enlightenment project, he actually diminishes the diversity of ideas and languages of nature in the second half of the eighteenth century in his attempt to relate all to his view of Enlightenment vitalism.

Reill's work has many strengths. It redresses impoverished narratives of Enlightenment views of nature as a disenchanted mechanical and rational order. It highlights new studies of active powers in the later eighteenth century; of the richness of chemistry before Lavoisier; and of important debates over generation, the history of nature, irritability, sensibility and the vital economy of living things – all whilst pointing to important traffic between these diverse areas of inquiry. Reill is deeply engaged by the ideas he discusses, presenting them not only as of significance for the eighteenth century but also as having continued relevance today. But that all these viewpoints, and the figures articulating them, can be brought together into a single movement which can be identified as Enlightenment vitalism is doubtful. Moreover, Reill is not content to offer an interesting reading of the Enlightenment, but rather claims to give a more valid characterization of Enlightened views of nature than alternative approaches. Yet he does not provide a convincing argument to support that claim.

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NICOLAAS A. RUPKE, *Alexander von Humboldt: A Metabiography*. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2005. Pp. 320. ISBN 3-631-53932-0. £22.80 (hardback).
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In this absorbing study of shifting representations, Nicolaas Rupke provides many salutary reminders that 'in historiography there does not exist an Archimedean point' (p. 217). Two versions of Alexander von Humboldt are familiar to British historians – the German explorer whose South American travels inspired Charles Darwin, and the meticulous observer whose name has, ever since Susan Faye Cannon's *Science in Culture* (New York, 1978), been used to characterize the disciplined search for global natural laws in early nineteenth-century exploration. Rupke's *Metabiography* challenges any assumption that these summaries are sufficient or even generally accepted, observing that 'post-war Anglo-American Humboldt scholarship developed in virtually complete and blissful ignorance of the many hundreds of German publications on Humboldt' (p. 191). For almost two hundred years, German impressions of Humboldt were very different from those maintained abroad. It was only during the 1990s, when globalization and environmental concerns dominated German politics after reunification, that English-language versions of Humboldt as a pioneering ecologist started to become fashionable in his own country.

This Anglo-German divergence started during Humboldt's own lifetime, and it owed much to Humboldt's own attempts to craft his reputation. After he published his carefully constructed *Relation historique* in Paris, Helen Maria Williams's prompt translation as *Personal Narrative*

inspired English-speakers to accept Humboldt's self-fashioning as an intrepid explorer of almost Napoleonic significance. In contrast, German readers regarded his romanticized adventures as suitable only for children. During his eighties Humboldt was adopted as a political figurehead by democratic nationalists, who admired his flamboyant support for the Berlin revolutionaries of 1848 but needed to conceal his French affiliations. Conveniently ignoring any book not originally written in German, eulogists chose to concentrate on *Kosmos*, his multi-volume late work, in order to promote Humboldt as a hero of the German *Volk*, patriotic companion of Johann von Goethe.

Over five thousand biographical accounts of Humboldt exist, and Rupke has dissected many of them to reveal the diverse guises under which Humboldt has appeared. Understandably for such a detailed analysis, Rupke has restricted his research to Germany, yet even this national trawl has enabled him to retrieve multiple Humboldts who acquired the solidity of reality despite being partial appropriations based on the self-serving interpretations of various biographers. As Rupke points out, examining any particular representation is valuable because it was not the product of a lone voice, but could be created and understood only collectively. Even though individual narrators survived through political ruptures, there was no such continuity in Humboldtian imagery, which changed abruptly to match transformations in institutional culture; even single authors switched sides, revising their view of Humboldt to conform with a new regime.

By focusing on Humboldt, Rupke has provided an intriguing if idiosyncratic survey of German history. Unsurprisingly, Humboldt became an emblematic Aryan during the Nazi regime, but after the war scholars sanitized earlier propaganda, and two especially fascinating chapters concern Humboldt's bifurcation from 1949 to 1990. In West Germany Humboldt was gently boosted as an exemplar of German culture, a cosmopolitan scientist who transcended national boundaries and opposed military engagement. Scholars suppressed previous reports of his anti-Semitism, and instead idolized him as a Jewish patron. Humboldt's elevation was conducted far more aggressively in the East. Marxist-Leninist ideologues concocted elaborate anniversary celebrations to construct Humboldt as the German father of humanistic socialism, the essential link between Goethe and Karl Marx, the scientist who had campaigned against slavery and dedicated himself to serving the proletariat. As the GDR sought to expand its political influence in Latin America, biographers gave a new prominence to Humboldt's youthful experiences, insisting that his education at the Freiberg Mining Academy had led him to battle against economic repression and empathize with the leading revolutionaries he had befriended on his American travels.

Based on meticulous research, this is a detailed, rewarding and well-illustrated account, although intellectually its meta-approach is less novel than Rupke claims – as just one example of several such reputational studies, Marco Beretta's analysis of Antoine Lavoisier's iconography (although shorter and less fine-grained) is conceptually similar. Rupke's bibliography consists overwhelmingly of German work specifically relating to Humboldt, and includes virtually none of the substantial literature on biographical theory. Although he does briefly discuss Darwinian parallels, Rupke misses the opportunity to relate his Humboldtian study to other cases of multiple representation. During the Second World War, for instance, several scientific heroes were appropriated for political ends, including Nicolas Copernicus (hailed as a symbol of Polish freedom during the German occupation) and Alessandro Volta (his battery was made to resemble the fascist bundle of elm branches). Similarly, Rupke mentions fleetingly but frustratingly that communities in other countries – North American frontier explorers, Latin American Creoles – created their own particular stereotypes of Humboldt. An international and comparative meta-biography of Humboldt would inevitably be painted with a broader brush, but it could constitute a truly innovative meta-meta-project.

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