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Romanticism, Alexander von Humboldt and the distinction of “Natur” and “Geist”

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Romanticism is an indefinable movement as F.R. de Toreinx pointed out as early as in 1829. However, Romanticism shares some characteristics with other historical movements such as Classicism or Enlightenment. Some experts claim that these two mentioned movements seem to totally opposed, even though Romanticism could also be seen as an extension of both. Following Arthur O. Lovejoy's ideas (1948), we can agree that there has not been one single movement called “Romanticism” but several “Romanticisms”, not only among the different European countries, but also within those countries. For example, German Romanticism, which for obvious reasons was the most important one for Humboldt, is often considered as a nationalistic political movement which aimed at the unification of the several German states after the Napoleonic wars. While, on the other hand, there are romantic writers like E.T.A. Hoffmann who were not political at all but focused on the power of “dark” and “fantastic” elements in nature after the Enlightenment's “disenchantment of the world” (*Entzauberung der Welt*) as the German sociologist Max Weber famously claimed almost 100 years later.

But if there is any distinctive characteristic of Romanticism at all, it is definitely its interest in nature and, more concretely, in the natural landscape. Most of the works of well known romanticists narrate the observation of landscape and the feelings the writer experiences. The romantic beholder tends to cover nature with a mystic veil that is impregnated with subjective beliefs and impressions that are far removed from scientific observation. But we should bear in mind that the concept of nature has been understood differently in different periods and a huge part of romantic discussion is about whether a Pure Nature exists or whether it is always a human construction. After all, the idea of nature is one of the elements that establishes clear differences between cultures and epochs.

The romantic nature is seen as pantheistic and, therefore, landscape becomes sacred; nature could be considered as God itself. This pantheistic approach can be understood by analyzing two Spinozistic expressions: *natura naturans* and *natura naturata*. We could define *natura naturans* as creative nature and *natura naturata* as nature that has been created. These two dynamic natural elements are, however, not seen as something different from mankind. From the point of view of the romantics, human beings, as we are also natural beings, should maintain ourselves far from an excessive mechanicism and rationalism in order to feel the freedom that not only belongs naturally to us, but also to nature. This way of perceiving nature's free beauty, leads the beholder to experience all kinds of feelings, from calm to sublimity. Beauty flatters sense and gratifies reason, but the Sublime overwhelms and transcends them, inspiring awe and

wonder. Thus, the sublime landscapes powerfully convey the huge energy and elemental fury of natural forces unleashed.

In contrast, the scientist follows the strict path of objective observation of nature, and this seems to be the way Humboldt chose for analyzing nature. *Ansichten der Natur* (1849) is well considered as a scientific work that provides the reader with detailed natural descriptions as well as an attempt to explain nature's phenomena as a whole. However, there are some easily recognizable features in the text that can remind the reader of the way romantic poets used to describe their feelings when observing certain kinds of landscapes or natural phenomena. Alexander von Humboldt's accurately observed natural data and his detailed landscape descriptions are finely blended in his works dedicated to give a detailed account of what he saw and experienced in his voyages. Humboldt could be, therefore, considered as the bridge that links Romanticism and Naturalism as, on the one hand, analyzes nature with a scientific eye but on the other hand, he also describes the effect that these elements of nature and landscape cause in him.

However, some parts of Humboldt's *Views of Nature* are clearly closer to the naturalist's way of analyzing nature:

According to my researches, Columbus made his way through the great fucus bank in the year 1492, in latitude 28,5°, and in 1493, in latitude 37°, and both times in the longitude of 38°-41°. This can be established with tolerable certainty from the estimation of the velocity recorded by Columbus, and "the distance daily sailed over;" not indeed by dropping the log, but by the information afforded by the running out of half-hour sand-glasses (ampolletas) (Humboldt 1850, 49)

However, in addition to the objective and scientific analysis of nature, the reader can also come across several commentaries that could be easily related to the romantic way of description. Humboldt sometimes strays towards metaphysical thoughts caused by an overwhelming feeling:

A feeling of melancholy, or solemnity, or of light buoyant animation is in turn awakened by the contemplation of our native trees. This influence of the physical on the moral world—this mysterious reaction of the sensuous on the ideal, gives to the study of nature, when considered from a higher point of view, a peculiar charm which has not hitherto been sufficiently recognised (ibid. 219)

Humboldt does not only find a special charm produced by human feelings at the time of facing nature's elements, but he also thinks that it deserves more recognition. This kind of gentle gesture to the importance of metaphysics is what makes it possible to consider Humboldt as a "hybrid" author. His wanderlust combined with his scientific knowledge and the attempt to appreciate the charm that feelings provide to the observation of nature create a direct path to attain communion with nature's elements. This romantic defense of human feelings and the pursuit of measuring the world from a scientific point of view show the reader that the existence of the great historical dichotomy between science and literature does not pertain to Humboldt's texts.

On the one hand, Humboldt adopted the Romantic Movement's delight for nature and, consequently, he also maintained the romantic descriptive style of nature's elements. This particular descriptive method is easily recognizable since it shows the beholder's subjective point of view and, therefore, the feelings that some scenes or elements of nature cause on the observer. On the other hand, it is also noticeable in Humboldt's texts the descriptive way that natural sciences use to analyze the environment. This descriptive style is formed by the objective information with which the observer contributes to constitute a complete view of nature leaving aside the personal repercussion. These two ways of description prove the existence of two different views of nature, the naturalistic and the humanistic that are clearly mixed in Humboldt's texts.

The aim of analyzing nature with these two domains blended together finds its origins in romantic poetry such as the following extract from William Wordsworth's *The Prelude* (1799, 1805, 1850) will show. How the pantheistic way of understanding nature powerfully stands out:

*Winds thwarting winds, bewildered and forlorn,
The torrents shooting from the clear blue sky,
The rocks that muttered close upon our ears,
Black drizzling crags that spake by the way-side
As if a voice were in them, the sick sight
And giddy prospect of the raving stream,
The unfettered clouds and region of the heavens,
Tumult and peace, the darkness and the light
Were all like workings of one mind, the features
Of the same face (1805, Book VI, lines 559-569)*

This extract can be easily compared with Humboldt's way of seeing nature. An extract taken from *Cosmos* (1866) will show how closely one author from the other is:

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 (von Humboldt 1856, vii)

Of course, this dichotomy is not new; it was made known by Wilhelm Dilthey and his writings on the distinction between natural sciences and human sciences. C.P. Snow corroborates in the text of a conference titled *The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution* (1959) the existence of two poles formed by discordances between scientists, on the one hand, and literary people, on the other hand. John Brockman (1995) proposed the unification of the two cultures by creating the *third culture* project which is thought to contribute to the unification with the support of the Philosophy of Nature. Edward O. Wilson (1998), whose work is part of the project, called *Consilience* to the method based on biological studies that could unite natural sciences and human sciences.

Humboldt does not only symbolize clear scientific standards in biology, but also he should be seen as an embodiment of the dialogue between the humanistic and the scientific way of measuring the world- A true universal genius from whom we can still benefit.

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