

Writing In and Out of Time

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When Charles Darwin set sail on the *Beagle*, one of the prized possessions he carried with him was Alexander von Humboldt's *Personal Narrative*. The volumes were a parting gift from his university tutor, John Henslow, who recognized his student's admiration for the renowned natural historian.¹ On botany field trips, Henslow had listened to Darwin read aloud the "most glorious passages" from Humboldt's narrative.² Furthermore, the tutor had known of Darwin's attempts to emulate his hero by arranging an expedition to the Canary Islands. Although Darwin never succeeded in organizing this trip, he was eventually able to follow Humboldt's trail by joining Captain FitzRoy on his 1832 voyage to South America. At many points during his subsequent journeys, on land or by sea, Darwin used Humboldt's narrative as a guide.

Consequently, when the *Beagle* approached Teneriffe, the place where Humboldt had once landed on the Canary Islands, Darwin turned to the *Personal Narrative* to help him understand what he was seeing for the first time. He opened its pages and repeated to himself its "sublime" portraits of the unfolding tropical landscape.³ Later, recognizing that perception often depends upon preconceived ideas, Darwin proudly admitted that many of his thoughts and points of view were molded by Humboldt's observations.⁴ In a

1. Henslow inscribed his gift with the following words: "J. S. Henslow to his friend C. Darwin on his departure from England upon a voyage round the world. 21 Sept. 1831."

2. Janet Browne in her biography of Charles Darwin writes that Darwin "insisted on reading out what he called the most glorious passages from the book [Humboldt's *Personal Narrative*] during botany field trips" (Browne 1995, 134).

3. In a 18 May 1832 letter to Henslow, Darwin wrote: "At Santa Cruz, whilst looking amongst the clouds for the Peak and repeating to myself Humboldts [*sic*] sublime description, it was announced we must perform 12 days strict quarantine" (Burkhardt and Smith 1985, 1: 236). As a result of this quarantine, Darwin never did get to visit Teneriffe.

4. In a letter home, Darwin explained: "I formerly admired Humboldt, I now almost adore him; he alone gives any notion, of the feelings which are raised in the mind on first entering the Tropics..." (Burkhardt and Smith 1985, 1: 237).

sense, Humboldt's commentary helped Darwin navigate his emerging narrative (*Voyage of the Beagle*).

Given that Humboldt and Darwin were both naturalists, one might assume that Humboldt served primarily as a model of a scientist who thinks meticulously and energetically about what lies before him. Indeed, Darwin did respect these qualities and esteemed Humboldt's mastery of a wide range of data, but, for him, these virtues were not exclusively compelling. Darwin was also drawn to the emotional and aesthetic tenor of Humboldt's observations. He identified with Humboldt's sense of awe and confusion upon entering a new land where 'a civilized man has seldom trod' (Browne and Neve 1989, 376). Darwin was also captivated by Humboldt's sensitivity to vast landscapes that stretch beyond the vanishing point – to spaces where the imagination can wander; to the scattered sublime and aesthetic moments that, at times, not only soften the measured timbre of Humboldt's prose but also alleviate the burden of the factual details weighing down his *Personal Narrative*.⁵

In a letter to Henslow, Darwin remarked on Humboldt's 'sublime descriptions' (Burkhardt and Smith 1985, 1: 236) and, in so doing, participated in a culture all-too-ready to seek the rugged, dangerous, and massive elements in a landscape. Just as Humboldt's text paid tribute to the sublime, Darwin's own narrative indulged in the idiom and took its cue from the prescriptive qualities of grandeur, gloom, and peril that occasionally found their way into Humboldt's pages. As a result, in his travels, Darwin looked at a sky and remarked that its "profundity" is "everything Humboldt had ever described" (Browne 1995, 290). And when Darwin wrote of "ominous" scenes that portray a "savage magnificence" (Engel 1962, 281 & 211), or when he thought of what a "sublime spectacle" it is "to watch the shadows of night" (Browne and Neve 1989, 298), he was responding not only to an accepted perspective but also to passages in Humboldt's narrative that spoke of the hazardous gloom spawned by the shadows of mountains that stretch over the surface of the ocean.⁶ Both Humboldt's and Darwin's appreciation for the sublime was also made more acute by their travels that brought them face to face with the immense and exhilarating forces within the earth's crust – the earthquakes, the volcanoes – and with the violent tempests in the air, all of which evoked a sense of danger, pleasure, and power.

5. For examples of the sublime moments in Humboldt's *Personal Narrative*, see: Williams 1818, 1: 75, 1:95, 1: 102, 1: 155-56, 1: 176, 1: 181, 1: 185, 3: 88, and 3: 106.

6. The passage from Humboldt's *Personal Narrative* reads: "The black mountains of Graciosa appeared like perpendicular walls of five or six hundred feet. Their shadows, thrown over the surface of the ocean, gave a gloomy aspect to the scenery. Rocks of basalt, emerged from the bosom of the water, wore the resemblance of the ruins of some vast edifice Y. Every thing which surrounded us seemed to indicate destruction and sterility Y" (Williams 1818, 1: 95).

Both also occasionally participated in a specifically painterly sublime. Appreciative of Humboldt's artistic eye that 'never wearied admiring the beauty of the nights,' and that admired the way the moon, 'at intervals,' shot across the sky's vapors and exposed its disk on a firmament of the darkest blue (Williams 1818, 1: 156), Darwin, thinking back to Humboldt's descriptive passages, also wrote about the light of the moon or the tint of the setting sun upon the mountains. Like Humboldt, Darwin noted how the transparency of the air rendered gradations of color. Both were interested in art (Humboldt actually more than Darwin), so that, periodically, upon viewing a prospect, each saw a framed copper engraving, a painting, a mezzotint, a da Vinci or a Claude Lorrain landscape. Both displayed a sensitivity to the way light creates delicate shades as well as a telling contrast between an object's form and its color.⁷

Yet, for all these parallels and for all the admiration that Darwin had for Humboldt, each narrative has its own distinctive ambience. A page from Humboldt cannot be confused with one from Darwin's narrative. Just what is this basic difference? One way to isolate the essential difference between the two is to think of the way each writer places the sublime moments within his text. The context, not the particulars of the aesthetic event, makes the difference. Basically, the distinction depends upon Humboldt's and Darwin's idiosyncratic relationship to time. Humboldt, who is primarily interested in discovering a universal set of scientific data, surrounds his sublime episodes with a narrative that is not concerned with time; whereas, Darwin, who is continuously struck by the mutability of his surroundings, positions his in a landscape mapped by his acute consciousness of the process of time.

Because of Humboldt's perspective, the sublime and aesthetic episodes do not strike the reader as being an absolutely integral part of the text. They seem almost extraneous (a peripheral bonus) to the narrative. Perhaps they even function as an interruption, for the reader has the sense that they do not properly belong to the general argument. Humboldt is so intent upon observing phenomena and then determining the relations that tie them together, and on finding what he terms their "marks of resemblance" (Williams 1818, 3: 160) to phenomena elsewhere, that the sublime instant soon disappears in his desire to view "the Globe as a great whole" (Williams 1818, 1: 233). Wanting to compare what he had learned on his travels with what recurs in a universal

7. Darwin in his *The Voyage of the Beagle* wrote: "The view was striking: it may aptly be compared to a framed engraving, where the frame represents the breakers, the marginal paper the smooth lagoon, and the drawing the island itself" (Engel 1962, 406). See also Darwin's correspondence in which he describes a view as being "more gorgeous than even Claude [Lorrain] ever imagined" (Burkhardt and Smith 1985, 3: 233). Humboldt's *Personal Narrative* also contains references to paintings. In volume three, he writes: "This singular view reminded us of the back-ground of the fanciful landscape which Leonardo da Vinci has decorated his famous portrait of Gioconda" (Williams 1818, 3: 22).

geography and wishing to find the relationship of these facts to what exists in different countries, to recall similar occurrences elsewhere, Humboldt moves, one might say laterally, through his landscape, in a narrative that is not so much embedded in time as seeking a more comprehensive, static vision. He looks at the Mexican fields and simultaneously recalls the most beautiful parts of France to create a parallel rather than a chronological perspective. The result is that Humboldt moves out of time and holds his surroundings still. As he admitted, he is not involved in things “successively observed” (Williams 1818, 1: 40).

One striking example of this orientation can be found in a passage from the *Personal Narrative* when Humboldt climbs Silla, the mountain just outside Caracas. Although he offers a vivid, and even humorous, account of his difficult ascent and descent, the reader soon learns that Humboldt’s intention is not to tell an adventure story that reveals itself sequentially, but rather to discover the resemblances between what he finds there with what has been known in other countries. He constantly interrupts his progress up the mountain not only to record data (temperature, flora, rocks, and atmospheric pressure) but also, through the course of several pages, to move in parallel directions that reveal and note resemblances between the facts he is gathering and what he can trace in similar climates as far away as Asia. He is no longer moving in time and being struck with “the new impressions...at every step” (Williams 181, 3: 160), but is pulling away to construct a map or a chart that, in effect, immobilizes the landscape in order to uncover more universal laws that do not alter their perspective, step by step. Everything seems removed from time; immediate, specific place becomes less important. Another instance of this approach can be found in Humboldt’s observations of water-courses. Rather than following their path down the mountain slopes and through valleys, he stops the motion and concentrates, instead, on water-courses everywhere else that have parallel patterns. The result is similar to what happens when he interrupts his ascent of Silla. The chronology of the water’s course disappears under the pressure of links and connections to other places throughout the world.

Humboldt’s impulse is quite different from what Darwin’s was to be, in spite of their shared sensibility, for when Darwin, in his narrative, chose to describe the way water falls and moves, he emphasized the flow and the sequence of its path. Unlike Humboldt, Darwin unfolded its course through time. A passage from his narrative captures this view:

The sound [the rushing water over the stones] spoke eloquently to the geologist; the thousands and thousands of stones, which, striking against each other, made the one dull uniform sound, were all hurrying in one direction. It

was like thinking on time, where the minute that now glides past is irrecoverable. So it was with these stones...(Engel 1962, 318).

The phrase “thinking on time” from the above quotation is a telling one: it describes Darwin’s acute sense of the ‘never ceasing mutability of the crust of this our world’ (Browne and Neve 1989, 356) – a perspective that was encouraged by his avid interest in geology and his reading of Charles Lyell’s *Principles of Geology* while on board the *Beagle*, preoccupations that, of course, later encouraged Darwin to engage evolutionary theories.

Throughout the *Voyage of the Beagle*, Darwin’s sense of metamorphic action is pervasive: he tells his story through time. Darwin looked at a landscape and saw history; he peered into the past of his surroundings, and thought of the forces that once upheaved the mountains and might, in the future, wear them down. Nothing is static in his narrative; change is measured by the passing of minutes. For Darwin there was no resting place in charts and maps as there had been for Humboldt; there is only mutability, sequence, and traces of what has gone by. Darwin cannot escape the pressures of ‘all-powerful time’ (Browne and Neve 1989, 211). In this context, then, the sublime moment is not one to be set aside, as Humboldt had done in his *Personal Narrative*, in favor of an agenda to establish patterns and harmonies of the cosmos. The sublime episode, in Darwin’s narrative, is not a distraction from his main aim, rather it is part of the continuum of experience. It is, therefore, neither extraneous nor parenthetical. It is part of the unfolding and, therefore, integral to the sequential thrust of his narrative. It does not threaten his perspective; rather, the precarious balance of the sublime moment that depicts a scene on the brink of alteration and disaster, very much supports a narrative dedicated to the idea of mutability.

Although both shared a sensibility that allowed them to appreciate solitude, a mysterious grandeur, delicate tones of color, and skies that resemble mezzotint engravings, the context into which each placed these qualities and perspectives alters the importance of the sublime or aesthetic moment and reveals a basic difference between the narratives of these two writers. Through these differences one better understands the more stationary, time-less nature of Humboldt’s studies that reject sequence in order to establish columns of data. And, certainly, one grasps better the time-oriented character of Darwin’s narrative.

Ironically, several years later, as if recognizing Darwin’s inclination to integrate the sublime moment into the scientific narrative, Humboldt finally admitted the importance of such moments for scientific discovery. In his second volume of *Cosmos*, Humboldt praised Darwin’s “extremely beautiful descriptions of Tahiti” and spoke of the “animating influence of the descriptive element” in “encouraging the scientific study of nature, and enlarging its

domain” (Otté 1851, 2:80). Thinking not only of Darwin’s remarkable descriptions but also of those of other naturalists, as well as of scenes rendered in landscape painting, Humboldt suggested that there can be a valuable connection between the aesthetic and the scientific, the sensual and the intellectual; both are capable of recording the distinct and harmonious physiognomy of nature. In fact, so convinced was Humboldt of this possibility that he envisioned Panoramic buildings “erected in our large cities,” that should contain “alternating pictures of landscapes of different geographical latitudes and from different zones of elevation.” Through these structures Humboldt believed that “the conception of the natural unity” and the “feeling of harmonious accord pervading the universe” could not “fail to increase in vividness among men, in proportion as the means are multiplied by which the phenomenon of nature may be more characteristically and visibly manifested” (Otté 1851, 2: 98).

However, even after recognizing that the sublime is not necessarily antithetical to the scientific endeavor, Humboldt still maintains his distance from Darwin’s style of thought. As his remarks about the panorama reveal, Humboldt continues to be more interested in the harmonies of nature and its comprehensive laws than he is in the kind of thinking that helped create theories of evolution and structured itself in terms of sequence rather than pattern. For Humboldt time and the mutability of the earth remain less of a factor than they are for Darwin. Whatever the differences, though, the respective narratives’ sublime moments reveal an aesthetic quality, belonging both to Humboldt and Darwin, that frequently gets either forgotten or neglected. Both were drawn to the sublime and the aesthetic. The two scientists shared a tacit agreement: that these episodes are major elements in their work and in their attitude towards nature.

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