

**Ottmar Ette**

## Languages about Languages: Two Brothers and one Humboldtian Science

### ABSTRACT

In the history of Humboldt research both brothers have been traditionally seen as representing the dichotomy between the humanities and the natural sciences. Today however, their similar approach to using and forming scientific language could be used as a starting point for conceiving a university, museum and even forum under one single Humboldtian science.

### RESUMEN

En la investigación humboldtiana, los hermanos tradicionalmente representaban la oposición entre las humanidades y las ciencias naturales. Hoy, en cambio, su enfoque similar de usar y construir las lenguas y los discursos de sus respectivas disciplinas se puede usar como punto de partida en concebir una universidad, un museo y un fórum desde una sola ciencia humboldtiana.

### ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

In der Vergangenheit sah die Humboldt-Forschung beide Brüder als Vertreter gegenteiliger wissenschaftlicher Ansätze. Heute jedoch kann ihr ähnlicher Zugang zu wissenschaftlicher Sprache als Ausgangspunkt für die Konzipierung einer Universität, eines Museums und Forums unter einer einzigen Humboldtschen Wissenschaft genutzt werden.

*Lecture held on the occasion of Leibniz Day, 2017 of the Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences and Humanities*



## “Everything is interaction”

“*Everything is interaction.*”<sup>1</sup> With these few words, written in German in the midst of a passage in French, that explode like a basic formula in his *Amerikanische Reisetagebücher*, Alexander von Humboldt gets to the foundational axiom of that science that is named for him, known today as Humboldtian science.<sup>2</sup> It is not by chance that it was Wilhelm von Humboldt who was the first to recognize his brother’s fundamental theoretical model, which Alexander would further develop and delineate a few years later during his great journey through the tropics (1799–1804). For as early as 1793, in a letter to Karl Gustav von Brinkmann, Wilhelm had attested to a remarkable talent in his brother, an aptitude for combinatorial analysis, and had further indicated that Alexander was destined “to connect ideas, to discern chains of things that, without him, would remain undiscovered for generations.”<sup>3</sup>

With his observations, Wilhelm advances as the first exegete, indeed, the first epistemologist of that Humboldtian science first indicated in 1793 that unfolded certainly less in chains than in a web-like interweaving. In the first volume of his *Kosmos*, dated November 1844 in Potsdam, Alexander himself spoke of a “general interlinking, not in a simple linear direction, but in a web-like, intricate interweaving.”<sup>4</sup> We may add today that this model of thought, science, and writing is of a deeply relational nature and is not oriented toward simple causal chains, but rather seeks to incorporate the widest variety of factors. Indeed, it is a matter of multilogical fields of factors that mutually interact and correspond fully to the foundational Humboldtian axiom, in accordance with which everything is to be regarded and investigated as interaction.

What if we look at Wilhelm, then, not only as the first epistemologist of that Humboldtian science that, as of 1793, did not even exist yet, or was, at best, foreseeable *in nuce*? What if Wilhelm were part of this science that was not only dreamed up by Alexander, but was thought out by him and was forever connected to his name? In other words, what if there were therefore one science, a *Humboldtian* science, which could be connected to the names of both brothers?

Ceremonial lectures do not generally fall under the suspicion that they might necessarily express risky, daring, or perhaps even radical observations that revolutionize established patterns of thought and classification from the ground up. The current context before us, however, could offer a favorable opportunity for it. And opportunity should, particularly in science, encourage the love of moving beyond the limits of the moment.

---

1 Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin – Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Handschriftenabteilung. Nachlass Alexander von Humboldt, Tagebücher der Amerikanischen Reise IX, fol. 27r. URL: <http://resolver.staatsbibliothek-berlin.de/SBB0001527C00000041> (checked on 05/02/2018).

2 The term was introduced in the research literature by Cannon, Susan Faye: *Science in Culture: The Early Victorian Period*. Folkstone: Dawson; New York: Science History Publications 1978, pp. 73–110, and developed further by Ette, Ottmar: *Alexander von Humboldt und die Globalisierung. Das Mobile des Wissens*. Frankfurt am Main-Leipzig: Insel Verlag 2009, pp. 16–22.

3 Humboldt, Wilhelm von: *Briefe an Karl Gustav von Brinkmann*. Edited by Albert Leitzmann. Leipzig 1939, p. 60.

4 Humboldt, Alexander von: *Kosmos. Entwurf einer physischen Weltbeschreibung*. 5 vols. Stuttgart – Tübingen: Cotta 1845–1862, here, vol. I, p. 33.

Ever since I, as a young man, began to deal with the works of the great Cuban poet, essayist, and revolutionary José Martí, I have been fascinated by a small confusion in the thought of this internationally well-informed thinker and globalization theorist of the waning 19th century, who resided for several years in Manhattan. As is the case for most Latin Americans, the name Humboldt was for him “naturally” associated with that of the scholar who had traveled through broad portions of the Spanish colonial empire in America, in whose writings could be recognized something like the birth announcement of an America independent of Iberian colonialism. But José Martí, at least occasionally during his exile in Venezuela, the home of Simón Bolívar, thought that this man, who had done so much for the “New World,” was none other than that scholar and researcher of the Basque language (that the young Martí somewhat unfortunately refers to as a “dialecto”) of whom he had also heard and read.<sup>5</sup> It always seemed to me to be a rewarding undertaking to perceive this small confusion as a productive misreading, and to use it for approaches that could perhaps lead to something unprecedented or at least long since unheard of. I do not wish thus to imply that Wilhelm and Alexander were one and the same person who made use of two different *noms de plume*, so as to be able in this way to work in different fields of knowledge—a thought, to be sure, that might possess considerable attraction, were it to be literarily played out by a talented author. What I mean, rather, is that from this standpoint, Alexander and Wilhelm may be thought of together in such a way that it would yield not a simple, homogeneous unit, but the unity of the multilogical (*des Viellogischen*), and at the same time, in a broad sense—if my play on sound may be pardoned—a multi-logical philology (*eine viellogische Philologie*)<sup>6</sup> that would be capable of pursuing differing logics simultaneously.

Quite contrary to this up to now, the respective areas of research examining Wilhelm and Alexander von Humboldt have, over the course of long periods of time, been separated from one another by clear and occasionally adversarial demarcations, and to some degree, they still remain separated. At the beginning of June, 2017, when I delivered a lecture on Alexander von Humboldt as part of a highly successful Polish-German cooperative effort at the Jagiellonian University in Krakow, I was introduced right at the start by a native German Wilhelm von Humboldt specialist—in jest, I hope—as being “from the opposition party.” Academics who work on Wilhelm or Alexander von Humboldt—we can refer to them jokingly as “Wilhelmists” and “Alexandrines”—have for the most part experienced scientific socializations quite different from one another, they originate disciplines that are different and not infrequently separate from one another, and they specialize as a rule on one *or* the other of the two Humboldt brothers. Scholars who work in balanced and equal proportions on Alexander *and* Wilhelm, on the other hand (to put it mildly) are seldom to be found. One dedicates oneself—to invoke the prevalent clichés—either to the Prussian patriot or the cosmopolite, either to the researcher of language or the researcher of nature.

The long history of Humboldt research—and by that I mean the “Humboldt Industry” dedicated both to Wilhelm and to Alexander—may be divided (in a manner that is surely a bit simplifying) into three phases. In the first, the *spiritus rector* of the Friedrich Wilhelm University (which

---

5 See also (i. a.) the observations in Martí’s “Sección Constante,” which appeared on January 14, 1882 in *La Opinión Nacional*, in Martí, José: *Obras Completas*, vol. 23: *Periodismo diverso*. Havana: Editorial de Ciencias Sociales 1975, p. 152.

6 For a delineation of a multilogical philology, see Ette, Ottmar: *Viellogische Philologie. Die Literaturen der Welt und das Beispiel einer transarealen peruanischen Literatur*. Berlin: Verlag Walter Frey – edition tranvía 2013.

upon its reopening in 1949 took the name of the two brothers) and the world traveler had little in common. This is also true, by the way, for the iconographies of each, which respectively follow very different lines of tradition. The depiction of the two brothers in a single painting, one single picture, is thus very rare and to my knowledge occurs only—as in the famous contemporary engraving of Friedrich Schiller, the close-knit brothers, and Johann Wolfgang Goethe in Jena—on the occasion of unusual intersecting circumstances. Even the two statues of the brothers have histories of greatly differing inceptions and rationales, and follow disparate representational traditions. It is as if Wilhelm, born in 1767, and whose 250th birthday we thus celebrate this year, and Alexander, born in 1769, whose birthday will coincide with the opening of the Humboldt Forum that is so-named for the two brothers, have long belonged to different worlds: the one an inhabitant of the “Old World,” and the other of the “New.”

In the second phase of both Humboldt research and Humboldt reception, the brothers were stylized into virtual antipodes, insofar as the one advanced to become the epitome of the humanities scholar, the other the icon of the natural sciences. The notorious fabrication (based no doubt upon a significant prehistory) of Charles Percy Snow’s thesis of the “Two Cultures,”<sup>7</sup> now long since crumbling but still having its effect, was anchored on this notion in a quasi-familial manner, and thus served to support the still widespread image of a separation between the “humanities scholar” Wilhelm and the “natural scientist” Alexander that was not only clearly evident across a broad public, but also not infrequently found in even the academic world. Yet this now long since hackneyed, in fact even cheap separation is, in light of Snow’s Two Cultures thesis, just as much *Schnee von Gestern* (“yesterday’s snow,” i. e., water under the bridge) as the equally false thesis—though still not stamped out in Germany—that Alexander von Humboldt is “one of the last” or even “the last universal scholar.”

It seems to me that today more than ever, it is necessary to place over such traditional and backward-looking platitudes a prospective scientific understanding that sees Humboldtian science, originally developed on the basis of Alexander’s example, as a conception of science that concentrates on the future, and whose present and future potential are far from being exhausted.

For some years, the indications have been accumulating that a third phase in Humboldt research dedicated to the brothers seems meanwhile to have commenced, a phase in which the notions of the divided worlds, and of an antipodal, indeed bipolar structure of the pair of brothers and of the sciences, are actually being overcome. In this year celebrating Wilhelm von Humboldt’s birth we are offered the perhaps historical chance not simply to examine them, to “take them apart,” as it were, *separately*, but from the vantage point of their distinct yet fruitful diversity, to think of them *together*. For many of the developments of Humboldtian science—to employ a now famous phrase from Snow, though no longer only in reference to the natural sciences—have “the future in their bones.”<sup>8</sup>

---

7 Snow, C. P.: *The Two Cultures*. With Introduction by Stefan Collini. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1993.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 10.

## The Languages of Science

In the following pages, if the question is posed of a Humboldtian science that relates to both brothers, the epistemology of which was recognized early on in Alexander by Wilhelm, then by no means should the differences, indeed, the sometimes profound differences between the two brothers not be mentioned. But with both, a common foundation can be found that rests upon the conviction that science assumes a public responsibility, and is aimed toward a relentlessly pursued democratization of this public. Science is responsibility, today more than ever. For a science that fails to impart its knowledge to society fails to acknowledge its societal obligation, and is itself obliged to take the blame when society takes away its funding.

The works of both Wilhelm and Alexander were directed toward creating an effective force, occasionally even an explosive force, in society, for they sought to make their ideas and concepts not simply presentable to the Prussian or French, Spanish or Habsburg courts, not merely acceptable to the salons of Paris or Berlin, but socially acceptable to a wide public, both in Europe and in America. Their model of knowledge and science, education and formation is ethically based and directed toward a transformation not only of the content of knowledge or the objects of research, of the structures of educational and scientific institutions. It is also directed toward a societal transformation in the sense of a democratization of knowledge, as is shown by Wilhelm's drafts for the foundation of a university or the reform of our academic world, and to the same degree by Alexander's sixty-one *Kosmos* lectures, and even more, by his sixteen *Kosmos* presentations that were open to the women of the choral society of the time. It was necessary, in memoirs and lectures, letters and books, to find and to invent a language or, better still, appropriate languages for this purpose. Science is also translation.

The formation and education of the two brothers, their socialization oriented toward knowledge and science, indicate important parallels of which only a few will be mentioned here. They studied under, and with, the best private tutors that Berlin had to offer, such that Schloss Tegel became for them their first and, in many ways, preprogramming educational institute. I expressly do not wish to attach myself to the widespread disparagement, the veritable bullying of their mother that runs through nearly all of the recent publications on the Humboldt brothers. Born of a Huguenot family, Marie Elisabeth von Humboldt, *née* Colomb, who held all the strings after the early death of their father, very deliberately and energetically created the possibilities of which the brothers, each in his own way, very successfully took advantage. It is not without reason that Wilhelm would remark in a letter how deeply the death of his mother had affected him, as though his own happiness had been taken to the grave upon her death.<sup>9</sup> Both brothers studied at Viadrina on the "frosty banks of the Oder,"<sup>10</sup> both quickly transferred to the Exzellenz-Universität (University of Excellence) in Göttingen at the time, both were impressed with Georg Forster, who had sailed around the world with James Cook, and both—if in different ways—were influenced by Forster,<sup>11</sup> and yet would surpass him; indeed, both favored

---

9 C. f. Humboldt, Wilhelm von: "Materialien. Erster Band: 1797–1798. Sonntag 31sten December" (11. Nivöse n.st.). In: *Wilhelm von Humboldts Gesammelte Schriften. Tagebücher*. Edited by Albert Leitzmann, vol. I. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter 1968, p. 390.

10 Humboldt, Alexander von: *Die Jugendbriefe 1787– 1799*. Edited and annotated by Ilse Jahn und Fritz G. Lange. Berlin: Akademie-Verlag 1973, p. 4.

11 See also (i. a.) Schmitter, Peter: "Zur Wissenschaftskonzeption Georg Forsters und dessen biographischen Bezügen zu den Brüdern Humboldt. Eine Vorstudie zum Verhältnis von 'allgemeiner Naturgeschichte', 'physischer Weltbeschreibung' und 'allgemeiner Sprachkunde'. In: Naumann,

in their last phase of life that same J. K. E. Buschmann who was of) such great significance to the preparation of their writings: Shared biographemes with doubled influence.

In the lives of both brothers, languages played a prominent role from the beginning. If we look at our Academy's theme of "Language" for this year, and the "multitude of world connections" and the "linguistic constitution of the world we live in"<sup>12</sup> that it comprises, it quickly becomes apparent in what an encompassing sense the lives, writings, and work of the Humboldt brothers exist in this sense within the influence of a multitude of languages. Both brothers not only spoke or communicated, wrote or published (beyond their competence in German and French) in a number of European languages, and had at their disposal their own profound translations that incorporated abilities in the languages of occidental antiquity, they also studied and employed non-European languages, both ancient and contemporary. In this, they were acutely aware of the linguistic constitution of all knowledge, and thus of all sciences as well.

Beyond this, they were able to use—setting aside for the moment their considerable artistry in the languages of diplomacy and politics—a multitude of the scientific languages that developed in the various vernaculars upon the demise of Latin as the dominant language of scholarship, and they themselves worked in highly specialized disciplinary languages, between which they were able—as their writings show—to move effortlessly back and forth, and from which they were able to translate. Both of them thereby not only sketched out—as in the case of navigation, for instance—the history and stories of these disciplinary languages, but exerted a formative influence on the linguistic development and characteristics of a wide variety of disciplines and scientific languages. They embody in a truly quintessential manner the idea of multilingualism in the sciences.

If we are moving today under the shadow of an ever-growing dominance of English toward a dangerous monolingualism in which entire libraries and archives, whole bodies of knowledge and ways of thought belonging to the non-English realm threaten to disappear, one may emphasize, much in the sense of the recently published plea of Jürgen Mittelstrass, Jürgen Trabant, and Peter Fröhlicher for multilingualism in the sciences,<sup>13</sup> that the linguistic diversity of the Humboldt brothers could stand not for an obsolescent scientific model, but rather, for a scientific development that today more than ever is worth fighting for, at the very least in the humanities, the intellectual and cultural sciences. (Even this translation—the German *Geistes- und Kulturwissenschaften* to the English "Humanities"—shows how different the respective accentuations can be.) The multilingualism of the two Humboldts, which is only briefly outlined here, is the prerequisite for the richness of their thought and understanding. They were never—not even in the political realm—misled by one single language.

However the future of the language(s) of science on our planet may look, we can avoid a significant reduction—to invoke once again this year's theme of the Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences and Humanities—of the "multitude of world connections" and the "linguistic constitution of the world we live in" if we do not consign the ideal of scientific multilingualism to a ca-

---

Bernd / Plank, Frans / Hofbauer, Gottfried (eds.): *Language and Earth: Elective Affinities between the Emerging Sciences of Linguistics and Geology*. Amsterdam: Benjamins 1992, pp. 91124, esp. 92.

12 Jahresthema ("theme for the year") 2017 / 2018 "Sprache": URL: <http://jahresthema.bbaw.de/das-jahresthema/jahresthema-2017-18-201esprache201c> (checked on 05/02/2018).

13 Mittelstrass, Jürgen / Trabant, Jürgen / Fröhlicher, Peter: *Wissenschaftssprache. Ein Plädoyer für Mehrsprachigkeit in der Wissenschaft*. Stuttgart: J. B. Metzler Verlag 2016.

sual disposal. The dominance of English does not mean the end, but probably an irretrievable loss and a substantial reduction, particularly in the area of the intellectual and cultural sciences. The actual model for the future—at least for these sciences—is represented, rather, by the equally fundamental and structural multilingualism of Wilhelm and Alexander von Humboldt.

One encounters languages about languages therefore, when one engages with the pair of Humboldt brothers and deals with the praxis of the Humboldtian science that runs across both languages and disciplines. The very forms and norms of translation, as well as concrete translational practices, play a decidedly epistemological role in the *Amerikanische Reisetagebücher* of Alexander as much as they do in the manuscripts of Wilhelm's *Kawi-Werk*. Again and again, the earnest play and the playful earnestness of the two brothers can be recognized in their dealings with languages as well as with their fields of activity. On both the linguistic and metalinguistic level, on the level of the application of language as well as the description of language, one sees less of the different languages running parallel than one sees them running together, and above all, running into and throughout one another.

The multilingual parallelism, interlingual intersection, and translingual interweaving demonstrate, in the unrelenting linguistic saturation of the object/state of language, the fact that we are being presented here with a living coexistence, a dynamic convivence of languages. We could speak, in light of this convivence, of an ecology of the polylogical, if indeed this is a matter of the interactions between the diverse logics that the languages stand for. But such a convivence of languages sets up, upon the foundation of unceasing translational activity, the necessary prerequisite of a convivence of people and, perhaps even more, of a coexistence of all humanity.

The draft of this model for the future from a Humboldtian science that has been developing since the 1790s proceeded from the linguistic constitution of all knowledge and did not restrict itself to the realm of science, whether at the level of linguistic philosophy, epistemology, or poetology. For both Wilhelm and Alexander von Humboldt were convinced that the world—and this shows Wilhelm's concept of *Weltansicht*—in all its complexity cannot be adequately taken in and understood from the standpoint of one single language. It was and is not possible, to achieve a multilogical understanding of the world in all its diversity without a multilingual approach toward a great variety of matters. The linguistic constitution of Humboldtian science demonstrates a fundamental challenge of this sort, not only for the bygone future of the 19th century, but for our own future even more.

## Commonality of Concepts, Commonality of Comprehension

The dissimilarity of the two brothers in their characters, and in their lifestyles as well—differences that can be clearly discerned in their iconography—repeatedly led to misunderstandings and disagreements between them. Wilhelm, then the Prussian ambassador to London and “deported” abroad by his opponents in post-Napoleonic Prussia, reported to his wife Caroline on December 3, 1817, on the occasion of a visit from his brother to the capital, that along with “the personal affection” that Alexander evoked, he also always brought “movement and liveliness into life.”<sup>14</sup> “But it remains forever true that it is painful to see how he has ceased to be German and has become Parisian to the smallest detail.”<sup>15</sup> Not without some admiration, he added that

---

14 *Gespräche Alexander von Humboldts*. Edited by Hanno Beck. Berlin: Akademie-Verlag 1959, p. 51.

15 *Ibid.*

Alexander certainly has “one of the most intriguing natures that there has ever been.”<sup>16</sup> Yet Wilhelm, who thought of himself and of his wife Caroline as representatives of a liberal patriotic Prussianism and who had recently been referred to as an “unconventional liberal,”<sup>17</sup> was disturbed by the worldly manners of his brother, long since an international celebrity, as much as he had objected to Alexander’s behavior during the Napoleonic occupation of Prussia, when Alexander, true to his science and its obligation to humanity, had stayed in Paris. For all of his life, Alexander remained out of reach of any sort of nationalistic discourse, to the point that even after his death, any attempt, even by the National Socialists, to exploit him for nationalist purposes was bound to fail.

Despite all legend-building to the contrary, this in no way changed the deep and mutual affection of the brothers. No, neither of the brothers tried to feed the other rat poison, as Daniel Kehlmann comically invented in an already nearly-forgotten bestseller, just as Alexander did not—in spite of a fairytale that every now and then begins to spread—cherish any sort of pedophilic practices.<sup>18</sup> However much they may have differed in habitus, speech, and lifestyle, or in certain political assessments—throughout their lives there is to be found copious evidence of an equal amount of intimacy, devotion, and affection, as well as mutual admiration for one another’s actions and personality.

When Alexander, about to embark upon a still-uncertain world voyage, took his leave of Paris, his parting glances were for his dear brother:

I looked at Bonpland, with whom I was to take such a long journey. What an assemblage! The public coach drove away. My eyes stayed on Wilhelm the longest. He looked very happy, which did me a great deal of good.<sup>19</sup>

He carried with him, among his measuring instruments, a faithful traveling companion, a “small Renard thermometer that Wilhelm had long possessed (and is therefore so dear to me).”<sup>20</sup> And when he finally arrived in the tropics he had longed for, he immediately wrote to his brother Wilhelm, on July 16, 1799, an enthusiastic letter<sup>21</sup> that can serve, as it were, as the key to the whole American journey. Later too, he sent his brother a great number of expressive letters in which, by the way, he happily underscored the dangers of his “adventure” in the tropics.<sup>22</sup>

But the two brothers were close not only in their feelings, but in their writings as well. After Wilhelm’s death, Alexander took meticulous care in the publication of his brother’s writings;

---

16 Ibid., p. 52.

17 Maurer, Michael: “Der unkonventionelle Wilhelm von Humboldt. Eine Erinnerung zu seinem 250. Geburtstag.” In: *Forschung & Lehre* (Bonn) XXIV, 6 (2017), pp. 490–493, here p. 493.

18 Kehlmann, Daniel: *Die Vermessung der Welt*. A novel. Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt 2005.

19 Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin – Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Handschriftenabteilung. Nachlass Alexander von Humboldt, Tagebücher der Amerikanischen Reise II and VI, fol. 52v. URL: <http://resolver.staatsbibliothek-berlin.de/SBB0001527300000108> (checked on 05/02/2018).

20 Ibid., I, fols. 10r–10v. URL: <http://resolver.staatsbibliothek-berlin.de/SBB0001527100000025>; <http://resolver.staatsbibliothek-berlin.de/SBB0001527100000026> (checked on 05/02/2018).

21 Letter from Alexander to Wilhelm from Cumaná, July 16, 1799. In: Humboldt, Alexander von: *Briefe aus Amerika 1799–1804*. Edited by Ulrike Moheit. Berlin: Akademie Verlag 1993, pp. 41–43.

22 In the same collection, see especially the letters no. 7, 11, 18, 35, 43, 51, 55, 62, 71, 79, 89, 111, 115, 134 and 142.

conversely, he had many years before appointed Wilhelm to edit a key portion of his own notes from America, whereby he trustingly added that Wilhelm would surely correct the style of his work.<sup>23</sup> Each knew the other's work, and each appreciated its value: throughout their creative biography, each maintained this mutual intellectual exchange.

Thus the Humboldt brothers worked—and this has often gone missing in the specialized individual depictions—in the most widely differing fields, yet intensively together throughout their lives. But did they have a common undertaking, a research project shared by both? Such a project may be distinguished with a look once again back to the year 1793, in which Wilhelm not only advanced as Alexander's epistemologist, but with explicit reference to his brother formulated that which may very well be understood to be the common program of research of both brothers.<sup>24</sup> In his letter of March 18, 1793 to Karl Gustav von Brinkmann, Wilhelm expressed it, not without pathos, in this manner:

A complete restoration of the sciences, and even more, of all human endeavors, has been needed for centuries, and the necessity grows with each year [...]. The most important step toward this restoration is to bring unity to all human striving, to show that this unity is the human person, indeed, the inner human person, and to describe to the human person how he affects everything beyond himself, and how everything beyond himself affects him, and from this, to depict the state of the human race, to conceptualize its possible revolutions, and to explain to the extent possible, its real ones.<sup>25</sup>

This program for the “restoration of the sciences,” certainly stated in terms that are anything but humble, is aimed with an anthropological orientation toward the unity of the human person more than that of the human race, on the foundation of an understanding, (not homogeneous and static, but dynamic, shaped by constant changes and revolutions) of that which should stand at the center of these natural *and* cultural sciences. To be sure, there are differences of orientation reflected here, but not a separation into those “Two Cultures” that would later be so persistently and obsessively projected upon the science of the Humboldt brothers. The phrase “how he affects everything beyond himself, and how everything beyond himself affects him,” which from today's viewpoint comes across as unmistakably ecological and based on interdependent relationships, cannot be divided into one part comprising “science of the humanities” and another comprising “natural sciences”; on the contrary, it leans much more toward that connective and binding formulation that Alexander found in his American travel journals: *Everything is interaction*. For the Humboldts, these interactions between human beings and the world in which they live, between human beings and the environment that has long since been changed by them, are a mutual weaving of relationships that should be investigated by both sciences. Alexander's *avant la lettre* geo-ecological patterns of thought belong to this early tradition.

---

23 Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin – Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Handschriftenabteilung. Nachlass Alexander von Humboldt, Tagebücher der Amerikanischen Reise VIII, fol. 167v. URL: <http://resolver.staatsbibliothek-berlin.de/SBB0001527B00000347> (checked on 05/02/2018).

24 C. f. Schmitter, Peter: “Zur Wissenschaftskonzeption Georg Forsters und dessen biographischen Bezügen zu den Brüdern Humboldt. Eine Vorstudie zum Verhältnis von ‘allgemeiner Naturgeschichte’, ‘physischer Weltbeschreibung’, und ‘allgemeiner Sprachkunde,’” p. 117 f.

25 Humboldt, Wilhelm von: Letter to Karl Gustav von Brinkmann of March 18, 1797. In: Humboldt, Wilhelm von: *Briefe*. Vol 2: July 1791–June 1798. Edited and with commentary by Phillip Mattson. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter 2015, p. 141.

The interactions between the brothers could, beyond a doubt, fuel an entire academic project and more. Beyond what has already been introduced, however, only a few more aspects can be mentioned here. Perhaps first among them is the perception shared by the brothers that science is an open process that can never be closed. It is true of the writings of both that they are characterized by a fundamental, occasionally almost radical open-endedness that forever marks them as a growing work in progress. Even though Alexander had a good quarter-century more to research, think, and write, this feature of open-endedness by no means applies only to Wilhelm, but to his younger brother as well: for the Humboldts, everything is in motion, opening out upon something yet to come, for which all things seek to clear the way. The fundamental open-endedness of their works is of a nature that is not epidemic, but epistemic.

In a series of lectures and essays, Jürgen Trabant brought attention to the close collaboration of the Humboldts in the area of linguistics, and in a recent publication, Trabant marked the third of August, 1804 (the day upon which Aimé Bonpland and Alexander von Humboldt returned to Europe) as an especially significant date in the history of science: for this day was “after the Leibniz birth announcement of 1765, the second birth of European philology.”<sup>26</sup> Not being able at this point to go into detail about the results of this study, it is nonetheless clear that the collaboration in the linguistic realm is by no means restricted to Alexander’s collecting of indigenous languages and his compilation of their grammars, but is of a much more substantial nature.

The materials selected and compiled by Alexander, by means of the collaboration that arose from them, would elicit in equal measure “a completely new direction in *historical* comparative linguistics” and “a post-Leibniz, newly-founded *anthropological* comparative linguistics,”<sup>27</sup> and they induced Wilhelm to begin writing his (admittedly never-finished) book on the American languages that was to go with Alexander’s travel account. It would be tackled in 1812 as the *Essai sur les langues du Nouveau Continent*.<sup>28</sup> When Wilhelm did not deliver, Alexander felt himself competent enough as a linguist<sup>29</sup> to take over the task. The two maintained a very close exchange; for Alexander, too, the topic of indigenous languages was of highest importance, such that it simply could not be missing from his American travel account.

From Wilhelm’s *Essai sur les langues du Nouveau Continent* for Alexander, a direct, if intricate path leads to Wilhelm’s primary work in the philosophy of language, his famous introduction in the *Kawi-Werk* with the title *On the Diversity of Human Language Structure* (1836). Once more, diversity, differences, and variety stand at the forefront of the scientific work in all searches for unity. Without a doubt, Wilhelm’s studies of the indigenous American languages played

---

26 Trabant, Jürgen: “Der Himmel, das Haus, das Gold, der gute Mann und das Nichts. Die amerikanischen Sprachen und das Weltbewusstsein der anderen Moderne.” In: Buschmann, Albrecht / Drews, Julian / Kraft, Tobias / Kraume, Anne / Messling, Markus / Müller, Gesine (Eds.): *Literatur leben. Festschrift für Ottmar Ette*. Madrid – Frankfurt am Main: Iberoamericana – Vervuert 2016, pp. 267–280, here p. 271.

27 Ibid., p. 272.

28 Ibid.

29 See Trabant, Jürgen: “Alexander von Humboldt als Linguist.” In: Ette, Ottmar: *Alexander von Humboldt Handbuch*. Stuttgart: J. B. Metzler 2018, (in print). See also Borsche, Tilman: “Die Sprache als Medium (des menschlichen In-der-Welt-Seins).” In: Messling, Markus / Tintemann, Ute (Eds.): *Der Mensch ist nur Mensch durch Sprache. Zur Sprachlichkeit des Menschen*. München: W. Fink Verlag 2009, pp. 69–77.

a significant role “in the emergence of a linguistic science of human thought and thereby in the development of the world-consciousness of the modern age” in general.<sup>30</sup> That the developments summarized in all brevity here are an important part of the payoff of that scientific program that Wilhelm had formulated in close cooperation with Alexander in 1793 is obvious.

Many of the concepts of the two Humboldts reference one another, or at least stand in a close mutual relationship. Thus the concept of the *Naturgemälde* (“nature portrait”) for Alexander can very well be brought into connection with the concept of the *Totaleindruck* (“overall impression”—of languages, for instance) as used by Wilhelm, should the *Naturgemälde* develop one of the ideas inherited from pasigraphy, of a quasi-simultaneous synopsis of a high number of diverse phenomena. It is committed to the attempt to present to the senses, and to render accessible as an impression, a complex body of insights and results of research *at a glance*.

Since Alexander, in his *Tableau physique des Andes et des pays voisins*, for instance, emphasized the aesthetic dimensions of knowledge in the artistic realization of his *Naturgemälde* no less than the results of his research in the areas of agrarian economy or anthropology, geography or geology, ecology or economics, plant geography or vulcanology, we can speak here of a highly elaborated dimension of transdisciplinarity and transmediality that distinguishes Humboldtian science in the interplay of word and picture, of literary and scientific expressiveness, as a science for which the *Totaleindruck* is important. Here at a glance is shown how everything is interaction.

For neither Wilhelm nor Alexander is it a matter of the attainment of an extensive but static picture, but rather, of the gradual development of a dynamic in a manner that corresponds to the concepts of both brothers. Just as in Alexander’s *Naturgemälde der Tropenländer* (“nature portrait of the tropics”) *everything*—from the geology of drifting continents to the migration of plants, the changing snowlines and climatological circumstances, and on to vulcanology and zoology—is in motion, so too does the principle of *energeia* in Wilhelm’s science prove to be the fundamental driving force of linguistic processes, but also in public law and in the governmental constitution of communities. For Wilhelm, it is always about activity, about a force that dynamically advances and alters, just as for Alexander, it was about the dynamism and vectoricity of all knowledge and thus a *knowledge from out of movement*. Thus a nearness and occasionally a commonality of the concepts of both brothers may be established that indicates a commonality of understanding. In this, the baselines of a Humboldtian science also emerge in this area, baselines that can be true not only for Alexander, but for both brothers.

## On Globality: Prussia and the World

In the case of the Humboldts, the thought of unity specifically does not rest on thoughts of uniformity or homogeneity, but on the variety and diversity that are forever in a state of interaction with one another. In order to be able to chart these interactions, there is a particularly unavoidable need for a science that strives toward surveying the entire planet, and thus also strives toward globality and totality. Alexander included this globality in the *summa* of his *Kosmos* by means of a complex relationality in which the Earth is set within an interplay of a

---

30 Trabant, Jürgen: “Der Himmel, das Haus, das Gold, der gute Mann und das Nichts. Die amerikanischen Sprachen und das Weltbewusstsein der anderen Moderne,” p. 273.

cosmic scale: “Heaven and Earth and all creation”<sup>31</sup> were all to be encompassed. Such a program of research was surely not a modest one, not least because it incorporated a study of the Earth from the integrated view of a great variety of disciplines, a great variety of the logics of knowledge, including those of the arts. On Earth, it was not without reason that Alexander, on the foundation of long decades of historiographic study, would become the first global theorist, whereby his insights into not only the phases of acceleration, but also into the interruptions of accelerated globalization, would be for us today—after the end of the fourth phase of accelerated globalization—of enormous significance.

Likewise, in Wilhelm’s undertaking to investigate the “diversity of human language structure,” the global dimension must not be omitted. For only the *globality* of a comparative examination could guarantee that one would truly be in a position to speak with authority, in a general and, as much as possible, generally accepted manner, about the structure and dynamics of human languages. The planetary recording of geomagnetism put forth by Alexander or the delineation of his globe-encompassing isotherms are thus closely related, in both principle and function, to Wilhelm’s investigations in the philosophy and analysis of language. Humboldtian science is a world science that builds upon a constantly growing world consciousness.

The stylization of Alexander as a “natural scientist” belonged to a very comfortable, but quite certainly unsustainable undertaking that sought to divide the sciences. Humboldtian science shows—whether we relate it only to Alexander or if, as is happening here, we also include Wilhelm—that there is a unity of the sciences and of science that was here pursued and practiced. If one wished to speak of a certain complementarity in the scientific activities of Wilhelm and Alexander, it is certainly not that complementarity that customarily separates the “natural sciences” on one side from the “humanities” on the other. It is thus not a matter of the complementarity of two differing realms, ostensibly foreign to one another, but of the rewards of the basic axiom of Humboldtian science, whereby everything rests upon interaction—including an examination of the interaction between the human person and the environment, “how he affects everything outside of himself, and how everything outside of himself affects him.”<sup>32</sup> The complementarity of the two Humboldt brothers—if we really want to talk about a complementarity—lies, as regards their conceptions, around that complex cross-section of sciences and, even more, of scientific organization that, in the thesis of the “Two Cultures,” is misapplied as a bisection. Here again, Humboldtian science shows itself to be an *energeia* that moves across borders, a science born of movement.

All of this is also true of the two Humboldts’ other fields of endeavor. It cannot be the case that the one brother, as the Prussian statesman and diplomat, should be perceived as the “actual” Prussian, while the other is given the stamp of “world-traveler” and “citizen of the world,” while at the same time, he is excluded and—as may often be observed still today—expatriated from Prussia. Wilhelm, through his numerous journeys, such as those to the Iberian region, and his assignments abroad in Paris, Vienna, Rome, London and other places, became familiar with large portions of Europe, which provided him with a formidable insight into the inherent structure and, even more, the future possibilities of his own country. And Alexander in turn, in addition to his many travels within Europe that took him to the North, South, East, and West of the

---

31 *Briefe von Alexander von Humboldt an Varnhagen von Ense aus den Jahren 1827 bis 1858*. With excerpts from Varnhagen’s journals and with letters from Varnhagen and others to Humboldt. [Edited by Ludmilla Assing.] Leipzig: F. A. Brockhaus 1860, p. 22.

32 Humboldt, Wilhelm von: *Briefe an Karl Gustav von Brinkmann*, p. 141.

continent, had completed two great transcontinental journeys that allowed him to view Europe not just from the intra-European perspective, but from the non-European perspective as well.

It may be said of both brothers that, as *mobile* Prussians, they understood Prussia as a *mobile* (as in sculpture), and recognized, far better than did most of their contemporaries, the degree to which, on both the collective and individual levels, the multitude of backgrounds—one should recall that they themselves came from the lines of tradition of a Huguenot family—fundamentally expanded the multitude of futures. Was one “more Prussian” than the other? The absurdity of the question makes any answer unnecessary. We have long since reached the point where Prussia should be considered not so much as a territory and a territorial state with clearly determined borders, but as the result of movements, migrations, and dynamics that first created this space as a *movement*-space. For every space—be it the space of cultures, languages, or states—is brought forth from out of the movements that traverse it.

Beyond a doubt, Wilhelm was Prussia’s leading political figure for education and science. He knew the power that comes with knowledge. As the visionary, head, and fellow-founder of the Berlin University, he completed the work that he had begun with his activities involving instruction at a wide variety of levels. That the model of “his” university was to become the exemplar not only for the German-speaking realm, but for the realm throughout and beyond Europe, is both undisputed and indisputable. It stood, and stands, for the unity and freedom of research and teaching.

At the current point in time, a time of extensively advanced dismantling and destruction of the Humboldtian University, one might well ask if it is not high time to develop a Humboldtian university of *both* brothers, considering that Alexander had indeed also dealt intensively with questions of education, had founded, at his own expense, a school for the children of miners, had regularly investigated the political dimensions of education in the countries he had visited and had opened up (and not only in his *Kosmos*) fields of inquiry in the realms of knowledge and the sciences that are still of great relevance to our time. To Wilhelm’s Humboldtian university should be added Alexander’s Humboldtian university, a university that, characteristic of its transdisciplinary and, at the same time, transcultural orientation that traverses the widest variety of areas, opens itself to a world that is aware of its own history of movement and seeks to live in peace and diversity. A university that comes forth from the *critical convivence* of languages.

Alexander’s Humboldtian science is without question a *Lebenswissenschaft*, a science of life—not merely in the restricted sense of the medical-technical ensemble of subjects in the “Life Sciences,” but cognizant of the fact that *bios* always includes the cultural dimension of life as well. In the wide variety of disciplines from anthropology to zoology, from biology to chemistry, from scientific history to ancient American studies, Alexander was always on the trail of life.

But the questions regarding the norms and possible forms of life and of living together were not posed only by Alexander. Wilhelm’s entire life and particularly his widely various and self-sacrificing activities in service of the state were characterized by the question of how it is that we wish to live together, and how it is that we can be able to live together. Convivence can thus be seen as a key concept, both within and outside of the Humboldtian university. The two brothers were one in the firm conviction that political decisions may only be discussed and reached responsibly in the light of established scientific knowledge. It is important to remember this, in a time when it seems to have become ominously possible that scientifically established knowledge, persistently collected over decades—as in climate research, for

instance—can be set aside with a few populist statements. The occasionally quite intelligent fabrication of stupidity shows that the principles of an ethical foundation of science have lost none of their importance and urgency.

Wilhelm not only shaped the modern structure of the university, which would be made complete by Alexander's world-conscious structuring of concepts, but also shaped the conception of a museum landscape, the first flagship of which he hoped would have Alexander as its founding director. When Wilhelm's urgent inquiry reached him, Alexander was outside the borders of Europe on his second transcontinental journey, his Russian-Siberian research expedition. His reply from the depths of the Tsar's empire came—as was almost always the case in his correspondence with Wilhelm—in French, and as if shot from a pistol: he had not left Paris to become the director of a picture gallery in Berlin. He would rather turn his back on Prussia again than to let himself be pressed into service as a committee chairman, a director, or a president.<sup>33</sup> Unlike Wilhelm—who in his Caroline had by his side a woman who, much like Rahel Varnhagen, was one of the most impressive women of the 19th century—Alexander was a confirmed nomad.

But Alexander had worked with museums in Paris and Rome, and in Mexico as well. And the scientific landscape in Berlin was for him, as for Wilhelm, a matter of the heart. Let us not forget that it was Alexander who sought to realize, one after another, Wilhelm's high-flying notions and plans with a view specifically to Berlin as a center of science; and who succeeded in equipping the Prussian capital—as Eberhard Knobloch has convincingly shown<sup>34</sup>—with the world's leading scientific institutions and scholars, such that Berlin might someday possess “the first observatory, the first chemical institution, the first botanical garden, the first school of transcendental mathematics.”<sup>35</sup> And let us also not forget that after Wilhelm's death in 1835, Alexander, with a changed perspective influenced by his transareal world consciousness, played an active role in the shaping of the Berlin museum landscape, orienting the Museum Island toward the collection of the totality of world cultures.<sup>36</sup> With a look to his brother, the direction

---

33 C. f. Ette, Ottmar: “Die Aktualität Alexander von Humboldts. Perspektiven eines Vordenkers für das 21. Jahrhundert.” In: Valentin, Jean-Marie (ed.): *Alexander von Humboldt. 150e anniversaire de sa mort. Sorbonne 23–24 octobre 2009. Special edition of Études Germaniques (Paris) LXVI, 1 (janvier – mars 2011)*, pp. 123–138, here pp. 124 and 129.

34 See (i. a.) Knobloch, Eberhard: “Es wäre mir unmöglich nur ein halbes Jahr so zu leben wie er: Encke, Humboldt und was wir schon immer über die neue Berliner Sternwarte wissen wollten.” In: Hamel, Jürgen, Knobloch, Eberhard / Pieper, Herbert (eds.): *Alexander von Humboldt in Berlin. Sein Einfluß auf die Entwicklung der Wissenschaften. Beiträge zu einem Symposium*. Augsburg: ERV 2003, pp. 27–57. See also Biermann, Kurt-R. / Schwarz, Ingo: “‘Moralische Sandwüste und blühende Kartoffelfelder’ – Humboldt, ein Weltbürger in Berlin.” In: *Alexander von Humboldt – Netzwerke des Wissens*. Catalog for the Exhibition in the Haus der Kulturen der Welt (Berlin) from June 6 through August 15, 1999 and in the Kunst- und Ausstellungshalle der Bundesrepublik Deutschland (Bonn) from September 15, 1999 to January 9, 2000. Bonn: Kunst- und Ausstellungshalle der Bundesrepublik Deutschland 1999, pp. 183–200.

35 This is in regard to a letter that dates from before April 12, 1829 from Humboldt to Spiker; c. f. Humboldt, Alexander von: *Briefwechsel mit Samuel Heinrich Spiker*. Edited by Ingo Schwarz. Berlin: Akademie Verlag 2007, p. 62 f.

36 See Bredekamp, Horst: “Der lange Atem der Kunstammer: das Neue Museum als Avantgarde der Vorvergangenheit.” In: Bergvelt, Ellinoor / Wezel, Elsa van (eds.): *Museale Spezialisierung und Nationalisierung ab 1830. Das Neue Museum in Berlin im internationalen Kontext. / Specialisation and Consolidation of the National Museum after 1830. The Neue Museum in Berlin in an International Context*. Berlin: G + H Verlag 2011, pp. 2536, here p. 33.

taken by Alexander seems to me neither contrary nor, in a negative sense, complementary; in the consciousness of its groundbreaking effect for the “human race” it is—despite any differences—very much in the same spirit.

To be sure, the differences between the approaches of the two brothers in terms of a varied accentuation within their Humboldtian science can be sharply delineated. The considerations presented here have not been a matter of constructing a homogenous unity, free from contradiction and based upon the foundation of a common origin, a shared brotherly genealogy. Beyond this genealogical connection, but also beyond any mythologizing talk of the Dioscuri, which has never yet contributed anything to the understanding of the brotherly pair, it is of decisive importance here to work out comprehensibly the fundamental epistemic overlappings and, even more, the epistemological challenges. The 250th birthday of Wilhelm von Humboldt is a welcome occasion for this.

For above all, Wilhelm and Alexander von Humboldt call for the challenge, the commitment, and the impulse to carry the brothers’ work into the 21st century. The two brothers were not a pair of opposites: the nomadic knowledge of the younger did not stand in opposition to the monadic knowledge of the elder. Neither nature nor spirit separated them. The task of thinking simultaneously of two brothers in one Humboldtian science will only succeed if we investigate Wilhelm’s and Alexander’s writings in their historical contextualization in a radical manner that scrutinizes their roots.

When Goethe, during his conversation with Eckermann on January 31, 1827, in a polemic against the emerging concept of a national literature, demanded that “it is time for the epoch of world literature,”<sup>37</sup> he did not mean by this a concept that transcends time, but simply an epoch, one that has its beginning and end. In the place of a single world literature, the literatures of the world have long since stepped forward which, in their inherent multilingualism and translatability, not only maintain the knowledge of humanity like no other discursive form, but continually develop it further, across the millennia, across cultures, and across languages.

The multilogical structures of the languages of the world, and of the literatures of the world, show us the possible forms and norms of a life set simultaneously within diverse logics. Co-existence with human beings of diverse origins, but also with the gods, the animals, and the plants of all of nature, coexistence as we have known it since the *Gilgamesh Epic* or the *Shijing*, points the way to a convivence that must stand at the heart of a Humboldt forum. Beyond thinking in the dialogic, which degenerates all too easily into an alteritization (an *othering*) of the other, who in turn is inferiorized and embattled, it becomes a matter of a *Weiter-Denken*, “thinking further,” of an epistemology of expansion that does not dissipate on ever-changing fronts. Today, more urgently than ever, we need forums of the multilogical: schools and laboratories in which we learn to think in various logics at once. Humboldtian science is, in the fullest sense, a life science: it asks about life from out of a multitude of cultures, languages, and forms of life. It poses the question of convivence, of living together in a community, a country, a union of countries, and on a world-wide scale. We could call this an *Ecology of the Polylogical*. But above all, we could learn from a formulation that has been carried out here that puts nothing in first position and gets along without any sort of hierarchizing: *Everything is interaction*.

---

37 Eckermann, Johann Peter: *Gespräche mit Goethe in den letzten Jahren seines Lebens*. Edited by Fritz Bergemann. Vol. I. Frankfurt am Main: Insel Verlag 1981, p. 211.