
As suggested even by the title of his recent book, Michael R. Page’s *The Literary Imagination from Erasmus Darwin to H.G. Wells: Science, Evolution, and Ecology* is an ambitious project that works to link together Romantic era imaginative literature with the history of the science fiction genre. Indeed, while a special issue of *Romanticism on the Net* (2001) was devoted to the topic of ‘Romanticism and Science Fictions’ over a decade ago – with articles by Robert Mitchell, Timothy Morton, and a number of other scholars – Page’s book is among the first monograph-length studies to investigate the connections among Romantic literature, science, and culture in the context of the formal and conceptual developments of science fiction. Furthermore, as announced by the subtitle of his study, Page’s book goes far beyond an analysis of Romanticism and science fiction through its focus on issues of ‘Science, Evolution, and Ecology,’ and these wide-ranging interests and impulses of the book contribute both to its successes as well as to some of its major problems and limitations.

While a range of provocative arguments are set into motion in the book, Page’s central claim is that the genre of science fiction has its roots in Romantic-era literature and especially in the work of Erasmus Darwin, who according to Page, ‘began a discourse between science and literature that was to occupy imaginative writers for the next 200 plus years’ (6). However, in order to evidence this claim and to give structure to his five-chapter book, Page relies upon a somewhat tautological argument: he suggests, on the one hand, that the Romantic text often ‘anticipates’ (a verb that he re-uses repeatedly (27, 37, 66, 89, etc.) throughout the book) developments in science or science fiction while simultaneously proposing, on the other hand, that late-nineteenth and twentieth-century science fiction authors are influenced by and indebted to Romantic writers including Erasmus Darwin (Chapter 1), William Wordsworth and Percy Bysshe Shelley (Chapter 2), and Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley (Chapter 3). Despite these argumentative flaws, however, the book’s proposal that the science fiction genre’s roots should be traced (in some manner) to the Romantic period in England remains generally effective and convincing, and it does so largely because of Page’s nuanced and invigorating readings of Victorian texts (Chapter 4) that fuse imaginative literature and matters concerning evolutionary science and ecology (the book’s other two major concerns) as well as the scientific romances (Chapter 5) of H.G. Wells, whose work, as Page notes, ‘spawned modern science fiction’ (9).

*The Literary Imagination from Erasmus Darwin to H.G. Wells* is organized methodologically through two distinct critical perspectives: ecological criticism and science fiction writing and criticism. Page employs eco-critical thought (or what he sometimes loosely equates with ‘Green Romanticism’) because in Romantic eco-critical theory and philosophy from roughly the 1990s to the present, he locates the vestiges of the preoccupation with representation and treatment of both evolution and ecology found in the work of science fiction writers and critics of the 1960s and 1970s. This methodological approach allows Page to position ‘evolution’ and ‘ecology’ as the organizing tropes of his study – topics and concepts that establish an historical trajectory linking Erasmus Darwin, Wordsworth, the Shelleys, and Charles Darwin with the evolutionary and ecological ideas of Charles Kingsley, Edward Bulwer Lytton, Samuel Butler, Richard Jefferies, and W.H. Hudson and ultimately with Wells. In doing so, the book investigates texts ranging from E. Darwin’s *The Loves of the Plants*, *The Economy of Vegetation*, and *The Temple of Nature* (Chapter 1); Wordsworth’s 1802 Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* and P.B. Shelley’s *Queen Mab* (Chapter 2), Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* and *The Last Man* (Chapter 3); Kingsley’s *The
Water Babies, Bulver Lytton’s *The Coming Race*, Butler’s *Erewhon*, Jefferies’s *After London*, and Hudson’s *A Crystal Age* (Chapter 4), as well as Wells’s *The Time Machine*, *The Food of the Gods*, and other stories (Chapter 5).

In articulating this sprawling historical and literary lineage from the Romantic period to the early-twentieth century, the book relies quite heavily on the ideas of the ‘literary imagination’ as well as the ‘scientific imagination’ – terms that are certainly not self-evident but that are, nonetheless, only elliptically defined in the book. For Page, almost all of the authors under investigation in his study follow Erasmus Darwin’s declaration ‘to enlist the imagination under the banner of science,’ as announced in the first paragraph of the ‘Advertisement’ to *The Botanic Garden*. While this phrase is cited often throughout the book (6, 84, 195, etc.), it is never fully unpacked or historically contextualized and, of course, even if it does apply to writers such as Wordsworth, the Shelleys, or Wells, it certainly does so in often radically different ways and varying contexts. Despite these possible shortcomings, *The Literary Imagination from Erasmus Darwin to H.G. Wells* enables a range of intriguing readings of Romantic literature and science. Perhaps most importantly, Page’s book reveals the need for further critical and historical analysis of the relationship between science fiction and Romanticism.

Andrew Burkett
Union College