



Autobiography and Natural Science in the Age of Romanticism: Rousseau, Goethe, Thoreau

Bernhard Kuhn

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Set against the backdrop of a rapidly fissuring disciplinary landscape where poetry and science are increasingly viewed as irreconcilable and unrelated, Bernhard Kuhn's study uncovers a previously ignored, fundamental connection between autobiography and the natural sciences. Examining the autobiographies and scientific writings of Rousseau, Goethe, and Thoreau as representative of their ages, Kuhn challenges the now entrenched thesis of the "two cultures." Rather, these three writers are exemplary in that their autobiographical and scientific writings may be read not as separate or even antithetical but as mutually constitutive projects that challenge the newly emerging boundaries between scientific and humanistic thought during the Romantic period. Reading each writer's life stories and nature works side by side-as they were written-Kuhn reveals the scientific character of autobiographical writing while demonstrating the autobiographical nature of natural science. He considers all three writers in the context of scientific developments in their own times as well as ours, showing how each one marks a distinctive stage in the growing estrangement of the arts and sciences, from the self-assured epistemic unity of Rousseau's time, to the splintering of disciplines into competing ways of knowing under the pressures of specialization and professionalization during the late Romantic age of Thoreau. His book thus traces an unfolding drama, in which these writers and their contemporaries, each situated in an intellectual landscape more fragmented than the last, seek to keep together what modern culture is determined to break apart.

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