



## BESONDERS/EXEMPLARISCH Morphomatische Fallstudien zu Biographie und Portrait

### Abstract

Nicholas Saul

### The Case of Darwin and Haeckel. Heroism, Onto- and Phylogenesis in the Evolutionist Biographies of Wilhelm Bölsche

What does it mean to write a life after Darwin's fundamental decentring of humanity in the great scheme of things? There is an extensive literature on the nature and function of the genre of biography, which has come increasingly into focus as an object of debate in the last ten years. Here, adding an evolutionary dimension to the discussion, I want for a start to offer a contrastive paired case study of the intellectual, ideological and aesthetic reconstitution of the material form of biography in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century in Germany in the cause of radical evolutionism: twin linked biographies by the leading German populariser of 'Darwinism', Wilhelm Bölsche (1861-1939), *Charles Darwin* (1899; extended as *Charles Darwin. Ein Lebensbild*, 1906) and *Ernst Haeckel. Ein Lebensbild* (1900). Bölsche, like his mentor and hero Ernst Haeckel both a monist and a social democrat, and the most significant populariser of Darwinism of the age, understands the emergence of Darwinism however interpreted as a unique cultural-historical watershed. Thus Bölsche distances himself from traditional biographies so as to refunctionalise the genre as an instrument of creative conversion in the evolutionary struggle ongoing in the arena of public opinion. Drawing on generic and ideological energies from such as Carlyle (*Heroes and Hero-Worship*), Jacob Burckhardt ('Das Individuum und das Allgemeine' in *Die historische Größe*) and Nietzsche (*Vom Nutzen und Nachteil der Historie für das Leben*), Bölsche of course wants to present Darwin and Haeckel as exceptional individuals who have made a new truth and a new world. But he also wants the receptive German reader to follow their cause so defined, that is, reconstruct his/her own self-

Universität zu Köln  
Center for Advanced Studies

Internationales Kolleg Morphomata  
Universität zu Köln  
Albertus-Magnus-Platz  
50923 Köln, Germany

Besucheradresse  
Weyertal 59 (Rückgebäude)  
50937 Köln, Germany

[www.ik-morphomata.uni-koeln.de](http://www.ik-morphomata.uni-koeln.de)

Telefon +49 (0)221 470-1292  
Fax +49 (0)221 470-1296  
[ik-morphomata@uni-koeln.de](mailto:ik-morphomata@uni-koeln.de)



understanding as part of the evolutionary process. Thus in addition to Carlyle, Burckhardt and Nietzsche, Bölsche attempts to construct his own, original narrative analogue of (cultural) *evolutionary* agency in an appropriately Darwinian manner as the action of creative individuals. Abandoning positivistic notions of chronological completeness (*histoire/sujet*) he refocuses the narrative structure (*récit/fable*) on singular creative junctures of cultural evolution, when the evolutionary process can be reconstructed and symbolically presented so as to disclose 'Geburtsstunden', realised instantiations of virtual creativity, in which the general process of (cultural) evolution becomes historical in the action of a great and special individual. In Bölsche's appropriation of Haeckel's language, the famous 'biogenetisches Grundgesetz', the ontogeny of the great individual emerging in history in this unique case – Darwin, Haeckel – recapitulates the phylogeny of the species at a higher level: Haeckel in a sense evolves from Darwin, in a kind of cultural palingenesis, and is seen to do so. Bölsche's evolutionist biography also gives the hero cult a new, political twist, notably as part of a polemic ongoing since Feuerbach and Virchow about the consequences of the evolutionary process for the structure of the German state. Finally, Bölsche's variety of biography also adds something characteristically German. For not only is his 'Darwin' presented as a German-friendly manner as a heroic Faust figure, also both Haeckel and Darwin are seen as evolutionary metastases of the greatest evolutionist of them all: Goethe.