



The Biologist's Mistress: Rethinking Self-Organization in Art, Literature, and Nature

By Victoria N. Alexander

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As 20th century geneticist J. B. S. Haldane famously quipped, "Teleology is like a mistress to the biologist; he dare not be seen with her in public but cannot live without her." Teleology is the study of the purposes of nature. As a scientific discipline, it began its celebrated decline in the 17th century, with the birth of modern empiricism, and continued to plummet apace the rise of the Enlightenment, Darwinism, and quantum mechanics. Those who continued to think nature could be purposeful were primarily spiritualists, artists, or madmen, who credited the guidance of gods, muses, or fate.

But could a wholesale rejection of teleology be an overreaction? Is there something in the idea, as Haldane implies, that we need? Applying research from the complexity sciences, Peircean semiotics, and poetics, Alexander helps us re-imagine what purposeful behavior might be, in ourselves as well as in nature. Lurking at the heart of the discussion about purposefulness is the too-often overlooked question of creativity, for without creativity there is no purposeful action, only robotic execution of design.

Using her knowledge and experience as an art-theorist and novelist, Alexander takes us "inside" paradoxical self-organizing processes (which, somehow make themselves without having a self yet to do the making) and shows us how poetic-like relationships -- things that are coincidentally near each other or metonymic, things that are coincidentally like each other or metaphoric -- help form organization where there was none before. She suggests that it is these language-like processes that result in the emergent phenomena we call meaningful and functional. The Biologist's Mistress deals deftly with postmodern theories that unfairly snubbed the purposeful artist and offers a view of a non-essentialist emergent self. It's a much-needed antidote to the extreme relativism and anti-intellectualism that has lately wreaked such havoc on human culture.

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The Biologist's Mistress: Rethinking Self-Organization in Art, Literature, and Nature By Victoria N. Alexander **Bibliography**

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Editorial Review

Review

Alexander "has refined a fresh and roundabout style of exposition building to a strong and coherent argument. With winningly explicit self-awareness and seasoned conviction conveyed in a lively conversational tone, she has come out swinging at 'postmodernist' idols of both the intellectual and the artistic marketplace. Her thesis, original and entirely stimulating, is that the modern evacuation of teleology--the loss of a ... secular notion of purposiveness in both nature and art--has led to an impoverished postmodern sensibility..." -Bruce Clarke, *Configurations*

From the Author

Watch VN Alexander in "The Science of Making Choices" for an introduction to themes in *Biologist's Mistress*. [youtube.com/watch?v=dxAIO_SLqsl](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dxAIO_SLqsl)

From the Back Cover

"Alexander has written a book of dazzling sparkle, charm and intellectual range. Her eleven chapters in *The Biologist's Mistress* make an easy tour through some very difficult terrain, and always one is aware of a sturdy armature of argument, lightly carried." -**Angus Fletcher, author of *New Theory for American Poetry and Time, Space and Motion in the Age of Shakespeare***.

"In *The Biologist's Mistress*, Alexander has achieved something so remarkable that one might have been thought impossible before reading her new book. She has persuasively shown how the notion of teleology, reinterpreted in the light of both complexity theory and Peircian semiotics, can illuminate aspects of the novelty producing core of creative process and art-making that had long remained obscure and inaccessible." -**Jeffrey Goldstein, author of *Emergence: Flirting with Paradox in Complex Systems***.

This "very personal inquiry into creativity, as apprehended by way of teleology with its historical depth reconceives final cause in connection with the process of self-organization, ...bridging the 'two cultures,' and allowing cross reflection between them." -**Stanley Salthe, author of *Development and Evolution and Evolving Hierarchical Systems***.

"Looking at the role of purpose in art and life, *The Biologist's Mistress* should strongly appeal to those interested in the dovetailing of the sciences and the arts, and especially those enthralled by literary criticism and the craft of fiction. In the end it is a kind of modern artistic manifesto, telling us what we've been missing and why." -**Dorion Sagan, co-author of *Microcosmos* and *Into the Cool***.

"Alexander has an uncanny way of anticipating critical artistic concerns - how much of what we produce is directed, and how much owes to chance? - and then rephrasing the issues in ways that illuminate and promote creativity itself." -**Ellen K. Levy, visual artist, past President of the College Art Association, and co-organizer (2002) of a traveling exhibition, *Complexity***.

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Ann Davis:

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Exactly why? Because this *The Biologist's Mistress: Rethinking Self-Organization in Art, Literature, and Nature* is an unordinary book that the inside of the guide waiting for you to snap the idea but latter it will jolt you with the secret that inside. Reading this book next to it was fantastic author who else write the book in such remarkable way makes the content on the inside easier to understand, entertaining means but still convey the meaning completely. So , it is good for you because of not hesitating having this any longer or you going to regret it. This phenomenal book will give you a lot of benefits than the other book include such as help improving your ability and your critical thinking technique. So , still want to hold up having that book? If I were you I will go to the reserve store hurriedly.

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