Literature, Science and Interdisciplinarity: 
The Critique of Coleridge’s Organicism

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I. Introduction: The Historical Emergence of Organicism in Literature and Science

Mechanical science and organic science constitute two representative kinds of modern science. Mechanical science eliminates qualitative differences of matters to mathematize their reversible motions, whereas organic science examines the irreversible change of life transforming itself. While the former is characteristic of what Andrew Cunningham and Nicholas Jardine term “the first scientific revolution” of the seventeenth century, the latter triggers what they call “the second scientific revolution” of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (1).

Organic rule distinguished from mechanical rule surfaced as a new criterion for judging both artistic and scientific practices during what we
call the Romantic era. Contemporary European life scientists, who placed organic life at the heart of a new discipline of biology, characterized it as capable of self-structuralization and inner transfiguration. In organicism, they find “the gradual complication of a basic form;” in other words, they strive to relate the origin of an organism to its diverse differentiations (Jacyna 13-48). To be more specific, British scientists such as Robert Knox, Patrick Matthew, and Erasmus Darwin define an organism as a self-regulating, self-creating being.¹) In Zoonomia: Or, the Laws of Organic Life, for instance, Darwin contends that “a single living filament” as “the cause of all organic life” metamorphoses itself “by its own inherent activity” (1: 453, 455);²) more precisely, “from their first rudiment, or primordium, to the termination of their lives all animals undergo perpetual transformation,” in which, of course, they might sometimes confront what Darwin terms “monstrous births” (1: 446, 451). Nature thus is not something a priori but a process of constant self-metamorphosis; “the world itself might have been generated, rather than created,” Darwin writes (1: 457).

Organicism flourished not merely in England but also on the European continent during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. German thinkers (i.e., Johann Wolfgang Goethe and Friedrich Schelling) and French zoologists (i.e., Étienne Geoffroy Saint-Hillaire and Georges Cuvier) among others participate in the early discussion of organicism. Goethe, for instance, looks upon it as a crucial concept of the disciplines of at once

1) For Knox’s and Matthew’s sense of organicism, refer to Knox, Desmond, Rehbock and Wells.
2) Quotes from Darwin’s Zoonomia are based on the 2007 edition of it by the publisher Bibliobazaar.