

A ‘Romantic’ Encounter with Latin America

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In a curious German text from 1796, an impassioned plea (not unrelated to a certain revolutionary enthusiasm that marked this period of German thought) was made to unite science and poetry. The text’s title, “The Earliest Program for a System of German Idealism,” is misleading, for the text does not really set out to deploy German Idealism, but it rather calls, in piecemeal fashion, for a move away from mechanistic models of understanding natural and social reality – invoking a new mythology that will join science and art, lawfulness and freedom.¹ According to the text, “the highest act of reason is an aesthetic act,” and so “the philosopher must possess as much aesthetic power as the poet.”² Those individuals lacking in aesthetic sense will remain limited beings, “in the dark when it comes to anything beyond graphs and charts.”³ In other words, those people who do not know how to handle ideas will be limited to the mechanistic realm of the quantifiable. With its focus on the intimate relation between poetry and philosophy, and the move to provide culture with an aesthetic point of orientation, this short, pithy piece can be read as a kind of romantic manifesto.

It would seem, at first glance, that no reputable scientist would want to be associated with the goals of such a manifesto, for scientists strive to orient culture via laws of nature, and laws are subject to strict rules, and put together into theories (not myths) supported by the data of those despised “graphs and charts” to which the author of the text makes reference. In con-

1. The misleading title was provided by Franz Rosenzweig, who found and published the manuscript in 1917. The text was found in the handwriting of Hegel, yet scholars still disagree about the identity of the text’s author (Hegel, Hölderlin, and Schelling are each viable candidates).

2. “Earliest Program for a System of German Idealism,” in *Theory as Practice. A Critical Anthology of early German Romantic Writings*, translated and edited by Jochen Schulte-Sasse “et al”. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997): 72-73, p. 72.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 73.

trast, art is the product of freedom and comes into being precisely as it moves beyond established laws, beyond the quantifiable – one does not measure beauty: one appreciates it. What connection could there be between a call to move beyond the “charts and graphs” of the empirical scientists and the serious work of a scientist such as Alexander von Humboldt? In what follows I shall argue that there is an important connection.⁴

The best way to explain this connection is to explore the link between Humboldt’s work and a philosophical movement that highlighted the aesthetic and historical dimensions of reality. I refer to early German Romanticism, a movement that flourished in Jena and Berlin between the years of 1794 and 1808, which included thinkers such as brothers August Wilhelm and Friedrich Schlegel, Friedrich von Hardenberg (Novalis), Friedrich Schleiermacher, Dorothea Mendelssohn Schlegel, and Caroline Schlegel Schelling. In order to analyze the relation between Romanticism and Humboldt’s work, I will focus upon the connections between some features of his approach to understanding the world and the central insights of Friedrich Schlegel, the leading philosopher of the early German Romantic Movement. The romantic connection that I shall explore will shed light on Humboldt’s contribution to the development of “Naturphilosophie”, a contribution that has too long been overlooked by philosophers in Europe and the United States.

In Latin America there is no such neglect of Humboldt’s work, but rather a long tradition of taking Humboldt seriously, not only as a scientist but as a humanist whose vast knowledge of the region helped to promote progress there and also led to a more enlightened image of Latin America in Europe. As a result of Humboldt’s serious engagement with the land, people, and political structures of Latin America, he has been heralded by intellectuals there as the first great thinker of modernity, a father of the independence movements, and (somewhat problematically) as the “scientific discoverer” of America.⁵

Humboldt’s long relation with Latin America began when he and his traveling companion, the French botanist, Aimé Bonpland were given permission by the Spanish Crown to explore the Spanish colonies of the New World. On June 5, 1799, they sailed from Spain in a ship called the “Pizarro”, stopped off at the Canary Islands, and arrived in Cumaná, Venezuela on July 16, 1799.⁶ They explored the coast and then penetrated inland, to the Orinoco and

4. In his introduction to the edited collection of Humboldt’s writings, *Alexander von Humboldt: Über die Freiheit des Menschen* (Frankfurt a.Main: Insel, 1999), Manfred Osten also makes a connection between this text and Humboldt’s work in order to analyze the central role that the idea of freedom played in shaping Humboldt’s thought.

5. See, for example, Leopoldo Zea, “Humboldt en la modernidad”, “Cuadernos Americanos” 4, Nr. 76 (1999): 11-15; Ibid., “Humboldt y el otro descubrimiento”, “Cuadernos Americanos” 6, Nr. 78 (1999): 11-19.

Rio 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 began a lifelong friendship with him). They returned to Europe (Bordeaux) on August 3, 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 1834.⁷

Humboldt was widely admired by influential figures of Latin America during his own lifetime. As early as 1815, Simón Bolívar praised Humboldt's "encyclopedic theoretical and practical knowledge" of Venezuela (in his "Carta de Jamaica").⁸ Long after Humboldt's death, this admiration is still very much alive. Recently, the prominent Mexican philosopher, Leopoldo Zea, contrasted Humboldt's views of the inhabitants of the Spanish colonies to those of his contemporaries. Zea uses these contrasts to convincingly show that Humboldt, unlike other prominent European thinkers of the period, such as Cornelius de Pauw or Comte de Buffon (the first of the anti-Americans), was able to overcome a view of non-Europeans as necessarily inferior. Zea argues that in overcoming racially hierarchical views, Humboldt was able to arrive at an appreciation of diversity that was ahead of its time. Humboldt's open, accepting attitude towards the cultures and peoples he encountered in the New World was the result of what Zea calls a "romantic attitude":

"Humboldt was one of those to whom Hegel referred when he spoke of those who were fed up, tired of the historical museum that Europe had become. For precisely this reason, Humboldt is a Romantic."⁹

To call Humboldt a Romantic merely because of his being "fed up" with Europe is to do a disservice both to Humboldt's innovative scientific approach and to early German Romanticism. I agree with Zea that Humboldt is a Romantic (and he most certainly would have been not only bored, but

6. The "Pizarro" was supposed to dock in Havana, Cuba, but an outbreak of typhoid fever on board made it necessary to land at Cumaná.

7. "Voyages aux régions équinoxiales du Nouveau Continent, fait en 1799, 1800, 1801, 1802, 1803, et 1804".

8. In "Selected Writings of Simón Bolívar", "Reply of a South American Gentleman of this Island [Jamaica]". This document is generally referred to as "La carta de Jamaica", and is one of Bolívar's earliest writings on political and international affairs. Given the general tone of disdain towards the leaders Europe, it is significant that he cites Humboldt in reporting on various statistics regarding the lands of the New World. Humboldt was generally perceived by the "criollo" leaders of the emerging Latin American nations as one of the few Europeans who appreciated their culture.

9. "Humboldt es uno de los hastiados de los que hablaba HEGEL, cansado del museo histórico que era ya Europa. Humboldt es por eso mismo, un romántico" ("Humboldt y el otro descubrimiento" in "Cuadernos Americanos", 6, Nr. 78 (1999), p. 12).

angered by views typical of many Europeans of the period), but I shall show that he is a Romantic for reasons far deeper than any ennui he may have had with the historical museum that Europe had (or had not) become.

In what follows I shall argue that Humboldt is a Romantic because of the particular way in which he approached his understanding of “all” living forces, human as well as plants, nations as well as individuals.¹⁰ Humboldt privileged the living, changing elements of nature and the method he developed to capture nature in its change, was one that involved moving “beyond charts and graphs,” that is, beyond the merely quantifiable aspects of nature. The scientific method of Humboldt included an aesthetic-historical approach to the phenomena of nature. I shall make the case that it precisely these aspects of Alexander von Humboldt’s work make him and his approach “romantic.”¹¹ My interest in bringing to light Humboldt’s connections to early German Romanticism stems from my conviction that it is precisely the romantic aspect of his thought that paved the way for his open, appreciative attitude toward the cultures he encountered in America, a land described by most of his contemporaries as a degenerate, sinister place, nothing more than a natural and cultural wasteland.

Humboldt and the Break from Eurocentrism

Humboldt certainly did not see America as any sort of wasteland. He spent an important portion of his life in the New World collecting data and plant and mineral samples to send back to Europe for further investigation, and he was impressed with the wealth of biodiversity he encountered there. Yet it is critical to keep in mind that his conception of his work’s importance was not limited to helping the cause of science understood as the mere amassing of data, but always also included the cause of “human” organization and progress. Unfortunately, Humboldt’s dedication to the alleviation of conditions which gave rise to social inequalities has been overlooked by some contemporary scholars. Consider, for example, the claim made by Mary Louise Pratt: “Humboldt’s eye depopulates and dehistoricizes the American landscape even as it celebrates its grandeur and variety.”¹²

10. I borrow this way of describing Humboldt’s task from an essay on history by his brother, Wilhelm von Humboldt. In “On the Historian’s Task”, Wilhelm emphasizes the importance of paying due attention to all living forces: “All living forces, men as well as plants, nations as well as individuals, mankind as well as individual peoples, have in common certain qualities, kinds of development, and natural laws” in, “On the Historian’s Task” in *The Theory and Practice of History: Leopold von Ranke*, edited with an introduction by Georg G. Iggers and Konrad von Moltke (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1973), p. 17.

11. Humboldt’s connections to Romanticism are traced by Robert Richards in, *The Romantic Conception of Life: Science and Philosophy in the Age of Goethe* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

Humboldt did indeed celebrate the grandeur and variety of the American landscape, yet it is simply false to claim that his eye depopulated and dehistoricized that landscape. In his hallmark work on America, “Voyages aux régions équinoxiales du Nouveau Continent”, Humboldt was primarily interested in providing an account of nature, yet, never without concern for those who lived amidst the scenes he was describing. In his “Essai sur la géographie des plantes”, Humboldt explores the issue of how the appearance of nature affects the customs and sensibility of the people of a given region. This text provides abundant counterexamples to Pratt’s claim that Humboldt’s eye depopulates landscapes. Moreover, in his political essays, concern for human political structures and the inequalities suffered by the Americans under colonial rule are the central issues. In his “Political Essay on the Kingdom of New Spain”, he described Mexico quite trenchantly (and not without risk of punishment from the Spanish Crown) as “the land of inequality”.

There is no hint in any of Humboldt’s work that he wants to “dehistoricize” anything. Quite the contrary, Humboldt incorporated history into his scientific approach in a comparative way that allowed him to free his observations of the cultural (and racial) bigotry that plagued the work of most of his contemporaries. In the “Political Essay”, rather than subsume all he finds in the New World to what he already knows, e.g., the indigenous “barbaric” ways under the European “civilized” ways, that is, rather than using the term ‘European’ as the universal standard by which to measure the degree of civilization that the American cultures possessed, Humboldt “compared” the American and European cultures, without appealing to European culture as the standard. He looked critically at “both” Europe and America. For example, Humboldt argues that in order to judge the worth of the indigenous cultures of New Spain (or Mexico, as the region came to be known after the colonial period), we must first make a proper comparison:

How shall we judge, from these miserable remains of a powerful people, of the degree of cultivation to which it had risen from the twelfth to the sixteenth century and of the intellectual development of which it is susceptible? If all that remained of the French or German nation were a few poor agriculturists, could we read in their features that they belonged to nations which had produced a Descartes and Clariaut, a Kepler and a Leibniz?¹³

Humboldt was well aware that in order to understand the indigenous cultures and to judge their merits, present quantifiable data was not enough, we must be presented with a proper sampling of evidence of their past achieve-

12. “Humboldt and the Reinvention of America” p. 592 of *Amerindian Images and the Legacy of Columbus*, edited by René Jara and Nicholas Spadaccini (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992): 585-606.

13. Alexander von Humboldt, *Political Essay on the Kingdom of New Spain*, translated by John Black, edited by Mary Maples Dunn (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988), p. 54.

ments. A proper sampling to make a comparison with European intellectual culture would have to include the work of some of the leading intellectuals and scientists of the pre-colonial era, yet as most of the remains of the Indigenous culture have been destroyed, it is hasty for the Europeans to assume that there were no intellectual figures or scientists of note. Furthermore, the Indigenous people who survived the colonization have been oppressed, their character has been changed. Humboldt writes:

As to the moral faculties of the Indians, it is difficult to appreciate them with justice if we only consider this long oppressed caste in their present state of degradation. The better sort of Indians, among whom a certain degree of intellectual culture might be supposed, perished in great part at the commencement of the Spanish conquest, the victims of European ferocity...All those who inhabited the "teocalli" or houses of God, who might be considered the depositories of the historical, mythological and astronomical knowledge of the country were exterminated. The monks burned the hieroglyphic paintings by which every kind of knowledge was transmitted from generation to generation. The people, deprived of these means of instruction, were plunged in an ignorance so much the deeper as the missionaries were unskilled in the Mexican languages and could substitute few new ideas in the place of the old.¹⁴

Humboldt was not willing to simply assume the superiority of the European culture based on a comparison with the scant historical evidence of the contributions of the Aztec civilization left in the wake of the devastation caused by the Spanish "conquistadores". The charts and graphs drawn by most scientists looking at the indigenous cultures were not prepared with sufficient attention to the historical factors which may have accounted for the indigenous inhabitants "seeming" to be behind the Europeans in terms of intellectual contributions. Humboldt emphasizes the need to look beyond present empirical evidence to the historical circumstances that give rise to present data: if the leading intellectuals of a group are killed off, their scholarly contributions destroyed, with no teachers available to pass on knowledge, certainly it is unjust to conclude that the group is inferior, at most they are uneducated, and as Humboldt indicates, the blame for the lack of education in New Spain fell squarely on the Spaniards, "not" on the native Americans.

In our multicultural times, it seems a matter of course that a scientist, be she a natural or a social scientist, would not assume cultural superiority, yet this was not the case at the turn of the eighteenth century (and still by no means always the case even in our own times). Humboldt's attention to the history of the indigenous cultures as a necessary condition for making a meaningful comparison of European and American cultures is a remarkable

14. *Ibid.*, p. 53.

move, for it reveals an openness to acknowledging that the cultures of a continent that had been consistently labeled by Europeans as the dwelling place of beasts and barbarians, “deserved” more attention than they had received: the unfamiliar was not uncritically to be associated with the inferior.

The respect Humboldt expressed for the Spanish-American region and its culture may very well have fueled the anti-colonial sentiment that was already building and which led to the independence movements of the early 1800s.¹⁵ Humboldt saw a connection between scientific study and political change:

A reforming government ought, before every other object, to set about changing the present limits of the intendancies. This political change ought to be founded on the exact knowledge of the physical state and the state of cultivation of the provinces of New Spain.¹⁶

Humboldt linked the social inequality he observed in the region of New Spain to inequalities in land distribution, and he did believe (perhaps too optimistically), that a proper understanding of the territory in terms of its dimensions, and its richness, would enable political leaders to make more informed decisions on how to divide the territories of the region and how best to use the land to improve the lives of all of the inhabitants. Humboldt did not see himself as a narrow specialist, concerned only with amassing data on, say, the mineral deposits of New Spain, he wanted his observations to be used to improve the lives of the inhabitants of the region. One central strand of Humboldt's 'romantic' science is the attempt to bring distinct disciplines into conversation with one another.

As we shall see, just as the early German Romantics were not afraid to bring philosophy into the company of poetry, indeed, they saw the association as necessary for both disciplines, Humboldt saw great potential in the relation between science and social/political issues. Pratt's (mis)reading of Humboldt as “depopulating/dehistoricizing the landscape” is symptomatic of a general misunderstanding of his intellectual project and of its place in the history of ideas. Humboldt was committed to providing a historical context for understanding nature and to discussing its impact on human beings. To “depopulate and dehistoricize” “any” landscape would go against the very romantic method Humboldt endorsed. Now a few words on “romantic method” are in order.

15. For more on this, see, Michael Zeuske, “¿Padre de la Independencia? Humboldt y la transformación a la modernidad en la América española” in “Cuadernos Americanos”, 78 (1999): 20-51.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 27.

Romantic Method

The early German Romantics employed unconventional forms for the expression of their ideas in order to challenge the general view of philosophy as something that should be modeled on the sciences.¹⁷ A central goal of the Romantics' project was to bring philosophy into closer contact with poetry and history, odd bedfellows in the wake of Kant's "Critique of Pure Reason", a work that celebrated philosophy's relation to the ahistorical sciences.

In Schlegel's "Letter on the Novel", which is arguably his most detailed statement on the meaning of the term 'romantic,' he claims that "romantic poetry rests entirely on historical grounds."¹⁸ As we learn in "Athenäum Fragment 116", "romantic poetry is a progressive universal poetry," it is an ideal, a poetry that is progressive because it is always in a state of becoming, never reaching completion. Historical grounds bring romantic poetry into conversation with the tradition of which it is a part. And like poetry, philosophy is also in need of history for orientation. Schlegel never tired of emphasizing this point, and he even went after Kant, the great critical philosopher himself, scolding Kant for his neglect of history and insisting that no critique can succeed without a history of philosophy.¹⁹

Humboldt also makes abundant references to tradition and history as guides, yet as guides not for the poet or philosopher, but for the scientist. He draws an analogy between (A) what can be accomplished with his holistic approach to nature, that is, his view that we must "recognize in the plant or the animal not merely an isolated species, but a form linked in the chain of being to other forms whether living or extinct"²⁰ and (B) that which is accomplished with historical composition²¹, that is, by placing the object of study into the historical context that will enable us to understand it:

17. "Das Athenäum" (1798-1800), a journal edited by Friedrich and August Wilhelm Schlegel became the most important literary vehicle of early German Romanticism. All references to Schlegel's work in German are to *Friedrich Schlegel Kritische Ausgabe* (KA), in 35 volumes, edited by Ernst Behler, *et al.* (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 1958 ff.). The "Athenäum Fragments" as well as selections of the "Critical Fragments and Ideas" have been translated by Peter Firchow in *Friedrich Schlegel, Philosophical Fragments* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), and I have used, with minor modifications, his translations.

18. KA 2, p. 334.

19. See for example, KA II, p. 165, Nr. 1; KA II, p. 364; KA XII, p. 286; KA XVIII, p. 21, Nr. 35; KA XVIII, p. 21, Nr. 36; KA XIX, p. 346, Nr. 296. In these passages, Schlegel claims that a critique of philosophy cannot succeed without a history of philosophy, that an age which calls itself a critical age, must not leave the age itself uncriticized, that, in short, Kant's critical project did not go far enough.

20. Alexander von Humboldt, *Cosmos: A Sketch of the Physical Description of the Universe*, translated by E.C. Otté (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), p. 42.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 49.

In interrogating the history of the past, we trace the mysterious course of ideas yielding the first glimmering perception of the same image of a Cosmos, or harmoniously ordered whole, which, dimly shadowed forth to the human mind in the primitive ages of the world, is now fully revealed to the mature intellect of mankind as the result of long and laborious observation.²²

Humboldt held that we must have some historical orientation point in order to understand nature. Just as a complete understanding and so appreciation of indigenous culture is impossible in the wake of the devastation of the historical records, an understanding and appreciation of nature is not possible if we dissect each part of nature and cease to see it as a "harmoniously ordered whole." The incorporation of historical analysis into his scientific method enables Humboldt to present nature in terms of its living, changing forces rather than as something to be interrogated as if it were a dead mass of quantifiable material. Humboldt's approach to understanding the world around him, whether Aztec culture or Andean mountain peaks, was never one of those scientists "in the dark when it [came] to anything beyond charts and graphs." What lies beyond the realm of the merely quantifiable? And why is it important for the scientist to go beyond this? For the merely empirical scientist, of course, nothing lies beyond the merely quantifiable, that is all we have. Yet, Humboldt was quite critical of the merely empirical approach to nature:

It is the special object of [Cosmos] to combat those errors which derive their source from a vicious empiricism and from imperfect inductions. The higher enjoyments yielded by the study of nature depend upon the correctness and the depth of our views, and upon the extent of the subjects that may be comprehended in a single glance.²³

The "higher enjoyments" are not yielded to the scientist who looks only for quantifiable facts in nature. Our experience of beauty or the sublime puts us in touch with something "measureless to man." Let us consider the *Ávila* in Caracas, a mountain Humboldt knew well: when we experience it as beautiful, we are taken beyond the merely physical characteristics of the mountain (its composition, its height, its location, etc.). The beautiful *Ávila* is something that cannot be measured by the scientist's instruments, yet, only under the influence of the vicious empiricism referenced by Humboldt would a scientist discount its importance. An aesthetic understanding of nature was critical for Humboldt, both to understand nature as a whole and to understand our own human finitude:

The earnest and solemn thoughts awakened by a communion with nature intuitively arise from a presentiment of the order and harmony pervading the

22. *Ibid.*, p. 24.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 39.

whole universe, and from the contrast we draw between the narrow limits of our own existence and the image of infinity revealed on every side whether we look upward to the starry vault of heaven, scan the far-reaching plain before us, or seek to trace the dim horizon across the vast expanse of the ocean.²⁴

Human experience of the tension between the infinite and the finite is something that Schlegel also emphasized. It is precisely this tension that gives rise to his claim that poetry and philosophy must come together, that “whatever can be done while poetry and philosophy are separate has been done and accomplished. So the time has come to unite the two.”²⁵ The beauty of art enables us to experience something whose meaning cannot be exhausted by thought and hence helps us to comprehend or grasp Being (although never exhaustively). Because philosophy is a kind of longing for the Absolute and art is an instrument that helps us to approximate the Absolute, Schlegel claims that philosophy is completed in and as art. This insight takes us to the heart of early German Romanticism. With the Romantics, aesthetic tools such as allegory, wit, irony, and the use of unconventional literary forms (esp. the fragment) take on philosophical relevance. The bulk of Schlegel’s work focuses upon the problem of the limits of our knowledge and the limitless of the Absolute, which in its very limitlessness propels us beyond our finite limits.²⁶ Schlegel characterizes the human condition in terms of a feeling of longing for the infinite, a longing for something that we as finite humans, can never possess, but which guides our search for knowledge and leads to the insight that the search is all we can hope for, not the possession.

Romantic Anti-foundationalism and Schlegel’s ‘Living Seed’

Schlegel’s move to unite philosophy and poetry changed the very conception of philosophy itself and its methods. One upshot of the romantic method for philosophy was that teleological and foundational approaches were rejected: Schlegel’s philosophical method granted more freedom to its subject matter than teleological or foundational approaches could. Hence Schlegel avoided problems like the ones described by Wilhelm von Humboldt:

Historical truth is, generally speaking, much more threatened by philosophical than by artistic handling, since the latter is at least accustomed to granting freedom to its subject matter. Philosophy dictates a goal to events. This search for final causes, even though it may be deduced from the essence of man and nature itself, distorts and falsifies every independent judgment of the charac-

24. Ibid., p. 25.

25. KA 2, “Ideen“ Nr. 108, Firchow, p. 104.

26. Wilhelm von Humboldt, *On the Historian’s Task*, op. cit., p. 15.

teristic working of forces. Teleological history, therefore, never attains the living truth of universal destiny because the individual always has to reach the pinnacle of his own development within the span of his fleeting existence; teleological history can, for that reason, never properly locate the ultimate goal of events in living things but has to seek it, as it were, in dead institutions and in the concept of an ideal totality.²⁷

If philosophers are guilty of freezing living reality in their move to subsume changing, living reality under fixed, final causes, then the adjective 'philosophical' will indeed suggest a move away from change and life to the fixed, stable, or dead categories used to capture reality. The ideal of such philosophical methods is "some state of perfection," which, as we saw above was disavowed in Schlegel's emphasis on infinite becoming. As already stated, romantic poetry is an ideal, a poetry that is progressive because it is always in a state of becoming, never reaching completion. This view of the inherent incompleteness of poetry holds also for the romantic view of philosophy, and of knowledge itself.

Romantic philosophy is anti-foundationalist, and an understanding of the implications of this particular breed of anti-foundationalism enables us to appreciate a major contribution that the early German Romantics made to philosophy: their model of philosophy did not sacrifice living, changing reality to fixed, teleological categories, all in the name of systematic unity, but rather left the system open, incorporating change and flux into the very frame of philosophy itself. There is no concept of an ideal totality operative in the 'romantic' conception of philosophy. Romantic philosophy is not guilty of what Wilhelm von Humboldt accuses most philosophy, that is, of an inability to locate the goal of events in living things, fixated, as most philosophers are, by the concept of an ideal totality, which leads away from living things and toward dead institutions. There is also the danger, when a philosopher deals in teleological systems, of placing a cultural prejudice within the closed system itself, that is, of measuring all by a supposedly "universal" standard that is all too local. This may very well have been the cause of many a charge of inferiority that plagued and continues to plague interpretation of other cultures.

Romantic philosophy does not rest on firm foundations from which it spins a deductive web of certainty. In place of a closed, grand deductive system that would provide the first and last word on the foundations of knowledge, the romantic conception of philosophy breaks with the view that philosophy must rest upon any foundation at all. In this conception of philosophy, there is no attempt to keep uncertainty out of the picture, but rather a humble acceptance of the provisional nature of all of our claims to knowl-

27. KA 12, p. 328.

edge. It is worth emphasizing that anti-foundationalists need not abandon a conception of objective truth: romantic skepticism about foundations led to reflections about our epistemological limitations, but not to any rejection of objectivity or truth. Admitting epistemological limitations need not lead us down the path of denying the existence of a mind-independent reality. So, the “romantic approach” that I am attributing to Humboldt does not amount to relativism. Humboldt and the early German Romantics, with their emphasis on the critical roles that history and art have to play in educating humanity, do not shirk from critique, inquiry or deliberation (as the relativist, with his easy “anything goes” attitude often does).

Schlegel’s insistence that it impossible to do philosophy without doing the history of philosophy is intimately connected to his anti-foundationalism. He writes:

Our philosophy does not begin like the others with a first principle – where the first proposition is like the center or first ring of a comet – with the rest a long tail of mist – we depart from a small but living seed – our center lies in the middle.²⁸

A philosophy based on first principles would provide a perspective from the outside, that is, from a point that established all that followed from it. Such a position is foundational, and the first principle or foundation stands outside of the matter that it serves to explain. The first principle would be fixed, static and would presumably explain all the changing, living matter in the world. Schlegel’s reference to a “small but living seed” is not an unimportant metaphor. His particular breed of anti-foundationalism commits him to something like life as the framework for understanding reality. Schlegel himself describes his philosophical method as genetic or synthetic as opposed to deductive or syllogistic.²⁹ Schlegel’s genetic method is historical, he wants to understand philosophy, poetry, and reality in terms of their relation to what came before, in terms of their genesis. This commitment to life, to the organic, to a “living seed” also shapes Humboldt’s approach to understanding reality, though he uses a slightly different metaphor to describe his commitment.

Humboldt and the Breath of Life

Evidence of Humboldt’s focus on the living, the organic, the developing is found in most of his writings, both scientific and political, yet because of space limitations, I shall focus here upon his final publication, “Cosmos”, which is what I take to be the culmination of his romantic view of nature.

28. KA 12, p. 307.

29. Alexander von Humboldt, *Cosmos*, op.cit., p. 7.

Humboldt's romantic method enabled him to approach nature (in all of its "living" manifestations) not only quantitatively but also qualitatively.

Humboldt's own description of his life's work provides good evidence of his romantic approach:

Although the outward relations of life, and an irresistible impulse toward knowledge of various kinds, have led me to occupy myself for many years – and apparently exclusively – with separate branches of science, as, for instance, with descriptive botany, geognosy, chemistry, astronomical determinations of position, and terrestrial magnetism, in order that I might the better prepare myself for the extensive travels in which I was desirous of engaging, the actual object of my studies has nevertheless been of a higher character...The principal impulse by which I was directed was the earnest endeavor to comprehend the phenomena of physical objects in their general connection, and to represent nature as one great whole, moved and animated by internal forces.³⁰

Humboldt makes explicit reference to an underlying unity in the multiplicity of nature and the connections between his study of nature, politics, history, and the general progress of humankind. He goes on to emphasize the "mutual dependence and connection" existing between the various classes of phenomena, and speaks of "chain of connection" that links all natural forces.³¹ For both Humboldt and Schlegel, 'holism' is defined in terms of the denial of deducibility. Both thinkers posit a whole (reality) which must be postulated as something related to, yet not reducible to the sum of the individuals which comprise it. For Schlegel, nothing is known in isolation, but always as part of a greater whole with which it interacts (but "not" from which it is deduced). Likewise, for Humboldt, "one sole and indissoluble chain binds together all nature."³²

Humboldt calls for a rational consideration of nature, that is, a nature submitted to the process of thought, finding a "unity in diversity of phenomena, a harmony blending together all created things, however dissimilar in form and attributes; one great whole, animated by "the breath of life" [lebendiger Hauch]."³³ This breath of life is something that would be suffocated by a scientific method shaped only by empirical, quantitative methods. Wilhelm von Humboldt also emphasizes the importance of developing a method that would maintain nature's "breath of life":

Even a simple depiction of nature cannot be merely an enumeration and depiction of parts or the measuring of sides and angles; there is also the breath

30. Ibid., p. 23.

31. Ibid., p. 27.

32. Ibid., p. 24.

33. Wilhelm von Humboldt, *On the Historian's Task*, op., cit. p. 7.

of life in the whole and an inner character which speaks through it which can be neither measured nor merely described.³⁴

A commitment to the living, changing aspects of reality, be those described in Humboldtian terms as a “breath of life”, or in Schlegelian as a “living seed”, informs the method that both thinkers use. The way in which Alexander von Humboldt fused history, aesthetics, and science is similar to the way in which Schlegel fused history, poetry, and philosophy. This fusion was not the result of an arbitrary whim, but rather the consequence of a commitment to “living” nature. Humboldt was dedicated to unveiling nature to human understanding, yet did not see the unveiling process as a mere interrogation of natural phenomena so that facts could be collected and recorded. The collection and recording of facts was only part of the scientific method.

If the goal is to find a “unity in diversity of phenomena, a harmony blending together all created things...one great whole, animated by the breath of life,” more than the charts and graphs of the empirical scientist are needed. The aesthetic-historical method of the Romantic protects the breath of life that animates the whole of nature. For Humboldt, the study of nature never amounted to merely an enumeration and depiction of parts or the measuring of sides and angles, for he was not a scientist wedded to strictly empirical methods, tied to the charts and graphs that would be suitable if nature were like a grand wind-up clock, but which were ill suited to maintain the “breath of life” animating all of nature, the living seed, the organic life forces that the romantic method was suited to capturing, however provisionally.

Conclusion

For more on this see “Lectures on Transcendental Philosophy” (delivered in Jena 1800-01) and the private lectures Schlegel delivered in Cologne (1804-05), KA 12 . Manfred Frank gives a thorough analysis of Schlegel’s position on the relation between philosophy and poetry in his “Unendliche Annäherung. Die Anfänge der philosophischen Frühromantik“ (Frankfurt a.Main: Suhrkamp, 1997). Both Humboldt and Schlegel see the task of understanding truths about the phenomena of nature as one that will ever come to an end: it is an infinite task, comprised of empirical, quantitative methods, but also, and just as importantly, of methods borrowed from art and history. Humboldt, the romantic scientist, did not find any tension between purely quantitative approaches to natures and qualitative (aesthetic-historical) ones. Humboldt’s romantic method freed science of the vicious empiricism which would petrify living organisms, and it did this by putting the charts and graphs of the scientist into dialogue with history and art, thereby introducing

34. Alexander von Humboldt, *Cosmos*, *op.cit.*, p. 24.

freedom and change into the scientific approach to nature. Humboldt's respect for freedom and change was widespread. It should, therefore, come as no surprise that he was one of the first Europeans to respect the cultures of Latin America, and that he would be admired by the very thinkers who introduced freedom and political change into the lands of the Spanish Empire.

