

1. ARTÍCULOS

Alexander von Humboldt's Poetry of Nature: Freedom and the Latin American Landscape*

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ABSTRACT: In this article, I present the *Naturgemälde* that Alexander von Humboldt created during his voyage from 1799-1804 to the equinoctial region of the earth. I suggest that Humboldt's approach to nature balanced empirical mastery with aesthetic appreciation, a balancing that opened a new space of freedom for the people and places of Latin America. Humboldt helped to liberate the Latin American landscape from the dominant Eurocentric views of its anti-American detractors. I argue that this valuable balancing of mastery and freedom is rooted in some of the philosophical insights of the early German Romantics. Further, by way of reference to the work of Theodor Adorno, Martin Seel, and César Aira, I demonstrate the enduring relevance of Humboldt's approach to landscape.

KEYWORDS: *Naturgemälde*, landscape, poetry of nature, mastery, freedom.

* With thanks to the anonymous reviewers whose valuable comments helped me to refine some of the points I present here.

LA POESÍA DE LA NATURALEZA DE ALEXANDER VON HUMBOLDT:
LA LIBERTAD Y EL PAISAJE LATINOAMERICANO

RESUMEN: En este artículo presento el concepto de la *Naturgemälde* y las escenas del paisaje latinoamericano que Alejandro de Humboldt creó durante su gran viaje de 1799-1804 a la región equinoccial del mundo. Sugiero que, en su aproximación a la naturaleza, Humboldt logró balancear el dominio empírico con la apreciación estética, un tipo de balance que abrió un espacio nuevo para la libertad, tanto de la gente como de los espacios de Latinoamérica. Un aporte central de la obra de Humboldt fue liberar el paisaje latinoamericano de las opiniones eurocéntricas que fueron tan dominantes durante su época. Sostengo que el balance valioso de dominio y libertad que logró Humboldt tiene sus raíces teóricas en la filosofía de los tempranos románticos alemanes. Por medio de una breve discusión de algunos puntos de Theodor Adorno, Martin Seel y César Aira demuestro la relevancia del pensamiento de Humboldt acerca del paisaje como idea filosófica.

PALABRAS CLAVE: *Naturgemälde*, paisaje, poesía de la naturaleza, dominio, libertad.

In the wake of the French Revolution, freedom was in the European intellectual air. This embrace of freedom had obvious political consequences. Less obvious, yet no less important, were the aesthetic consequences of freedom's embrace. In what follows, I will examine the ways in which the embrace of freedom affected how Alexander von Humboldt presented the scenes of nature he experienced during his famous voyage from 1799-1804 to the equinoctial region of the earth (Spanish America as it was then known). As we shall see, for Humboldt nature is defined as a realm of freedom [*Reich der Freiheit*], that is, *not* as a realm to be dominated by humans (for if dominated, nature would not be free), but rather as a set of phenomena to be appreciated (for appreciation does not limit its objects, but leaves them free). Under Humboldt's lens, nature emerges as a realm of beauty and grandeur, of those things "measureless to man" and precisely because measureless to humans, of great value¹. I shall make the case that Humboldt's move from mastery to

¹ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, in his ballad *Kubla Khan* (1816) gave most the beautiful articulation to the expression "measureless to man": "In Xanadu did Kubla Khan/A

appreciation is one that has roots in a philosophical movement that took form in the late 1700s and which was shaped by the events of the French Revolution and early German Romanticism. Furthermore, I should like to suggest that by stepping out of mastery of nature (a mastery, one might add, that Humboldt mastered with impressive skill), Humboldt helped to liberate the Latin American landscape from the dominant Eurocentric views of its anti-American detractors.

In what follows, my focus will be on Humboldt's presentation of the Latin American landscape, though it should be noted that the region through which Humboldt had permission to travel from 1799-1804 was known as Spanish America, as it was still part of the Spanish colonial empire. Humboldt's long relation with Latin America began when he and his traveling companion, the French naturalist, Aimé Bonpland, were given permission by the Spanish Crown to explore the Spanish colonies of the New World. On June 5th, 1799, they sailed from La Coruña, Spain, in a ship called the *Pizarro*, stopped off at the Canary Islands, and arrived in Cumaná, Venezuela, on July 16th, 1799. (The *Pizarro* was supposed to dock in Havana, Cuba, but an outbreak of typhoid fever on board made it necessary to land at Cumaná.) Bonpland and Humboldt explored the coast and then penetrated to the Orinoco and Río Negro rivers, collecting data as they went. In Caracas, Humboldt met with individuals who would prove to be critical political and intellectual figures of the period, such as Andrés Bello and Simón Bolívar. Humboldt and Bonpland's travels took them to Cuba, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, Mexico, and to the United States (where Humboldt met Thomas Jefferson and other leading politicians, thus beginning a lifelong friendship)². They returned to Europe (Bordeaux)

stately pleasure-dome decree:/Where Alph the sacred river, ran/Through caverns measureless to man/Down to a sunless sea". The concept of that which is measureless to humans is central to the work Humboldt does in presenting nature to his reading public.

² For more on Humboldt's travels in the United States, see Laura Dassow Walls, *The Passage to Cosmos. Alexander von Humboldt and the Shaping of America*, a detailed and elegantly written study of Humboldt's relation to and influence in both Americas. Dassow Walls places Humboldt's work into conversation with Emerson, Poe, Thoreau, Church, and Whitman. With this important volume, Dassow Walls has provided one of the most detailed English-language accounts of Humboldt's views on nature, race, freedom, and slavery. Another study of Humboldt and America is Vera M. Kutzinski,

on August 3rd, 1804, and Humboldt began work on his narrative of the five year voyage to the equinoctial regions of the earth, a project that was to consume his time and his finances for most of the rest of his life. The published work consisted of 30 folio volumes, with the last volume published in 1834 (*Voyages aux régions équinoxiales du Nouveau Continent, fait en 1799, 1800, 1801, 1802, 1803, et 1804*). Humboldt's presentation of the Latin American landscape was important during his own time, and it remains relevant for our understanding of nature and of culture.

This theme of the relation between freedom and the aesthetic, central to the work of the early German Romantics, endures in more contemporary discussions of human society, and it was central to the work of some of early German Romanticism's greatest heirs, the critical theorists, Theodor Adorno and Walter Benjamin³. Indeed, a point from Adorno's work can be used to bring Humboldt's presentation of the Latin American landscape into sharper focus. In his *Ästhetik des Erscheinens*, Martin Seel develops a point from Adorno's aesthetic theory that has great relevance for the contributions that Humboldt made to our understanding of nature's beauty more than a century before Adorno wrote his *Aesthetic Theory*⁴. In his analysis of Adorno's work on aesthetics, Seel emphasizes the fact that the indeterminable is not only of great theoretical, but also of great ethical importance for Adorno. Seel observes of the indeterminable that "It opens a 'freedom to the object' which is a condition of real freedom among subjects" (*Aesthetics of Appearing* 15). Because the work of art reveals to the viewer "a reality richer than all of the appearances we can fix in the language of conceptual knowledge," it unfolds the "difference between determinable appearance and indeterminable appearing", (15) and so, concludes Seel:

For Adorno, art thus becomes the hallmark indicating that the world has not been comprehended if it is known only conceptually;

Ottmar Ette, and Laura Dassow Walls, *Alexander von Humboldt and the Americas*, an excellent contribution to the growing body of research on the relevance of Humboldt's work in both Americas. Sandra Rebok presents Humboldt's relationship with Thomas Jefferson in *Humboldt and Jefferson: A Transatlantic Friendship of the Enlightenment*.

³ For more on the relation between Critical Theory and early German Romanticism, see, Margarete Kohlenbach, (257-280).

⁴ Adorno's last work was his *Aesthetic Theory*, written from 1961-69.

that the world has not been appropriated if it is appropriated only technically; that individual and social freedom have not been attained if they are guaranteed merely as a license to make profit; in a word, that we do not really encounter the reality of our lives if we encounter it merely in a spirit of mastery (15).

The social freedom of which Seel speaks here in reference to Adorno's view of art and indeterminable appearing was also operative, or so I shall argue, in the work of Humboldt as he attempted to present the Latin American landscape to the European public. While working at different historical moments, with social issues that were different in scope, Adorno and Humboldt each saw a need to protect the realm of freedom in society, and to do so via an aesthetic path. Humboldt's aesthetic path opened a space for freedom in society; in particular a new space of appreciation for the Latin American landscape was opened through Humboldt's aesthetic lens. Humboldt's aesthetic path was related to the poetry of nature developed by Friedrich Schlegel, one of the leading philosophers of early German Romanticism, a movement that flourished in the cities of Jena and Berlin between the years of 1794-1808. I shall begin with a brief account of Schlegel's philosophical project.

1. SCHLEGEL'S POETRY OF NATURE

In *Athenäum Fragment* 116, Schlegel calls for a radical new way of conceiving philosophy, a way that dethroned the lofty place promised by philosophers who claimed that philosophy was the "queen of all sciences." For Schlegel, philosophy does not stand above the other disciplines, but rather is just one discipline along a horizon of other disciplines. Indeed, for Schlegel as philosophy opens its boundaries to converse with the other disciplines, it will become more progressive. Philosophy for Schlegel is not a finished product, but rather ever in a process of becoming. Schlegel reminds us time and again in his writing that one can never be a philosopher, but only ever be in the process of becoming one, for philosophy is not about final words or closed systems, but much more like an open web of claims that cohere together to lead us to truth. Our infinite longing for truth will never be satisfied, but only approximated, because truth is never ours to possess, but rather it regulates our search for knowledge. The

theme of philosophy's incomplete nature is sounded by other thinkers of the early German Romantic movement. In the *Logological Fragments*, Schlegel's friend and fellow romantic, Friedrich von Hardenberg (Novalis) tells us that, "Only what is incomplete can be comprehended – can take us further" (*Novalis Schriften* I 559/Nr. 151)⁵. In the *Allgemeine Brouillon* (1798-99), Novalis tells us that "an absolute drive towards perfection and completeness is an illness, as soon as it shows itself to be destructive and averse toward the *imperfect*, the incomplete (...) (*NS* II 384/Nr. 638; Stoljar 131/Nr. 33)." Rüdiger Bubner, in his work on the period's thinkers, stressed that the early German Romantics, more concerned than their idealist contemporaries with commentary, criticism, and interpretation, also developed a different model of the system. For the early German Romantics, "[t]he relevant model (...) is not a godlike creation of a system *ex nihilo*, as it was for the early idealists, but rather an actively sympathetic response on the part of the critic and the philologist to the significant creative works of the past (*Innovations* 33)." Bubner's reference to a "godlike system" recalls Novalis' critique of the "absolute drive for perfection and completeness," for certainly only a godlike creation could possibly hope to satisfy such a drive. Furthermore, only those with a desire for absolute mastery of their subject matter would opt for a godlike system in the first place. With the early German Romantics there is a distinct move away from mastery to appreciation of the world, the critic and the philologist, with their "actively sympathetic responses" are trying to understand and appreciate the objects of their investigation, not to dominate them. The grand system builder is, one could argue, after domination, final words, enduring edifices. The early German Romantics wrote essays, fragments, dialogues – final words and closed systems were not part of the romantic approach to philosophy, and their literary forms reflect their view of philosophy as an open-ended pursuit of the truth.

Schlegel rejects attempts to ground philosophy *ex nihilo* in ahistorical first principles, stressing the intimate relation philosophy has to history and tradition, and searching, all too often in vain, for an active and sympathetic reception of his own work. It became a popular saying of

⁵ Hereafter referred to as *NS*. Some of Novalis' writings have been translated by Margaret M. Stoljar in *Novalis. Philosophical Writings*, hereafter Stoljar. Stoljar (65/Nr. 86).

his time that “Was man nicht versteht hat ein Schlegel geschrieben” (whatever one does not understand, must have been written by a Schlegel). The openness that Novalis and Schlegel embrace is not without its hermeneutical hazards – and neither thinker attempts to dodge this danger by setting up a clear border between that which is understood and that which is incomprehensible. For both thinkers, there is a play between comprehension and incomprehension, a fluctuating movement, a fluid border between that which is understood and that which is not understood, and which may remain incomprehensible (but not for that reason unintelligible). Hovering, fluctuating, a fluid movement from one aspect of meaning to another is part of the romantic view of the work and play of the understanding. In *Lyceum/Critical Fragment 20* we are told that a “classical text must never be entirely comprehensible. But those who are cultivated and who cultivate themselves must always want to learn more from it (*KFSA 2 149; Firchow 2*)”⁶. As we shall see, Humboldt took similar hermeneutical risks with his writing, eschewing traditional scientific literary forms and introducing new literary forms to present nature to the public. Making their readers aware of the fact that what is presented in any given text is only part of the story of the meaning of that text, is a key aspect of the sort of poetry that both Schlegel and Humboldt are after in their work.

Poetry and nature began to blend with the early German Romantics, a blending that we see developed even more fully in Humboldt's writings on nature. In the following claims from *Athenäum Fragment 116*, Schlegel offers us a rich harvest of romantic tropes, tropes that not only characterize early German Romanticism, but also many aspects of the late 18th and early 19th century intellectual landscape in German speaking lands:

Romantic poetry is a progressive, universal poetry. Its aim isn't merely to reunite all the separate species of poetry and put poetry in touch with philosophy and rhetoric. It tries to and should mix and fuse poetry and prose, inspiration and criticism, the poetry of art and the poetry of nature...The romantic kind of poetry is still in the state of becoming; that, in fact, is its real essence: that it should forever be becoming and never be perfected. It can

⁶ *Kritische Friedrich Schlegel Ausgabe*. Some of the fragments have been translated by Peter Firchow in *Friedrich Schlegel: Philosophical Fragments*, hereafter, Firchow.

be exhausted by no theory and only a divinatory criticism would dare try to characterize its ideal. It alone is infinite, just as it alone is free; and it recognizes as its first commandment that the will of the poet can tolerate no law above itself. The romantic kind of poetry is the only one that is more than a kind, that is, as it were, poetry itself: for in a certain sense all poetry is or should be romantic (*KFSA* 2 182; Firchow 31-32).

In this statement on romantic poetry, Schlegel emphasizes freedom: the freedom of romantic poetry, which is more than a genre, it is a kind of aesthetic and even philosophic ideal of how we should approach our search for truth. There is a call for a fusion of borders, poetry and prose “mix and fuse” – the poetry of art with its provisional, incomplete, and uncertain strands will flavor the method favored by the romantic philosopher. The subject matter of the romantic investigator will never be mastered or dominated: it will be appreciated through careful understanding and critique. We are in the realm of appreciation: and as August Wilhelm Schlegel tells us in *Athenäum Fragment* 106, in aesthetic appreciation, good intentions mean “nothing at all,” the point is to “[lift] conventional barriers” and “[liberate] the spirit (*KFSA* 2 181; Firchow 30).” The process of understanding, both Schlegel brothers seem to be telling us, will never be complete. As Friedrich Schlegel emphasizes, the process of understanding and of appreciating a given text, a given painting, even a given natural landscape (in the poetry of nature) will be forever becoming. Just as romantic poetry is to be understood as infinite, so too is the process of appreciating and coming to an understanding of art. As Schlegel says of romantic poetry, its “real [is] essence [is] that is should be forever be becoming and never be completed.” One can complete a logical proof, but one does not solve the problem of understanding the meaning of *Don Quixote*, or ever finish appreciating a landscape of the pampas by the painter Rugendas the way one might very well master the coordinates of a map of Latin America⁷. Aesthetic experience is closely connected to the eternal process of becoming voiced by Schlegel in *Athenäum Fragment* 116. And to accept that philosophy is not like a science, but more like an art, one must accept the openness of the method with which one is

⁷ Johann Moritz Rugendas (1802-1855), German landscape painter who worked with Humboldt to present the landscape of Chile, Argentina, and Mexico.

engaged. With the early German Romantics a kind of aesthetic philosophy was born. Alexander von Humboldt is a thinker whose presentation of nature was romantic in this aesthetic sense. To further refine the romantic roots of Humboldt's presentation of nature, let us now consider his *Naturgemälde* or canvasses of nature, in which central features of his innovative presentation of nature can be found.

2. HUMBOLDT'S *NATURGEMÄLDE*: ART OR NATURE?

The very term, *Naturgemälde* or canvas of nature, seems to suggest that in attempting to present nature to his reading public as a realm to be appreciated, Humboldt feels that he must assimilate art and nature – nature will be seen as a set of phenomena to be aesthetically appreciated only if nature is depicted as a work of art. Is Humboldt guilty of assimilating the appreciation of nature and of art? Is the *Naturgemälde* part of this assimilationist move? Kant claims in §45 of the *Critique of Judgment* that “nature is beautiful because it looks like art and art can only be called beautiful if we are conscious of it as art while yet it looks like nature.” Freedom is central to our aesthetic experience, the freedom at the center of Kant's analysis is the freedom in the play of our cognitive faculties, which is part of why purposiveness without purpose becomes a leading motif in Kant's account of aesthetic judgments. Disinterest is also a key element of aesthetic experience in the account given by Kant. Freedom is, as we quickly see from the very definition of nature that Humboldt offers, e.g., “the realm of freedom” [*Reich der Freiheit*], central to Humboldt's view of our experience of nature. Unlike Kant, Humboldt's focus is not on the freedom operative in the free play of our faculties: Humboldt is not guilty of the subjectivization of aesthetic experience. But is he guilty of failing to carve out an autonomous space for the aesthetic appreciation of nature? Is nature reduced to a landscape painting when presented via Humboldt's *Naturgemälde*? To probe this matter, let us consider an account that places Humboldt's views of nature into a most intimate connection with landscape painting.

César Aira's 2000 account, *Un episodio en la vida del pintor viajero/An Episode in the Life of a Landscape Painter*, is a fine example of how Humboldt's influence in Latin America went far beyond scientific circles. The episode

chronicled by Aira is that of the German artist Johann Moritz Rugendas. As we are told early in the *Episode*:

Rugendas was a genre painter. His genre was the physiognomy of nature, based on a procedure invented by Humboldt. The great naturalist was the father of a discipline that virtually died with him: *Erdtheorie* or *La Physique du monde*, a kind of artistic geography, an aesthetic understanding of the world, a science of landscape. Alexander von Humboldt (1769-1859) was an all-embracing scholar, perhaps the last of his kind: his aim was to apprehend the world in its totality; and the way to do this, he believed, in conformity with a long tradition, was through vision. Yet his approach was new in that, rather than isolating images and treating them as “emblems” of knowledge, his aim was to accumulate and coordinate them within a broad framework for which landscape provided the model (*Episode* 5-6; *Episodio* 10).

In this passage, Aira captures the following central elements of Humboldt’s approach to nature: 1) his desire to present the whole of nature and not only its isolated parts; 2) his aesthetic understanding of nature; and 3) his commitment to science. Furthermore, Aira correctly connects this *Ganzheitsidee* to Humboldt’s fusion of aesthetic and scientific method, a fusion that Aira locates in the notion of landscape. Contemporary scholars of nature and aesthetics make similar moves to link the appreciation of nature to concepts such as landscape, perhaps due to what T.J. Diffey, invoking Lovejoy, reminds us of, namely, that “nature” is an ambiguous term and so, “we cannot understand the idea of natural beauty without considering certain concepts more restricted in scope such as *landscape*, *view* or *prospect* (52).” As Diffey goes on to say,

[t]he concept of landscape is particularly interesting (...) for its double membership of the language of art and the aesthetics of nature...To identify something more determinately than as “nature,” as for example a “view,” “prospect,” “landscape,” or whatever, is to conceptualize it in such a way as to imply that the terrain in question *has already been recognized aesthetically*. (...) These subject-terms are already aesthetic in meaning, whereas the nondescript territory that I may motor through on my way to the beach or office is neither prospect nor view nor landscape (52).

Humboldt's work reflects an awareness of the double membership enjoyed by the concept of landscape. Humboldt's *Naturgemälde* are even more encompassing than the concept of landscape: for they join not just nature and beauty, but also the realm of scientific truth. Hence, while Diffey sees a gulf between matters of truth in art and truth in the beauty of landscapes, claiming that, "[w]e appreciate nature, *when* this is more determinately identified through such aesthetic categories as 'landscape,' for its beauty but not for its truthfulness," (60) Humboldt gets at *both* the truth and the beauty of nature via the *Naturgemälde*.

When Aira speaks of Humboldt's "artistic geography," his "aesthetic understanding of the world," and his "science of landscape," he broaches what I have been arguing are the romantic roots of Humboldt's presentation of nature. Schlegel realized that "where philosophy ends, poetry must begin (*KFSA* 2 261/Nr. 48; Firchow 98)." Humboldt seems to realize that where science ends, poetry must begin, and his *Naturgemälde* are the result of this realization. Humboldt's empirical approach to nature is never abandoned in favor an artistic rendering of the landscape, in romantic manner, he fuses science and art. "All art should become science and all science art (*KFSA* 2 161/Lyceum Critical Fragment Nr. 115; Firchow 14)." There is an openness born of this fusion of disciplines, an openness that is liberating.

Aira emphasizes the important role that Humboldt played in making the unfamiliar continent of America familiar to his European readers:

[Humboldt] lived for many years in tropical regions of (...) America, and encouraged artists who had adopted his approach to do likewise. Thus he established a circuit, stimulating curiosity in Europe about regions that were still little known and creating a market for the works of traveling painters (*Episode* 6; *Episodio* 11).

Humboldt's stimulation of curiosity about Latin America was an important element in freeing Europeans from a certain Eurocentric tendency born of less generous and more dogmatic presentations of America. The following observation from Aira helps us to see the connection between liberation from Eurocentrism and Humboldt's approach to nature: "The Humboldtian naturalist was not a botanist but a landscape artist sensitive to the processes of growth operative in all forms of life (*Episode* 8; *Episodio* 12)." Aira's focus on the sensitivity to the processes of growth operative in

all forms of life is indeed central to the open way in which Humboldt was able to present nature to his European audience. Humboldt's approach to nature was valuable not only for the wealth of scientific data it provided, but also, and perhaps even more importantly, because of the new lens he provided to bring Latin America into focus, a lens that did not disregard the value of the culture, people, or natural beauty of Latin America. Let us now consider the details of Humboldt's Latin American landscapes.

3. HUMBOLDT'S POETRY OF NATURE: FROM MASTERY TO APPRECIATION

Few philosophers have taken up Humboldt's work in their considerations of the aesthetic. Martin Seel is a notable exception⁸. In his *Ästhetik der Natur*, Seel explores Humboldt's *Naturgemälde*, and he rescues Humboldt's views of nature from some misunderstandings generated by Joachim Ritter⁹. In particular, Seel emphasizes that Humboldt understands the unity of

⁸ Joachim Ritter's 1963 essay, "Landschaft", features an analysis of Humboldt's work (though, as we shall see, there are problems with his account). Robert Richards is another of the few philosophers to include Alexander von Humboldt in his work on the post-Kantian period. See, Robert Richards, *The Romantic Conception of Life*. There has been some excellent work on Humboldt by scholars in fields other than philosophy. Laura Dassow Wall's definitive account of Humboldt is one such work (see note 2 above). Aaron Sachs provides a lively and compelling account of Humboldt's contributions to environmental thought in his detailed study, *The Humboldt Current*. Oliver Lubrich and Christine A. Knoop have edited a richly detailed collection of interdisciplinary essays, *Cumaná 1799*. New English translations of some of Humboldt's work have also opened new paths for further scholarship. For example, an excellent and meticulously annotated English-language edition of Humboldt's, *Political Essay on the Island of Cuba*, edited by Vera Kutzinski and Ottmar Ette, translated by J. Bradford Anderson, Vera Kutzinski, and Anja Becker, was recently published.

⁹ After a detailed analysis of Ritter's claims and missteps, those taken in Ritter's essay, Seel clarifies Humboldt's position in the following way: "Bei allem 'Glauben an eine alte innere Notwendigkeit' an das 'harmonisch geordnete Ganze' an den 'Geist' der Natur, an 'die heilige, ewigschaffende Urkraft der Welt,' ist sein wissenschaftliches 'Naturgemälde' des Kosmos programmatisch von einer individualisierenden und differenzierenden Anschauung getragen. Die Einheit konkreter Landschaften versteht Humboldt aus der simulaten Erfassung ihrer divergierenden Gestalten" (Seel, *Ästhetik der Natur* 229).

concrete landscapes from a simultaneous grasping of its diverse forms, so there is no generalizing, reductionist sweep in Humboldt's view of nature – as Seel reminds readers, Humboldt's *Naturgemälde* are programmatically guided by an individualizing and differentiating intuition [*programmatisch von einer individualisierenden und differenzierenden Anschauung getragen*] (*Ästhetik der Natur* 229). Humboldt does not suffer from a disinterest in the phenomenal particularity of the objects of nature, a disinterest that Seel convincingly demonstrates to be the consequence of Ritter's metaphysical nostalgia and his ensuing landscape consciousness [*landschaftliches Bewußtsein*]. Seel's analysis of Humboldt's approach to landscape sheds much needed light on how Humboldt's aesthetic approach to nature (or to speak with Seel, the way in which the phenomena of nature appear to Humboldt) helped liberate him and then his readers from the Eurocentric gaze which held the landscape and culture of Spanish America imprisoned for far too long.

For Humboldt nature is a realm in which law and freedom blend. Nature for Humboldt is “the realm of freedom” [*das Reich der Freiheit*] (*Cosmos*)¹⁰. Nature is “that which is conceived as eternally growing, eternally developing and unfolding (*Kosmos* 16)”¹¹. How is the scientist to present “the realm of freedom” or something that is eternally growing, developing, and unfolding without abandoning insistence on empirical evidence and demonstration? Humboldt saw a common challenge facing all of those who wanted to present nature, be the presenter an artist or a scientist: “In scientific circles as in the circles of landscape poetry and painting, the presentation gains clarity and objective liveliness when the parts are determined and limited (*Kosmos* 9)”¹². The landscape artist and the scientist need to use empirical methods, Humboldt never tires of reminding his readers that, “Humans cannot have any effect on nature

¹⁰ All references to *Cosmos* are to the English edition. I have often altered the translation significantly, and sometimes I have used my own translation, always indicated as “My translation.” References to the German are to, Alexander von Humboldt, *Kosmos*, Beck edition.

¹¹ My translation. “Die Natur ist (...) das ewig Wachsende, ewig im Bilden und Entfalten Begriffene”.

¹² My translation. “Aber in dem wissenschaftlichen Kreis wie in den heiteren Kreisen der Landschaftsdichtung und Landschaftsmalerei, gewinnt die Darstellung um so mehr an Klarheit und objektiver Lebendigkeit als das einzelne bestimmt aufgefaßt und begrenzt ist”.

or get close to any of her powers, if they do not have knowledge of the laws of nature according to relations of measurements and data (*Kosmos* 25).¹³ So Humboldt, the *Naturforscher*, is after a clear understanding of the laws that do control the processes of nature, and he did spend much of his time in America taking measurements and in this way, attempting to master the phenomena of nature. Humboldt's aesthetic turn indicates his acknowledgment that nature cannot be mastered by knowledge of its laws, that it is something more than what the charts and graphs of the empirical scientist can give us. Following Humboldt, when nature is considered rationally, we get to its unity:

In thoughtful contemplation, nature is unity in multiplicity, the connection of the manifold in form and composition [*Verbindung des Mannigfaltigen in Form und Mischung*], the essence of natural phenomena [*Naturdinge*] and forces of nature as a living whole (*Kosmos* 3)¹⁴.

This unity, this living whole, Humboldt indicates, almost as if Adorno had been whispering in his ear, cannot be mastered by the scientist's empirical methods. There can be no mastery of nature, for nature is the realm of freedom. The theme of freedom is central to Humboldt's presentation [*Darstellung*] of nature and to his canvases of nature [*Naturgemälde*]. Humboldt strives to combine the empirical or measurable elements of nature with those elements that are measureless to man. Hartmut Böhme describes "On Steppes and Deserts" from *Views of Nature* (1807) as a text that:

Offers everything that a *Naturgemälde* (canvas of nature) is: that is, moments of a traveler's account, with traces of concrete intuitions, properties of a descriptive/analytic treatise, but also symbolic generalizations, with elements of the cosmos-idea, aesthetic elements of the sublime, and philosophical reflection,

¹³ My translation. "Der Mensch kann auf die Natur nicht einwirken, sich keine ihrer Kräfte aneignen, wenn er nicht die Naturgesetze nach Maß- und Zahlenverhältnissen kennt".

¹⁴ My translation. "Die Natur ist für die denkende Betrachtung Einheit in der Vielheit, Verbindung des Mannigfaltigen in Form und Mischung, Inbegriff der Naturdinge und Naturkräfte als ein lebendiges Ganzes".

but at the same time that they offer a cultural-historical treatment of nature, they also present nature scientifically (23)¹⁵.

In Humboldt's *Naturgemälde*, ideas, which cannot be measured, blend with those aspects of nature that can be measured. As Böhme indicates, there is a fusion of science with the aesthetic elements of experience. With his *Naturgemälde*, Humboldt acknowledges that nature has not been comprehended if it is known only conceptually – empirical methods gives us half the story – we need to understand nature as the realm of freedom, indeed, as a work of art, to approximate a fuller understanding (never, of course, is a full understanding possible or even desirable). In Humboldt's presentation of nature, especially in his favorite work, *Ansichten der Natur* (1807), we find abundant examples of the balancing act between a making present of determinable appearing (these are the elements of nature that can be charted and graphed) and presenting the indeterminable appearing of nature (this presentation is where Humboldt's poetry of nature begins). For example, Humboldt quantifies the steppes described in "On Steppes and Deserts," that is, he gives measurements and data on them, but he also observes that they fill his spirit with the "sense of the infinite"¹⁶. Obviously, the infinite cannot be measured. This "sense of the infinite" is not part of what can be measured by the natural scientist's tools – it belongs to the realm of the aesthetic, to the realm of that which can be appreciated, but not measured. In the seven chapters of Humboldt's *Ansichten*, aesthetic terms of beauty, of the sublime, of enjoyment, of movement of the spirit, are presented alongside empirical accounts of the objects presented in his portraits of nature. The term, *Naturgenuss* (enjoyment of nature), is central in *Views of Nature*. The neglect of this

¹⁵ "Der Text bietet alles, was ein 'Naturgemälde' ausmacht: also Momente eines Reiseberichts mit den Spuren von konkreter Anschauung, Eigenschaften einer deskriptiv-analytischen Abhandlung, aber auch einer symbolischen Verallgemeinerung, mithin Elemente der Kosmos-Idee, Züge der Ästhetik des Erhabenen und der philosophischen Reflexion, aber auch einer kulturhistorischen wie naturwissenschaftlichen Abhandlung", my translation.

¹⁶ See, "Über die Steppen und Wüsten", *Ansichten de Natur* (3-19). When I am using the translation, references are to *Views of Nature*. All references to *Ansichten* are to the Beck edition, hereafter, *Ansichten*.

pleasure and all of the aesthetic elements involved in experiencing nature is the result of the one-dimensional science that Humboldt critiques:

The one-sided handling of the physical sciences, the endless accumulation of raw materials, could indeed lead us to the deeply held prejudice that scientific knowledge [*wissenschaftliche Erkenntnis*] must necessarily chill our feelings and kill the creative power of our imagination [*schaffende Bildkraft der Phantasie*] and so destroy our enjoyment of nature [*Naturgenuss*] (*Kosmos* 15)¹⁷.

Humboldt is a natural scientist, so he does believe, of course, that part of his task in the presentation of nature is to uncover the laws of nature. But he realizes that the laws of nature don't tell us the whole story of nature's meaning, for the complete story, we must try to understand the poetry of nature. There is a reality accessible to aesthetic consciousness that cannot be reached if we restrict ourselves to the methodological framework of the natural sciences. Humboldt, in his turn to the aesthetic, does open freedom to the object he brings into appearance through his presentation of nature, in his case, the landscape of Spanish America. This opening of freedom is not insignificant. In opening this freedom to the appearance of steppes, deserts, the pampas, etc., he also opens the possibility for freedom among the people of Spanish America. In liberating science from the "old prejudice" of approximating its objects in a purely empirical way, Humboldt also opened the European mind to all that the so-called New World had to offer, thus freeing those European minds from some pernicious prejudices about America and its inhabitants. In the connection Humboldt makes between his aesthetic approach to nature and the realm of freedom, we return to the point from Adorno that Seel highlights, namely, that the indeterminable appearing is of great theoretical and ethical importance because it opens a freedom to the object which is a condition of real freedom among subjects.

We can illustrate the freedom opening instances in Humboldt's depictions of nature by looking at some of the scenes of nature or

¹⁷ My translation. "Einseitige Behandlung der physikalischen Wissenschaften, endloses Anhäufen roher Materialien konnten freilich zu dem nun fast verjährten Vorurteil beitragen, als müsste notwendig wissenschaftliche Erkenntnis das Gefühl erkälten, die schaffende Bildkraft der Phantasie ertöten und so den Naturgenuss stören".

Naturgemälde Humboldt presents in *Ansichten der Natur*, scenes that create a portrait of nature with the same sort of detail one would expect from a landscape painter. In his *Naturgemälde*, Humboldt is offering a canvas (written, not painted) of the Latin American landscape¹⁸. He not only describes the scenes he is presenting to his reading public but he also discusses the impact any given scene has upon the viewer, describing the impact of the steppes thus:

Like a limitless expanse of waters, the Steppe fills the mind with a sense of the infinite, and the soul, freed from the sensuous impressions of space, expands with spiritual emotions of a higher order. But the aspect of the ocean, its bright surface diversified with rippling or gently swelling waves, is productive of pleasurable sensations—while the Steppe lies stretched before us, cold and monotonous, like the naked stony crust of some distant planet (*Views 2*)¹⁹.

This depiction of the steppes, filled as it is with references to the infinite (something measureless and hence indomitable), the freedom of the soul, and emotions of a higher order – is not guilty of being “a

¹⁸ The *Naturgemälde* are a special kind of sign. Novalis indicates in his reflection, *Über Goethe*, that: “Der Sitz der eigentlichen Kunst ist lediglich im Verstande. Dieser konstruiert nach einem eigenthümlichen Begriff. Fantasie, Witz und Urtheilskraft werden nur von ihm requirirt. So ist Wilhelm Meister ganz ein Kunstproduct –ein Werck des Verstandes. Aus diesem Gesichtspunct sieht man manche sehr mittelmäßige Werke im Kunstsaal– hingegen die meisten vortrefflich geachteten Schriften davon ausgeschlossen” (*NS I*, 641). “True art is situated in the intellect, which creates according to a characteristic concept: only fantasy, wit and good judgment are required of it. Thus, *Wilhelm Meister* is entirely a product of art, a work of the intellect. From this point of view, we see that many mediocre works of art are exhibited in the halls of art, while on the other hand many writings regarded as excellent are excluded” (in Bernstein, 228). The scenes of nature presented in Humboldt's *Ansichten der Natur* are the sorts of works of art that Novalis would have liked to have seen displacing the mediocre works exhibited in the halls of art.

¹⁹ “Wie dieser erfüllt die Steppe das Gemüt mit dem Gefühl der Unendlichkeit und durch dieses Gefühl, wie den sinnlichen Eindrücken des Raumes sich entwindend mit geistigen Anregungen höherer Ordnung. Aber freundlich zugleich ist der Anblick des klaren Meerspiegels, in welchem die leichtbewegliche, sanft aufschäumende Welle sich kräuselt; tot und starr liegt die Steppe hingestreckt wie die nackte Felsrinde eines verödeten Planeten” (*Ansichten 3-4*).

mere accumulation of unconnected details” that chills our feelings for an enjoyment of nature. Indeed, in this passage, a poetic presencing or appearing of nature is what Humboldt accomplishes with his references to the indeterminable appearing of nature. After a brief excursion on the plains of Central Asia, Humboldt returns to the plain of South America²⁰. Despite the devotion he had to empirical observations and so to a kind of mastery over nature, Humboldt emphasizes the appeal of that which will never be mastered or tamed, celebrating such wild nature as the realm of freedom. He describes one such untamed scene thus:

The interest yielded by the contemplation of such a picture [*Gemälde*] must arise from a pure love of nature [*Naturinteresse*]. No Oasis here reminds the traveler of former inhabitants, no hewn stone, no fruit-tree once cultivated and now growing wild, bears witness to the industry of past races. As if a stranger to the destinies of mankind, and bound to the present alone, this region of the earth presents a wild domain [*ein wilder Schauplatz*] to the free manifestations of animal and vegetable life (*Viens* 6)²¹.

Even when Humboldt seems steeped in a purely empirical account of a given aspect of nature, he consistently brings the reader back to a more abstract level of nature, connecting his empirical account to something larger, something beyond the scope of his instruments, to a context that

²⁰ Humboldt makes connections between the plains of Central Asia and the spread of “misery and devastation over the earth.” He tells us early in his essay that, “Some of the pastoral tribes inhabiting this Steppe, —the Mongols, Getae, Alani, and the Usüni—have convulsed the world. If in the course of earlier ages, the dawn of civilization spread like the vivifying light of the sun from east to west; so in subsequent ages and from the same quarter, have barbarism and rudeness threatened to overcloud Europe” (*Viens* 5). “Hirtenvölker dieser Steppe: die Mongolen, Geten, Alanen und Üsun, haben die Welt erschüttert. Wenn in dem Lauf der Jahrhunderte frühe Geisteskultur gleich dem erquickenden Sonnenlicht von Osten nach Westen gewanderte ist, so haben späterhin in derselben Richtung Barbarei und sittliche Roheit Europa nebelartig zu überziehen gedroht” (*Ansichten* 6).

²¹ “Das Interesse, welches ein solches Gemälde dem Beobachter gewähren kann, ist aber ein reines Naturinteresse. Keine Oase erinnert hier an frühe Bewohner, kein behauener Stein, kein verwilderter Fruchtbaum an den Fleiß untergangener Geschlechter. Wie den Schicksalen der Menschheit fremd, allein an die Gegenwart fesselnd, liegt dieser Erdwinkel da, ein wilder Schauplatz des freien Tier- und Pflanzenlebens” (*Ansichten* 7).

allows the meaning of the scene described to emerge more fully and for nature to emerge as a work of art. To speak with Seel (invoking Adorno), Humboldt combines the determinable appearance of nature (in the spirit of mastery) with nature's indeterminable appearing (in the spirit of freedom). For example, in the essay on "Steppes and Deserts," Humboldt lingers on a point about what, at first glance, seems to be a merely empirical and quite mundane matter, humidity. He writes:

A number of causes, many of them still but little understood, diminish the dryness and heat of the New World. Among these are: the narrowness of this extensively indented continent in the northern part of the tropics, where the fluid basis on which the atmosphere rests, occasion the ascent of a less warm current of air (*Views* 7)²².

Humboldt's attention to empirical detail is then immediately used to take the presentation of nature to a different level, in this case, to dispel some of the myths that contributed to the anti-Americanism of the period. After a long, detailed, empirical account of the causes of dryness and heat in the New World, Humboldt concludes:

If, therefore, the atmosphere on one side of our planet be more humid than on the other, a consideration of the actual condition of things will be sufficient to solve the problems of this inequality. The natural philosopher need not shroud the explanation of such phenomena in the garb of geological myths. It is not necessary to assume that the destructive conflict of the elements raged at different epochs in the eastern and western hemispheres, during the early condition of our planet; or that America emerged subsequently to the other quarters of the world from the chaotic covering of waters as a swampy island, the abode of crocodiles and serpents (*Views* 8)²³.

²² "Mannigfaltige, zum Teil noch wenig entwickelte Ursachen vermindern die Dürre und Wärme des neuen Weltteils. Schmalheit der vielfach eingeschnittenen Feste in der nörderlichen Tropengegend, wo eine flüssige Grundfläche der Atmosphäre einen minder warmen aufsteigenden Luftstrom darbietet" (*Ansichten* 8).

²³ "Wird daher eine Seite unseres Planeten luftfeuchter als die andere genannt, so ist die Betrachtung des gegenwärtigen Zustandes der Dinge hinlänglich, das Problem dieser Ungleichheit zu lösen. Der Physiker braucht die Erklärung solcher Naturerscheinungen

Humboldt's approach to nature in general, and his detailed, inspiring, and accurate depictions of the Latin American landscape in particular, helped to break-down the misleading accounts of America given by too many scholars of his generation, accounts that depicted America as nothing more than the dwelling place of beasts, a place far inferior, both culturally and naturally to Europe. Humboldt's *Naturgemälde* allow the Latin American landscape to appear without the distorting prejudices that plagued most accounts of the period.²⁴ In his *Nautgemälde*, Humboldt not only depicts nature, but also gives clear analyses of some of the ways in which the landscape affected the culture of the people of the region he is presenting. In the case of the "Steppes and Deserts" account, Humboldt lingers on the significance that the absence of pastoral life in the pampas had upon the culture of the region:

If a pastoral life –that beneficent intermediate stage which binds nomadic bands of hunters to fruitful pasture lands, and at the same time promotes agriculture– was unknown to the primitive races of America, it is to the very ignorance of such a mode of life

nicht in das Gewand geologischer Mythen zu hüllen. Es bedarf der Annahme nicht, als habe sich auf dem uralten Erdkörper in der östlichen und westlichen Hemisphäre ungleichzeitig geschlichtet der verderbliche Streit der Elemente, oder als sei aus der chaotischen Wasserbedeckung Amerika später als die übrigen Weltteile hervorgetreten, ein sumpfreiches, von Krokodilen und Schlangen bewohntes Eiland" (*Ansichten* 9).

²⁴ Hegel's account of America springs immediately to mind in this connection. Consider his account of Americans, bearing in mind that Hegel never stepped foot in America: "The main character of the native Americans is a placidity, a lassitude, a humble and cringing submissiveness toward a Creole, and even more toward a European—and it will take a long time for the Europeans to produce any feeling of self-confidence in them. The inferiority of these individuals in every respect, even in regard to size, is very apparent. Only the extremely southern tribes, in Patagonia, are stronger by nature, but they are still in the natural condition of barbarism and savagery" (*Philosophy of History* 85). "Sanftmut und Trieblosigkeit, Demut und kriechende Unterwürfigkeit gegen einen Kreolen und mehr noch gegen einen Europäer sind dort der Hauptcharakter der Amerikaner, und es wird noch lange dauern, bis die Europäer dahin kommen, einiges Selbstgefühl in sie zu bringen. Die Inferiorität dieser Individuen in jeder Rücksicht, selbst in Hinsicht der Größe gibt sich in allem zu erkennen; nur die ganz südlichen Stämme in Patagonien sind kräftigere Naturen, aber noch ganz in dem natürlichen Zustande der Roheit und Wildheit" (Hegel, *Philosophie der Geschichte* 140).

that we must attribute the scantiness of population in the South American Steppes (*Views* 12)²⁵.

A typical Eurocentric reaction to the scantiness of population in the South American Steppes would be to use the low population levels as evidence for the inferiority of the land and, in an unfavorable comparative move, for the superiority of European culture and indeed, even of European nature –the country with the richer natural resources would be the country with greater concentrations of thriving populations. Humboldt draws quite another conclusion, writing:

But this circumstance [the lack of the transitional pastoral life] allowed freer scope for the forces of nature to develop themselves in the most varied forms of animal life; a freedom only circumscribed by themselves, like vegetable life in the forests of the Orinoco, where the Hymenaea and the giant laurel, exempt from the ravages of man, are only in danger of a too luxuriant embrace of the plants which surround them (*Views* 12)²⁶.

Humboldt presents the Latin American landscape as a realm of freedom and of natural luxury. As I have mentioned, Humboldt defines nature as the “realm of freedom.” Nicolaas Rupke reminds us in the “Introduction” to the 1997 edition of *Cosmos* that given Humboldt’s focus on the relation between nature and freedom, “the proper study of nature would lead to liberty, away from religious and political absolutism and oppression. Thus, *Cosmos* could become a metonymy of the politics of liberalization (Humboldt, *Cosmos* xxvii).” I would add that only with the addition of the aesthetic depiction of nature does the line from nature to freedom really take shape, taking us once again to Adorno’s insight. If *Cosmos* could

²⁵ “Blieb demnach das Hirtenleben, diese wohlthätige Mittelstufe, welche nomadische Jägerhorden an den grasreichen Boden fesselt und gleichsam zum Ackerbau vorbereitet, den Urvölkern Amerikas unbekannt, so liegt in dieser Unbekanntschaft selbst der Grund von der Menschenleere der südamerikanischen Steppen” (*Ansichten* 12-13).

²⁶ “Um so freier haben sich in ihr die Naturkräfte in mannigfaltigen Tiergestalten entwickelt: Frei, und nur durch sich selbst beschränkt wie das Pflanzenleben in den Wäldern am Orinoco, wo der Hymenäe und dem riesenstämmigen Lorbeer nie die verheerende Hand des Menschen, sondern nur der üppige Andrang schlingender Gewächse droht” (*Ansichten* 13).

become a metonymy of the politics of liberalization, then *Views of Nature* can also be read as a presentation of views of freedom, freedom *from* the prejudices that kept Europeans from fully appreciating the landscape of Spanish America²⁷. The steppes and deserts of Spanish America are unlike anything to be found in Europe, but, as Humboldt is careful to show, the unfamiliar is by no means to be associated with the inferior. Indeed, the description cited above leads the viewer (reader) to appreciate the unpopulated landscape of Spanish America as a realm of freedom and purity. The absence of human population is no disadvantage to the beauty and majesty of the landscape, quite the contrary, according to Humboldt, without the interference of humans, nature can develop with greater freedom, generating a wider diversity of forms. What Humboldt accomplished with his *Naturgemälde* was path-breaking and evidence, I think, for the central role aesthetics plays in presenting the world, for letting freedom appear. Humboldt transformed his acts of aesthetic perception of the Latin American landscape into *Naturgemälde* which, in turn enriched the perception of his reading public, bringing into a focus a more just portrait or picture [*Bild*] of the Latin American landscape.

CONCLUSION

Upon his return from the journey to the equinoctial regions of the earth in 1804, Humboldt was welcomed back to Europe as a figure uniquely situated to present the exotic and unfamiliar territories of America to Europeans. Goethe has given the most eloquent tribute to Humboldt's presentation of nature in his novel *Elective Affinities* [*Die Wahlverwandtschaften*], telling the reader through a passage in Otilie's diary that Humboldt was able to "describe and represent the strangest and most exotic things in their locality, always in their own special element, with all that surrounds them." Otilie lingers on this achievement, in part, because she recognizes (as did Goethe), that the tasks of science and of poetry were related by a band

²⁷ In his political essays on the Island of Cuba and on New Spain, Humboldt quite explicitly links his study of nature to political ends. In my article, "Humboldt's Role in the Decolonization of Spanish America," I discuss the matter of the essay in Humboldt's work by reference to the work of Arthur Whitaker and Oliver Lubrich.

of sympathy: without a desire to truly understand the world around us, neither the natural scientist nor the poet would present anything more than dead remains, remains utterly incapable of arousing any feeling in others, let alone of clarifying anything about the world. With Humboldt's turn from mere mastery of nature to appreciation, a sympathetic portrait of nature emerges in beautiful detail. In Humboldt's presentation of the Latin American landscape, beauty helped to restore justice to a continent that had long been unfairly dismissed as inferior by too many Europeans.

The liberating forces opened by Humboldt's aesthetic lens provided a space for appreciation of the Latin American landscape. The "aesthetic understanding of the world," which César Aira attributes to Humboldt is part of a tradition that I have presented as a crucial element in coming to an understanding of Humboldt's contributions to a chapter of intellectual history that remains relevant: the time when a poetry of nature was developed. I have argued that the roots of Humboldt's unique blending of science and art can be traced to the philosophical contributions of the early German Romantics, in particular, to the insights of Friedrich Schlegel and Novalis. Guided by a belief in the value of the aesthetic for the purposes of science, Humboldt was able to step out of the framework of mastering the object of nature and grant freedom to his subject matter. The move out of mastery enabled a richer landscape of nature to emerge in his writings.

Adorno observed that, "Just as in music what is beautiful flashes up in nature only to disappear in the instant one tries to grasp it (72)." *Humboldt* was well aware that mastery of nature, while necessary to present it, was not enough. For such a one-sided grasp of the phenomena of nature would asphyxiate the beauty of nature and even its living breath [*lebendiger Hauch*]. We can understand Humboldt's aesthetic presentation of nature as an act of preservation – with Humboldt's unique fusion of science and art, that is, with his poetry of nature, the life and beauty of the landscape of Latin America is preserved, and with it, a just presentation of that landscape was, at long last, brought to the European readers of his work.

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