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Armstrong, Charles. *Romantic Organicism: From Idealist Origins to Ambivalent Afterlife*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003. pp. 233. ISBN 1-4039-0475-8.

Charles Armstrong's *Romantic Organicism* is a book that effectively combines philosophical inquiry and literary criticism. Taking as its central premise the persistence of organicist thought since the late eighteenth century, Armstrong offers a carefully crafted investigation into the ways in which the thoughts of Immanuel Kant and his German idealist successors have influenced the writings of both their contemporaries and later thinkers as well, even when those thinkers have attempted to distance themselves from organicist thought. At the physical center of the book stand William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, whose work exemplifies the romantic period's frequent attempts to unite the philosophical and the poetic. Samuel Coleridge's optimistic claim that Wordsworth's *Recluse* would be the first "genuine philosophic poem" reveals the centrality of this concern, and therefore the exchanges between Coleridge and Wordsworth regarding that project serve as important touchstones for Armstrong's discussion, which in fact also covers a large number of other philosophers.

In the opening chapter, Armstrong introduces three "nodal points" for his study. These include the concept of the sacred book, "the absolute, and systematic, philosophical-literary text that is romanticism's transformative equivalent to the Bible;" the "question of the limit-experience," which is associated with the sublime; and the "problem of community, where political and private forms of togetherness are thought of on the basis of an articulated body" (5). To investigate the different manifestations of these issues in the writers he considers, Armstrong employs what he terms "the three main principles of organicism" (6), which he obtains from Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781). These are the concepts of unified hierarchical organization or totalizing unity, interdependence of parts, and external delimitation (6). Throughout his discussion Armstrong explores the degree to which different thinkers utilize these principles in their works, and how they may privilege one or another of the different principles over the others. To this end, the second and third chapters examine the writings of several German idealist philosophers, including Kant, Herder, Fichte, Hegel, Schlegel,

and Schelling. The second section is comprised of two chapters on Coleridge and one on Wordsworth, while the third section involves three chapters on I. A. Richards, Bataille, Gadamer, Blanchot, and Derrida, followed by a final, concluding chapter.

Given the large number of figures who receive substantial consideration, the book offers a challenging treatment of rather complex theoretical ideas. For the most part, however, Armstrong succeeds in maintaining a sense of coherence throughout the text through his repetition of key concepts and quotes and his extensive footnotes. Perhaps the most successful chapter in this regard is the one on Wordsworth, which offers a thorough investigation of a large number of his later poems, many of which have not previously received much critical attention, to explore the larger implications of Wordsworth's stated conception of his body of works as a large Gothic cathedral, wherein his minor poems can be viewed as "the little cells, oratories, and sepulchral recesses" ordinarily found in such structures (qtd. in Armstrong 109). Throughout this chapter, Armstrong offers insightful argument regarding Wordsworth's employment of the contending principles of hierarchical totalisation and interdependence, in particular, to demonstrate the ultimate inaccessibility of the absolute text, despite Wordsworth's efforts to create one with *The Recluse*.

Interestingly, perhaps the least successful chapter in the discussion is the one immediately preceding the Wordsworth chapter, in which Armstrong discusses Coleridge's conversation poems—especially "To a Friend," "Frost at Midnight," and "To Wordsworth"—in terms of his notions of community. Although the subject of community is introduced as one of Armstrong's "nodal points" at the beginning and is explicitly mentioned again in the concluding chapter, the connection of Armstrong's discussion at this point to his larger project is not made as clear as it could have been. There is no real discussion of the community as an organic structure, for example, and it is only at the end of the chapter that brief connections to Kant's conception of organicism are made. Armstrong might have been better served in this chapter by including discussion of some of his fragment poems, including "Christabel" and "Kubla Khan," as the issue of the fragment was an essential part of the preceding chapter on Coleridge's theoretical writings.

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The rest of the book successfully develops Armstrong's argument, and the chapters on Richards, Blanchot and Derrida are particularly effective in demonstrating the perseverance of organic thinking in more contemporary thought, showing in fact how Derrida's theories regarding deconstruction, which were supposed to have initiated organicism's "demise" (183), in many ways correspond to some of the concepts associated with organicism. In the end, Armstrong's book makes an important contribution to the fields of both philosophy and literary criticism.

L. Adam Mekler
Morgan State University
Baltimore, MD, USA.