

BOOK REVIEWS

Darwin's Critics

Charles Darwin: The Years of Controversy—The Origin of Species and its Critics, 1859–82. By Peter J. Vorzimmer. Pp. xix+300. (University of London: London, 1972.) £4.40.

IT might have been said of Darwin, as it was of Newton, that he was so happy in his conjectures that he seemed to know more than he could possibly have any means of proving. Newton, however, could provide the proof when required, whereas it was Darwin's misfortune that he could not, for reasons that are made clear by Professor Vorzimmer in this well documented and scholarly analysis of the controversy that developed around the theory of natural selection. The laws of the Newtonian universe had a basic logical and mathematical simplicity, whereas the natural world encompassed by Darwin included complex biological phenomena which could not, during his lifetime, be subjected to mathematical treatment. Particularly damaging, as we can now see, was current ignorance regarding the mechanism of inheritance and the nature and origin of small variations.

Vorzimmer, drawing on new material, including Darwin's annotated reprint collection in the Botany School Library at Cambridge, traces the steps by which certain inconsistencies were introduced into the successive revisions of *The Origin of Species* and shows how these were then seized upon by Darwin's critics with what appears, in retrospect, to be an ill-judged and at times distasteful enthusiasm. Mivart, for example, who was amongst the earliest supporters of the theory of natural selection, later found that his religious views were incompatible with a more general belief in evolution. The result was an ideological estrangement in which a "vituperative attitude" was fortified by dialectic skill founded on his previous legal training.

Vorzimmer argues that what exposed Darwin to this and other attacks was the intellectual honesty with which he

sought the facts that he needed to justify his arguments. Unfortunately, the facts were not always there, and so, rather than ignore the consequent difficulties, he adopted assumptions which could not be consistently subsumed within a single theory. Nevertheless, the sixth and final edition of the *Origin* showed him maintaining his stand against his critics with renewed firmness, but the strain was proving too severe, and he retired from the controversy during his closing years to find relief in botanical studies.

The picture suggested by Vorzimmer, of an elderly Darwin badgered into a state of frustrating confusion, is surely too highly coloured, for he did, after all, live to see wide acceptance of much of his thinking. But in the "Epilogue" to this fascinating study there is a well-judged tribute to the magnitude of Darwin's achievement, and to the superbly consistent faith with which he held to the essentials of his position throughout a momentous intellectual struggle to which we all owe so much.

E. J. W. BARRINGTON

Organic Metaphor

Organic Form: The Life of an Idea. Edited by G. S. Rousseau. Pp. xii+109. (Routledge and Kegan Paul: London and Boston, June 1972.) £2.

ALTHOUGH the terms "organic form" and "organic unity" have long had a cherished place in the terminology of aestheticians, their popularity is not always accompanied by close definition or examination. Often they serve a vaguer, more rhetorical purpose, guarding works of art against premature classification and artists against mechanical rules of judgment. Indeed, the issues raised by their use are so wide-ranging that evasiveness is not unforgivable; even now, it may be that the topic is best approached by a convergence of brief studies, as in this small book, which consists of lectures given by specialists

in three different fields (G. N. Orsini, Philip C. Ritterbush and W. K. Wimsatt) to a section of the annual Modern Language Association meetings, along with an extremely useful bibliography, contributed by the editor.

In the first lecture G. N. Orsini draws attention to the early appearance of the concept in ancient philosophy, as when, in Plato's *Phaedrus*, Socrates declares that every discourse "must be composed like a living being, with a body of its own, as it were, so as not to be headless or footless, but to have members and a middle arranged in a fitting relation to each other and to the whole." Unfortunately it is not clear how seriously Socrates took his metaphor. (As Wimsatt trenchantly asks later, "What is the stomach of a work of art?") Nor does the paper itself offer a satisfactory definition of the basic terms involved. It begins by quoting approvingly Hospers's criterion of "unification":

The unified object should contain within itself a large number of diverse elements, each of which contributes to the total integration of the unified whole, so that there is no confusion despite the disparate elements within the object. . . . In the unified object everything that is necessary is there and nothing that is necessary is not there.

This, however, would surely apply as much to a clock as to a camel. It is hard to see how one can have a satisfactory concept of "organic" unity which does not contain some reference to phenomena associated specifically with life.

Philip C. Ritterbush's paper (taken partly from his interesting book *The Art of Organic Forms*) traces the recent development of the idea. Artistically, the need for it may be seen to have resulted from the breakdown of earlier theoretical justifications for art—as in religiously-authorized ritual or established convention. When such bases come to be questioned, it was natural to look for the authority of art first in its relationship to observable nature—and