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Alexander von Humboldt begins his *Ansichten der Natur* with a rather curious disclaimer. In the preface to the first edition of the work he reveals to his readers that the descriptions of his journey to South America may not contain the authoritative truth about everything that he has seen. He admits that many of the observations made by him of his travels were based on faulty scientific criteria, because they were informed by personal perception, rather than by fact alone and that, hence, they may lack some of the exactitude one associates with a purely methodical observation of nature. However, by conceding his subjective approach to nature, Humboldt does not wish to discredit the scientific merit of the work at hand, nor does he want to take away from the principled and investigative way in which he conducted his journey. Instead, he uses it to bolster a personal and deeply-rooted scientific notion of *having* the experience of nature as the important criterium of making sense of the world around him.

In order to maintain emphasis on the significance of subjective perception, Humboldt clearly separated the essays from their *Erläuterungen*, the copious scientific explanations that accompanied each text and in which he documented his research with an empirical eye and mathematical precision.¹ The addition of these notes to the main body of essays make the scientific value of his journey an incontestable fact, because the data is the solid proof that Humboldt did conduct actual work on his journey, and that he was not preoccupied with artistic observation alone. However, while the notes do provide an invaluable positivistic resource to future explorers and scientists alike, Humboldt also makes a point of directing his readers not to consider the notes the central aspect of the text itself. His great accomplishment in

1. Only unabridged editions of *Ansichten Der Natur* include the scientific addition. See Hanno Beck's edition: *Ansichten der Natur: erster und zweiter Band* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1987).

accumulating and systematizing the diverse data from his trip is to be understood as serving a particular purpose, namely to support his “ästhetische Behandlung”² (aesthetic treatment) of nature, which, as he outlines, is the preferred way in which he wants his work to be understood.

Thus, rather than instigating a need in his readers to adopt a scientific mind set and a sophisticated usage of current terminology in order to comprehend his writings, Humboldt invites them to approach them as a readable organic whole, encouraging them to *trust* (rather than question) the information rendered and to see it as relevant, despite its apparent disparateness and novelty. By prefacing his work in such a way, Humboldt garners a particular type of accessibility for his text, one that is clearly not predetermined only by intellectual preparedness or by elitist academic principles. Instead of enforcing such regulated standards of perception, he engages with his readers in a more companionable way, by connecting with them at a level of their general curiosity and, more importantly, suspense. In addition to opening up the text to an audience larger than the scientific community alone, the presence of these qualities in the narrative benefit Humboldt, as the author, in other ways as well, for they allow him to convey his experiences in a thoroughly authentic manner, i.e. in the way he himself perceived them.

Rather than recontextualizing his travel experiences into proper scientific form, whereby he would convert his observations into a clinical formulaic expression, Humboldt is able to maintain a narrative vigour in his descriptions that defies institutional categorization. He does this foremost by adopting a comparative mode of depiction. Rather than portraying new phenomena with an explorer’s sense of their uniqueness, he makes a point of describing them in terms that will not alienate the reader, but which will enable him/her to envision them in comprehensible terms. Thus, in describing the steppes of South America, he compares them to moorlands of Northern Europe in order to render an image that his reader can easily identify with.³ The relational terms in which he writes makes the text immensely readable, allowing Humboldt to extrapolate his ideas even further, which in this case, means connecting the South American llanos with Asian and African planes, which, as we should point out, he, by this point, has not seen.⁴ By resorting to this type of technique, and enticing his readers to consider such (unimaginable) things, Humboldt clearly issues his own poetic licence, deviating from the course of scientific truth, and embarking into his own sense of *truthfulness*.

2. Alexander von Humboldt, *Ansichten der Natur* ed. Adolf - Meyer - Abich (Stuttgart: Reclam, 2003). This particular edition of *Ansichten der Natur* is used throughout the present study.

3. *Ansichten der Natur*, 12.

4. Humboldt, *Ansichten der Natur*, 21.

It is important to emphasize that Humboldt recognizes his inexact grasp of the truth. He repeatedly admits that his apprehension of reality within the texts has obvious shortcomings, and thus, even though the experience is authentic, the knowledge may not be. This is an entirely different tone than that used by Humboldt in his role as scientist in the separate section containing the *Erläuterungen* and *Zusätze*, for there he evaluated phenomena with scientific rigidity, mediating his understanding of them with the usage of apparatus and standard jargon. In the essays he is less rigorous in applying such a standardized methodology, because he resorts to other, less precise sources. Thus, while narrating his travels, he often relies on local folklore to clarify the phenomena he encounters, departing entirely from any scholarly mode of comprehension. He regularly includes the opinions and expertise of his *Dolmetscher* (translator) into the text, allowing a local voice to formulate his impressions, expose his own ignorance and translate the phenomena with meaning into his writings. The presence of this “other” authority also changes the feel of the text significantly, because the inclusion of this indigenous voice makes the landscape depicted seem authentically lived, rather than merely visited by an outsider.

An instance of how Humboldt chooses to integrate the indigenous narrative voice is, for example, his depiction of the *Mapires*, a type of body casket that was found by his expedition in an ancient graveyard off the Orinoco. Rather than researching the background of this site himself, he relays the legend of the *Guareca* Indians to explain the origin of the skeletons found, opting to confine his understanding of the discovery to their folklore alone. Although scientifically inexact, his technique proves to be extremely effective for his readers. Thus, the *Guareca* story is so charming and so vivid, that upon hearing it in Germany a friend of Humboldt became so inspired that he wrote a poem about the *Aturen* people, whose bones the site supposedly contained.⁵

In addition to validating the culture and knowledge of the local people in an obvious way, the inclusion of oral narrative truths into his reports should also be read as Humboldt’s implicit criticism of the traditional means of epistemological communication as they were made available to him. Even before departing for South America he encountered a lot of practical misinformation, as he travelled (and struggled) with inaccurate maps, flawed measurements, and false guides throughout his trip through the European continent. In the New World more geographical blunders quickly became apparent. In travelling down the Orinoco Humboldt tactfully notes that one seeks the Dorado Laguna in vain (“vergebens”⁶), for the available Arrowsmith map he

5. The title of the poem is “Der Aturen-Papagai”; Humboldt *Ansichten der Natur*, 52.

had was wrong, and the 20 miles-long sea indicated on it, does not, in fact exist. Humboldt's indication of this mistake is fruitful, however, for it reinforces the inexact and unorthodox methodology he himself chose to adopt in his writings. Thus, after citing Arrowsmith's error, Humboldt is able to continue with his descriptions of the Orinoco with such adjectives as "fabelhaft," story/dream-like, and is able to cite the legends of the "Eingeborene,"⁷ the natives, as the appropriate tone, and authoritative source of information for the course of his travels.

After rejecting the stringent guidelines of the scientific jargon (which, despite appearances of precision, has proven to be faulty) Humboldt is free to adopt a descriptively analytical mode of writing. His descriptions of the Orinoco become especially lyrical, as he employs a series of vague, and highly unscientific, adjectives. The flowers are, in his view, *blühende* (flowering), and they cover the water *wiesenartig* (like on a meadow). The water, on the other hand, is *strömend* (streaming) and *schäumend* (bubbly). Exotic flora is frequently described as *herrlich* (divine), *malerisch* (picture-like) and *sonderbar* (odd). The conclusions he derives from his observations are similarly vague and liable to more than one simple interpretation. Thus, rather than using concrete verbs like *beweisen* (to prove) or *zeigen* (to show) to conclude a thought, Humboldt adopts a more suggestive vocabulary, alluding to the fact that the images in his depictions might have a tentative impact, *convincing* us ("überzeugen"⁸) or *leading us to believe* ("zu erkennen glauben"⁹) a certain thing.

In order to embrace this sense of veracity that cannot be regulated by rules of scientific convention, Humboldt's modifies the tone of his prose as well. Throughout the text he repeatedly reminds his reader that language is an unreliable means of communicating everything that he has seen, and that, in consequence, they should treat it as the tenuous medium it is. Thus, rather than questioning the phenomena he depicts, he encourages the reader to question the text that he writes and with which he seeks to express phenomena, and to appropriate or disregard it as they see fit. He also quite clearly indicates that his *Naturschilderungen* (depictions of nature) were not made with the sole intention of educating his readers, but they are also meant to have an *effect*. He also notes that in order for nature to have the largest *Wirkung* possible, it is first and foremost necessary that one be receptive and in harmony, "Einklang"¹⁰ with their senses, and not their intellect.

6. Humboldt, *Ansichten der Natur*, 38.

7. Humboldt, *Ansichten der Natur*, 37-38.

8. Humboldt, *Ansichten der Natur*, 47.

9. Humboldt, *Ansichten der Natur*, 51.

10. Humboldt, *Ansichten der Natur*, 33.

In addition to highlighting the linguistic deficit he encounters in providing truthful descriptions, he also points out many existing mistakes already in use and in the language. For example, he speaks of the etymology of the river Orinoco, claiming that its name must be a *Sprachverwirrung*,¹¹ a linguistic mistake, for the original explorers overlooked the generic word for “river” which the natives used, and imposed the name “Orinoco” instead, which was not at all in keeping with local tradition. The attention paid by him to the artificiality (and meaninglessness!) of the existing nomenclature encourages the reader to disregard the language of the text further, forcing him/her to consider it as a purely arbitrary means of communication, which is much in the same vein as Humboldt himself sees the matter.

Humboldt himself takes up the issue of linguistic inadequacy in his essay “Das nächtliche Tieleben im Urwalde,” an essay that purports to be about nocturnal animal life in the jungle. What is significant about this particular manuscript is that it is largely a theoretical essay in which Humboldt first and foremost engages in a protracted discussion about language and scientific discourse. He openly contends that language is a contrived medium that alienates, or as he expresses it *turns away*, “abwenden,” natural phenomena from its original meaning. In the same breath, he speaks of an imposed, but limiting, “literarische Willkür,”¹² literary arbitrariness, which, in describing natural phenomena, quite blatantly disregards the multifariousness of the natural world, for the benefit of maintaining a standard and uniform scientific expression.

In his essay he argues for a more flexible and a more fanciful linguistic competence. Imagination is not contrary to intellect, and in order to do justice to nature, so Humboldt implies, one *must* investigate and experiment with different modes of depiction. In doing so, the writer of nature should not be seen as violating the protocol and procedure of the scientific establishment, but rather s/he should be seen as attempting to achieve a degree of *Naturwahrheit*, a truthfulness about nature, which as Humboldt indicates is the purpose of *all* writing on nature: “Das unablässige Streben nach dieser Wahrheit ist im Auffassen wie in der Wahl des bezeichnenden Ausdrucks der Zweck aller Naturbeschreibungen.”¹³

To achieve an authenticity capable of corresponding to this desired “truthful depiction” it is necessary to move away from abstract notions and prescriptive theories of nature. Rather than embracing a predetermined view of nature, absorbed from scientific studies and similar objective analyses, when describing natural phenomena one should draw upon the subjective percep-

11. Humboldt, *Ansichten der Natur*, 35.

12. Humboldt, *Ansichten der Natur*, 55.

13. Humboldt, *Ansichten der Natur*, 56.

tion first, an act that Humboldt defines as “[das] Selbstbeobachtet” and “[das] Selbsterlebte.”¹⁴ In his view, the individual’s percept of nature is a powerful sensation that is more accurate than theory, for in recording one’s immediate perception one brings the “Gegenwart der Erscheinung,”¹⁵ the presence of the phenomenon, to the page with a trustworthiness and truthfulness that does justice to the true incommensurability of the natural world.

In closing, it is important to point out several other things about *Ansichten der Natur* and language. Like *Kosmos*, it was a work that was written by Humboldt in German; those two texts being the only two seminal monographs that he chose to write in his native tongue. Having emphasized that, it is also necessary to note that many of the celebrated works he chose to publish in French were based on information derived from his *Tagebücher*, journals that he wrote in German; which means that he was never really far from his mother tongue in conducting and recording any of his research. Furthermore, whether it was due to its linguistic particularities or to some other alternate reason, *Ansichten der Natur* seemed to occupy special prominence in Humboldt’s personal recollection of his written work. Even after completing his *Lebenswerk Kosmos* in 1845 he fondly remembered this youthful collection of essays. In a letter to his friend Varnhagen, written in 1849, he referred to *Ansichten der Natur* as his “Lieblingswerk,”¹⁶ proving that despite the passage of time and his other great successes that this particular view of nature was never far from his mind nor from his method.

14. Humboldt, *Ansichten der Natur*, 56.

15. Humboldt, *Ansichten der Natur*, 60.

16. Alexander von Humboldt, *Briefe von Alexander von Humboldt an Varnhagen von Ense aus den Jahren 1827 bis 1858* (Leipzig: Brodhaus, 1860).