

dispositio

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Nos. 42-43

CROSSING THE ATLANTIC:
TRAVEL LITERATURE AND THE PERCEPTION OF THE OTHER

Guest Editors: Ottmar Ette and Andrea Pagni

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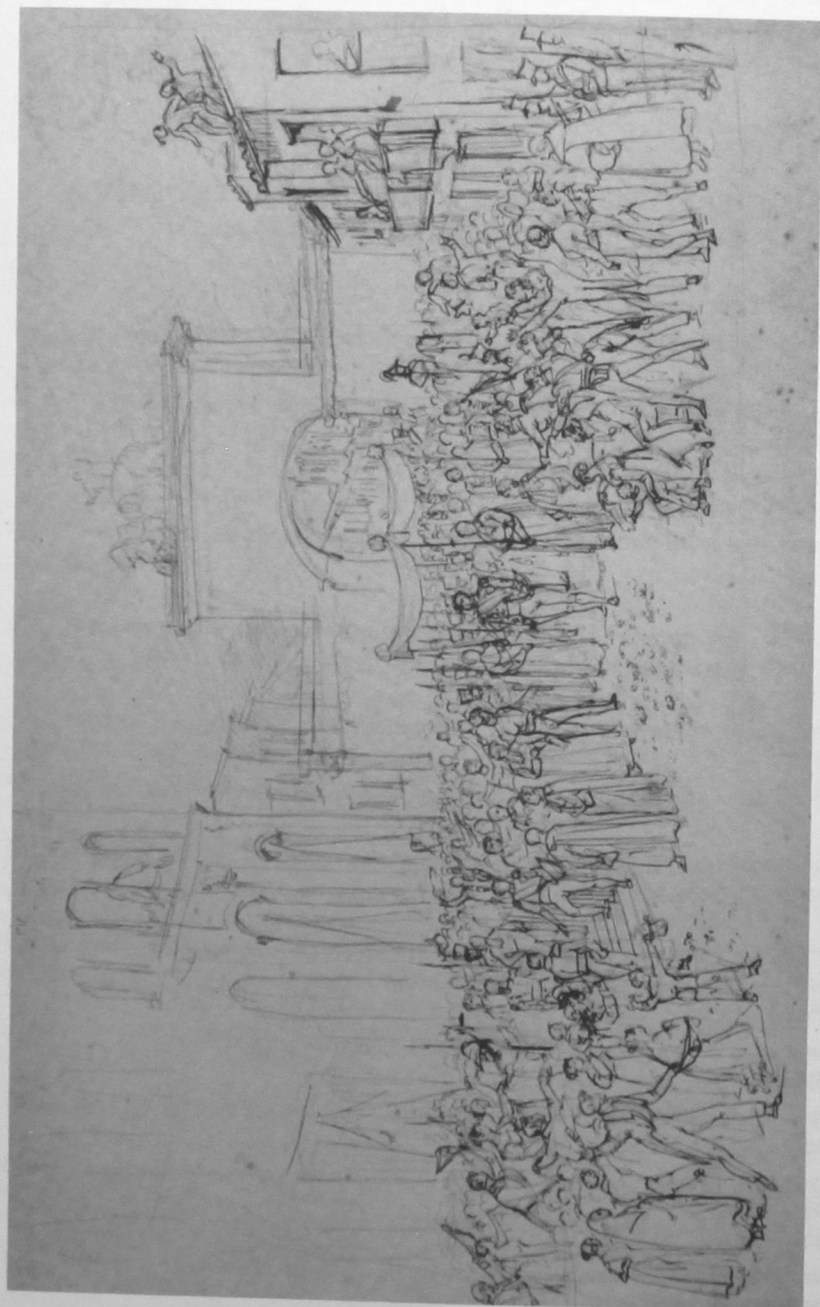


Figura 1.

Coronación de Pedro I, 1822. Lápiz y tinta sobre papel, 23 x 36,9 cm. Biblioteca Municipal de São Paulo, inv. núm. SP 04.

INTRODUCCION

Andrea Pagni / Ottmar Ette

Hoy en día es posible *cruzar el Atlántico* en menos de veinticuatro horas. Para los viajeros cuyos textos serán discutidos en este número, partir de Europa hacia América o de América hacia Europa conllevaba necesariamente un alejamiento prolongado de sus territorios, en razón de las condiciones mismas del traslado. Benzoni, por ejemplo, viajó por América durante quince años, Rugendas casi veinte, Fray Servando deambuló por Europa veintiún años; y aun aquellos viajeros cuyas estadías fueron más breves, como Léry o Sarmiento, permanecieron más de un año en tierras de ultramar. Para quienes viajaban, desde el siglo XVI hasta fines del siglo XIX, la experiencia del viaje y la estadía en el mundo del otro, que constituyen el criterio autorizante de la escritura de los viajeros, formaban parte de proyectos de vida.

Retomando la idea de Lévi-Strauss, formulada en sus "Tristes Tropiques", de que los viajes se desarrollan por lo menos en cinco dimensiones, podemos constatar, para los viajeros europeos y americanos, un desplazamiento a través de las tres dimensiones del espacio: en superficie, ante todo y obviamente, de un lado al otro del Atlántico—el océano como frontera hace imposible la contigüidad que propicia el contacto y la mezcla—, y en la tercera dimensión, por ejemplo en el ascenso de Humboldt al Chimborazo, que implica una nueva perspectivización; un desplazamiento también en la cuarta dimensión, la del tiempo—o mejor dicho los diferentes tiempos— que articulan por ejemplo las reflexiones de Du Tertre sobre el "bon sauvage", o las de Sarmiento sobre los paisajes históricos del Sena, y un desplazamiento en la quinta dimensión, la de las relativas jerarquías sociales por las que se mueve el viajero, como en el caso de Flora Tristan en Perú, o de los emigrantes alemanes en los Estados Unidos. En

todos los casos, estos desplazamientos están marcados por una discontinuidad de la que el Atlántico da, a nivel espacial, una imagen.

Se estudian en este volumen textos de viajeros europeos que efectuaron viajes llamados de descubrimiento, como Colón, o que viajaron por motivos políticos en misiones oficiales, como Stedman o Azara, o por razones religiosas, como Léry, Cobo o Du Tertre, textos de viajeros guiados también por intereses comerciales particulares—como Carletti o Isabelle—, o científicos—como Humboldt o Martin de Moussy. Los viajeros americanos viajan llevados por otros motivos: el destierro y la persecución por parte de las autoridades coloniales en el caso de Fray Servando Teresa de Mier, el estudio de las instituciones europeas en Sarmiento y Alberdi, o el placer del viaje a los “centros de la cultura” en Cané y López.

Si cruzar el Atlántico constituye una experiencia multidimensional, la escritura de esa experiencia no es por cierto menos polifacética. Así se discuten en este volumen dedicado a la *literatura de viajes* textos tan disímiles como las cartas de los emigrantes alemanes del siglo XIX, el diario de Alberdi, las narraciones retrospectivas del viaje de Léry, de la expedición de Stedman, o de las peregrinaciones de Flora Tristan, las memorias de Fray Servando, las historias del nuevo mundo de Benzoni y Cobo, la de las Antillas de Du Tertre, o la descripción geográfica de la Confederación Argentina de Martin de Moussy. Y agreguemos a la clasificación de Lévi-Strauss una sexta dimensión, la de la imaginación, presente en todos los textos aquí discutidos, y privilegiada en los viajes imaginarios de Gulliver.

Si esta amplia concepción del género permite incluir tantos tipos distintos de textos, también abre la noción misma de texto incorporando aspectos no-escriturales, que muchas veces están a la base de la traducción de la experiencia del viaje al relato. Así, por ejemplo, la relación entre oralidad y escritura en la transmisión del modelo cultural del “matrimonio surinamés”; la “*histoire des petites gens*” en las cartas de los emigrantes alemanes; la tensión entre imagen y texto en el “umbral” de las distintas ediciones de Swift, o la representación pictórica del viaje de Rugendas, cuyos bocetos y óleos aquí presentados son en gran parte inéditos.

La literatura del viaje elabora siempre una *percepción del otro*. Todas las contribuciones reunidas en este volumen aluden a esa estructura fundamental. La discusión sobre alteridad es, como señalara Rolena Adorno en un número anterior de *Dispositio*, “fashionable”. Se caracteriza por el hecho de que el otro lo es, por regla general, respecto del sujeto hegemónico, y esto fija una perspectiva, marca el contexto para la definición de la identidad del otro. El pronombre indefinido pierde su calidad de tal. Con intención incluimos estudios sobre viajeros americanos, para quienes los otros son los europeos. Pero la fórmula “percepción del otro”, aun en la versión generalizada, es ambigua: “del otro” puede ser un genitivo objetivo—el otro como objeto de la percepción—o un genitivo subjetivo—el otro como sujeto que percibe y articula su propio discurso.

Si la experiencia del viaje, como aparece elaborada en los textos que se estudian a continuación, consiste siempre en alejarse de un territorio propio y tomar contacto con un mundo ajeno, los viajeros americanos y los viajeros europeos construyen a través de esa experiencia espacios culturales diferentes, en los que lo ajeno adquiere su lugar transformándose, por aceptación, por rechazo, por apropiación, por proyección, en una dimensión de lo propio. En este sentido, la relación entre los espacios culturales que simplificando podemos llamar americano y europeo, está marcada por la experiencia colonial. Este hecho conlleva la asimetría de ambos espacios culturales, debida a la expansión de un sistema cultural y la marginalización de otros. En consecuencia, las modalidades y los grados de apropiación de lo ajeno y su transformación—y reinterpretación—en lo propio son significativamente distintos en el caso de los viajeros europeos a América y de los americanos a Europa. Más allá de los límites cronológicos de la colonia, y más allá del siglo XIX, esta asimetría no ha dejado de tener validez. Nos proponemos indagar, en otra oportunidad, el carácter de esa relación y las consiguientes construcciones de espacios culturales a partir de textos de viajeros del siglo XX.

La idea de este número de *Dispositio* nació con motivo de un viaje transatlántico—o de varios. Compuesto en Europa, el volumen es editado en América. Los editores provenimos de uno y otro lado del Atlántico, y así también los contribuyentes: americanos residentes en América y Europa, europeos residentes en Europa y en América. Los colaboradores son especialistas en literaturas románicas, anglosajonas y germánicas, en teoría literaria, historia americana e historia del arte. Si sus objetos de estudio y sus enfoques son variados, el conjunto de los artículos aquí reunidos puede leerse como una imagen caleidoscópica que, sin la pretensión de ser representativa, reúne distintas aproximaciones a los procesos culturales vinculados con la producción de los relatos de viaje hasta fines del siglo XIX.

Volvamos una última vez, invirtiendo la *dispositio* propuesta en el título del volumen, al cruce del Atlántico. Casi todos los viajeros cuyos textos se presentan a continuación, regresaron. Pero el viajero nunca vuelve al lugar de donde partió. Marcada por la experiencia del viaje, la vuelta da pie a una redefinición de lo propio que puede tener, por cierto, matices muy variados. En muchas ocasiones es justamente el regreso el que hace posible la elaboración del relato, la representación que simula la experiencia del viaje construyendo en la escritura una versión del otro. Esa versión es producto de una o de muchas lecturas. Viajar es también un modo de leer, de producirle sentido al mundo del otro. Pero a su vez leer es, con buena disposición para hacerlo, también un modo de viajar. Los colaboradores de este volumen, lectores de relatos de viaje, construyeron también, viajeros en sus lecturas, sus versiones de los textos recorridos. Invitamos pues a los lectores de *Dispositio* a embarcarse en un nuevo viaje transatlántico, a leer las lecturas de los lectores de los viajeros que a su vez leyeron..., a incorporarse al proceso de construcción de sentido en el cruce cultural transatlántico.



Figura 2.

Recolección del café, hacia 1822. Lápiz sobre papel, 20,5 x 29,5 cm. Col. H. Weiszflög, São Paulo.

TRANSATLANTIC PERCEPTIONS:
A CONTRASTIVE READING OF THE TRAVELS
OF ALEXANDER VON HUMBOLDT AND
FRAY SERVANDO TERESA DE MIER

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In the novel *El mundo alucinante* published in Mexico in 1969 by the Cuban writer Reinaldo Arenas, Fray Servando Teresa de Mier, after endless persecutions, imprisonments and attempts to escape, meets the young Alexander von Humboldt, "el plato fuerte del salón" (Arenas 1981: 144), in the Parisian salons. During a night-time drive through Paris in the Prussian's carriage the two of them, the European and the Latin American, together reconstruct the regions of America that are for one the location of a long dreamed-of voyage of exploration, for the other his home, a home taking on new contours from the perspective of exile. Walking through Paris and later in the "Baron's" castle, in whose garden Fray Servando is surprised to find "chillidos, silbidos, piales, graznidos de aves americanas que no pensé oír jamás" (Arenas 1981: 145), the two of them work each other up, despite the cold European climate, into a passion ("pasión") for the distant tropics. More or less as a by-product there are scientific insights, too, since the Dominican monk provides from memory additional recent data for Humboldt's *Essai politique sur le Royaume de la Nouvelle-Espagne*. On taking leave of Humboldt, Fray Servando ponders his relationship to America:

Pienso en América como en algo demasiado querido para que sea verdadero. Y algunas veces me pregunto si será verdad que existe.
(Arenas 1981: 148)

This meeting between Fray Servando Teresa de Mier and Alexander von Humboldt, which in the novel is said to have taken place during the Mexican's first stay in Paris in 1801, is fictitious. Nevertheless it was not pure invention on Arenas' part since Artemio de Valle-Arizpe (1951: 95), in his somewhat yarn-spinning biography, had already dated the beginning of a close friendship between Mier and Humboldt to this very year. His reasons for doing so are probably attributable to Fray Servando himself, who cited in his so-called "Memoirs" a conversation with Humboldt in Paris (Mier 1946, II: 45); however, any such conversation could not in fact have taken place until after the publication of Mier's *Historia de la Revolución de Nueva España* in 1813. In 1801 Humboldt was, as can be clearly established, still on his travels in South America, which means that the only conceivable date for a meeting in Paris would be the year 1814, in which Fray Servando was admitted as a member of the "Institut National" and when Humboldt was in Paris¹ for the publication there of the first volume of his *Relation historique du Voyage aux Régions équinoxiales du Nouveau Continent*.

The problem is that nearly all the information on Mier's stay in Europe comes from Mier himself; if he is to be believed, it can probably be assumed that a meeting did take place between him and Humboldt in Paris, but as yet reliable confirmation has not been found.² What is certain is that the two of them moved in similar circles—albeit mainly at different times—in Paris and Madrid and that each had made contact with a number of the same people.

The uncertainty as to whether or not the meeting between Mier and Humboldt ever took place does not, however, prevent us from linking these truly different travellers and their travels since the writings the two of them left behind paint a picture—albeit each with its own perspective and aim—of the respective *different* world. What we shall concern ourselves with in the following is the way in which this *differentness* or *otherness* is explained and treated in literary form as well as how it is communicated to the readers what the respective author had in mind. Whereas Alexander von Humboldt was quickly acclaimed on both sides of the Atlantic as the "rediscoverer of America" and a "second Columbus," Fray Servando's travels and writings have remained unknown in Europe and are even today, despite the efforts of, for example, Alfonso Reyes (1956a; b; c) or José Lezama Lima (1969), likely still to be only marginal in Latin America and known only in specialist circles. Our present concern is to look at the strategies and reactions in dealing with "otherness" at the turn of the 19th century, a time that was so decisive for both Latin America and Europe, in the hope of shedding light on the perspectives and aims of the encounter between Europe and Latin America. This brief appraisal centers on Humboldt's *Relation historique* and Fray Servando's *Memorias*, especially on his *Relación*.

* * *

When Alexander von Humboldt (1769–1859) set sail for the "New World" from La Coruña on 5 June 1799, a long period of intensive and extensive

preparation lay behind him. In the first chapter of his *Relation historique* he remarks:

Ma position individuelle ne me permettant pas d'exécuter alors des projets qui occupaient si vivement mon esprit, j'eus le loisir de me préparer pendant six ans aux observations que je devois faire dans le nouveau continent, de parcourir différentes parties de l'Europe, et d'étudier cette haute chaîne des Alpes, dont j'ai pu dans la suite comparer la structure à celle des Andes de Quito et du Pérou. (Humboldt 1970, I: 41)

What comes out clearly here is how his preparatory studies in Europe provide the key to comparing different countries. The experience and knowledge gained in Europe will enable him to interpret and categorize the new phenomena investigated in America. In this respect the judgement of the most eminent Humboldt scholar, the editor of many of his works and his biographer, is presumably to be trusted:

Whereas constant delays drove him almost to desperation, fate was kind to him in that it demanded a form of scientific preparation hitherto not required of any explorer. (Beck 1985: 96; in italics in the original)

When he set out on his expedition, Humboldt was up to date in his knowledge of the latest research and the instruments he took with him. Furthermore, although he was not travelling on government service as had been the rule in the 18th century, but as a private person paying his own way, the Spanish government had granted him far-reaching plenary powers and liberties,³ which allowed his financially secure research the necessary scope and gave him access to archives, libraries, etc., in the colonies. Humboldt, who was gradually making a name for himself in European research circles, in addition succeeded in gaining "publicity" for his journey of exploration by skilful international public relations efforts (Beck 1985: 140-42).

The extremely positive acclaim accorded to his expedition was furthered by the fact that a veritable intoxication with the South Seas⁴ had broken out among the German public, which, although not initiated by Georg Forster's *Reise um die Welt*, was nevertheless increased by it. The great fascination of this work is certainly to be linked—as Humboldt also felt—with its author's power of expression since Forster can probably be regarded as the actual creator of the artistic travel description in the German language.⁵ Humboldt, who on his own admission was himself first taken with wanderlust as a result of Forster's descriptions of Tahiti, could not fail to recognize this huge demand among the reading public from the additional fact that a work entitled *Reise um die Welt und in Südamerika*—the title in itself was revealing—had been published in six volumes in Hamburg under his own name; in it newspaper reports of his travels

and extracts from his first public lectures had been compiled into a non-authorized travel description from which Humboldt indignantly distanced himself in the first chapter of the *Relation historique* (1970, I: 40).

At the center of the multifarious utilizations of Humboldt's voyage is the thirty-six volume *Voyage aux Régions équinoxiales du Nouveau Continent* published between 1805 and 1834, "... the greatest private travel work in history,"⁶ the central part of which is the *Relation historique*, with which, without excluding other works, I wish to concern myself primarily in the following.

The *Relation*, containing the so-called account of the journey in chronological order, was published in Paris between 1814 and 1825 in an extremely expensive edition whose price and small number of copies certainly prevented its widespread dissemination even though Humboldt succeeded in making the results of his travels accessible to a wider public through both lectures and other publications. Admittedly, this account is neither complete (H. Beck [1985] has repeatedly pointed this weakness out and recently tried to make up for it with a comprehensive presentation of the "American Journey") nor does it offer a strictly ordered continuous narrative, a fact that has always been criticized and which Humboldt's friend Arago had, albeit in a different context, already pointed out:

Humboldt, tu ne sais pas comment se compose un livre; tu écris sans fin; mais ce n'est pas là un livre, c'est un portrait sans cadre.⁷

As Hans Blumenberg (1983: 285) points out, the fragmentation to be found throughout Humboldt's works right down to his *Kosmos*, a gigantic and perhaps final attempt to offer a comprehensive and all-combining presentation of nature in a single volume, can justifiably be associated with the "pathos of the fragment" and, in the last analysis, with a "Romanticism that extends into the conception of the 'cosmos'." Our present concern, however, is to take a closer look at the frequent excursions, digressions and interpolated treatises which often disorient the reader.

Hardly has he set sail from Spain with the reader than the author begs him in the first chapter of the *Relation* to bear with a first lengthy excursus on the ocean current that makes itself felt between the Azores, the Portuguese coast and the Canary Islands (1970, I: 64ff.). Then follows first of all a lengthy refutation of the theory that this current flowing in the direction of the Straits of Gibraltar is linked with a greater degree of evaporation in the Mediterranean; Humboldt sets this phenomenon in a world context by explaining clearly that it is the Gulf Stream and the Equatorial Current, i.e., global phenomena, that give rise to this strong current observed off the coast of Europe:

on ne sauroit douter que la même cause qui fait tournoyer les eaux dans le golfe du Mexique, ne les agite aussi près de l'île de Madère. (Humboldt 1970, I: 68)

Here he points out for the first time, once again in the field of geography, how dangerous it is to view things from an exclusively European perspective and how necessary a global understanding has become even in order to explain phenomena in Europe. Thus the inner interrelatedness of very disparate phenomena is revealed to the all-embracing eye of the naturalist.

On a second level, what appears superficially to be a digression on an oceanographic phenomenon enables Humboldt to introduce the destination of his journey of exploration, namely the Latin American subcontinent, and to establish some kind of link between it and Europe, a link represented here on the natural level by ocean currents. However, Humboldt goes a step further in his excursus when he describes as a first exchange of objects between the two distant continents the washing up of wood, fruits, other natural products and even the bodies of dead Indians on European shores while, in the opposite direction, a European ship, for example, is carried to the coast of South America (1970, I: 70f.). This first "exchange," for which Humboldt subsequently supplies well researched evidence, is also interesting in that—irrespective of the factual correctness of this information—the American continent sends natural objects whereas the European world exports sophisticated navigation techniques, and consequently culture. Both are offered to human view, but while nothing has been handed down about how the Indians saw this, the sufficiently well known reaction of the European—for which Christopher Columbus serves as the prototype of the voyager of discovery—is that of suspecting there to be a land to the west, namely India, which was meant to be reached by this sea-route in order to take Christianity to it and bring back gold.

Whereas the interpolation of the treatise on ocean currents initially appeared to be a disorienting structural weakness and error of construction, it can now be more easily seen to fulfill a function at the very beginning of the travel account. For the portrayal of a first exchange between the two continents on the level of nature implicitly contains a demand for reliable communications over which man has control, something that Humboldt never tired of encouraging his whole life long. The precise information on the Gulf Stream that Humboldt included and processed in his observations served the purpose of improving the sea-route between the two continents—mind you, to the advantage of the Europeans:

Dans les mers les plus fréquentées par les Européens, loin de la vue des terres, un navigateur habile peut encore se livrer à des travaux importants. La découverte d'un groupe d'îles inhabitées offre moins d'intérêt que la connaissance des lois qui enchainent un grand nombre de faits isolés. (Humboldt 1970, I: 73)

Humboldt's quite obsessive repetition of the idea of a system of worldwide communications shows him to be a child of his times. To this belong in the last analysis his many projects for canals, cuttings through isthmuses, etc.; particularly

well known among them are his detailed plans for an inter-ocean link in the Central American region, which he indefatigably presented—albeit with little success—to governments, societies, and to his general audience. After all, the systematic voyages of discovery inspired and conducted by the state in the second half of the 18th century had given rise in Europe to a surplus of empirical material on non-European countries which now had to be made more precise and utilized for (global) economic ends.

Even though Humboldt did not see himself as being in the service of future economic exploitation but rather as contributing to the (pure) advancement of science and thus, for him, of mankind as such, there is no doubt that his publications and proposals had the precise effect of encouraging an economic development and exploitation of Latin America. Goethe himself clearly recognized this in his conversations with Eckermann on the topic of Humboldt's projected cutting through the isthmus in Panamá since

this would lead to quite unpredictable results for the whole civilized and uncivilized world. It would, however, surprise me if the United States were to fail to grasp the opportunity of taking such a project in hand.

Goethe had noticed the USA's interest in a rapid link for "both merchant shipping and warships between the west and east coasts of North America" (Eckermann 1981, II: 566). There is a clear link between this remark made on 21 February 1827 and Goethe's first outline of the concept of world literature on 31 January of the same year, but this matter cannot be pursued further here.

Against this background the following poem by Hans Magnus Enzensberger on Alexander von Humboldt also becomes clearer:

Why did he put up with it all: insects, downpours, creepers,
and the *sullen looks of Indians*?⁸ It was not for tin, for jute,
for rubber or for copper. Healthy was he who sickness bore,
unwittingly, a selfless messenger of plundering, a courier
who did not know he'd come to herald the destruction of
the nature painting he lovingly drew to his ninetieth year.

Enzensberger 1975: 58)

Right at the beginning of his account of his travels Humboldt thus makes its basic pattern clear: the principle of apparent digressions which nevertheless do belong to an overall structure and can be allocated to an underlying uniform plan just as the individual volumes of the work constitute separate parts of an overall idea. This explains the most important sentence in a letter to Varnhagen von Ense, which is of fundamental significance for all his writings, "A book about nature has to evoke the impression of nature itself" (Humboldt 1860: 23).

Precisely this pattern is revealed by the first significant digression. For as in nature certain things seem to stand in isolation alongside each other whereas in

reality they are interrelated and form a unit even if this is not immediately apparent to the superficial observer. In Göttingen, the "center of the examination and scientific analysis of European travel literature" (Bitterli 1982: 257) in the Germany of those days, Humboldt had formed the opinion that there was a coherent plan to the universe which was, however, not directly accessible to man.⁹

To be sure, not all of Humboldt's digressions follow this principle but were consciously inserted by the author himself (Humboldt himself repeatedly admitted that structuring such an enormous work was too much for him), but this initial passage, by means of which the reader is, as it were, introduced to the account proper, displays both the multiplicity of references to the complete work and the reasoning behind the precise positioning of this digression within it. Humboldt's writing attempts to *simulate* nature. It is certainly one of his—not merely literary—goals to approach the object he is describing and portraying by way of a structural imitation of it.

In the preface to the first edition of his *Ansichten der Natur*, which was based on his lectures and offered his wider German audience for the first time a written version of the results of his American travels, Humboldt expresses himself as follows:

Each essay should be a complete whole in itself; in all of them one and the same trend should be equally apparent. (Humboldt 1808: vi)

In an aesthetic treatment there are, however,

great difficulties in composition. The richness of nature leads to an accumulation of individual images. This accumulation, however, disturbs the peace and the overall impression of the nature painting. (Humboldt 1808: vi)

Humboldt's lack of self-assurance as regards style is well known and he often called upon his friend Vernhagen von Ense for advice and criticism on works to be published in German (Scuria 1985: 326). Our main concern in the present context of a literary presentation aimed at achieving maximum effect is the question of the overall structure and the integrated aesthetic portrayal of his travels, which (along with the question of his possible audience) was already a matter of concern to the Prussian geographer while he was still in America.¹⁰ Here, as on countless other occasions, Humboldt resorts to visual metaphors, especially those from the field of painting, in order to illustrate what he is after. Again and again he speaks of that "nature painting" which alone is able to create in the observer the total impression aimed at. In the introduction to his *Relation historique* he points to the difficulties met with by anyone reporting from America, in contrast to the traveller in Greece, as the result, for example, of not encountering a completely differentiated culture there:

Dans l'ancien monde, ce sont les peuples et les nuances de leur civilisation qui donnent au tableau son caractère principal; dans le nouveau, l'homme et ses productions disparaissent, pour ainsi dire, au milieu d'une nature sauvage et gigantesque. Le genre humain n'y offre que quelques débris de hordes indigènes peu avancées dans la culture, ou cette uniformité de mœurs et d'institutions qui ont été transplantées sur les rives étrangères par les colons européens. (Humboldt 1970, I: 32)

This harsh and contemptuous statement, which is incidentally by no means an isolated case, may come as a surprise in view of the extremely knowledgeable and indeed sometimes even loving depiction of the people, culture, and history of the new continent in the *Relation historique*; after all, even though he regarded American art less as art than as an historical document, Humboldt's investigations did stimulate the later archaeological exploration of the American continent. What the passage quoted above proves quite clearly is that for Humboldt the American continent was first and foremost a realm of nature, a world of objects—even though man, too, is never missing in his observations, not least of all in the definition of the subject of his research. The tropical riches of this nature, which inevitably express themselves in his scientific work, too, are what confronted Humboldt with basically insoluble problems of presentation.

The investigation of nature is in Humboldt inseparable from the sensual, from the impression it makes on the soul (*Gemüt*) of the observer. His understanding of nature—an entirely Romantic way of looking at it—is based on the tension between the individual and the landscape, the latter being reflected in man's consciousness and feelings, in his "innermost being" (1986: 261). This relationship is, incidentally, also to be found in Goethe's *Italienische Reise* (Strelka 1985: 174).

Humboldt's concern was to pass on an (his) impression as undiminished as possible to his audience. In so doing he was aware of the risk involved in attempting to subject "the magic of the sensual world to a dissection into its elements" when after all the strength of the impression made by these natural phenomena is "in fact really linked to the unity of what is felt, what is non-developed" (Humboldt 1845–62, I: 9f.).

The immediacy of the impression was, however, in Humboldt's eyes jeopardized by being recounted through the medium of language.¹¹ The numerous illustrations contained in this travel account could not in themselves avert this danger for the very reason that the feared "accumulation of individual images" (1808: vi) was otherwise bound to occur. Instead Humboldt wished the overall impression to be produced by a *nature painting* via language. The linearity of language was to be broken, one could say diverted, into a *quasi-simultaneous* perception such as is found precisely in painting. Humboldt's "rejection" of the power of language and his preference for the optical, the visual is not merely a resumption of Columbus's contention¹² that it is impossible to convey the beauty of America in words. This phrase, which had long since become a platitude even

in contemporary travel literature, for Humboldt touched on a fundamental problem of depiction as such, a problem in turn associated with his holistic conception of nature based on Goethe's view of nature.¹³

This explains the great emphasis that Humboldt placed on landscape painting, for which he prophesied a great future as a result of the "expansion of sensual horizons, acquaintance with nobler and greater forms of nature, with the luxuriant richness of life in the hot zones" (1986: 384). This direct heralding of a "tropical style," the concept of which owed a great deal to the thinking of the French Enlightenment and in particular to Montesquieu's climate theory as well as to Buffon's style theory¹⁴ was taken up in Latin America—although presumably to no great extent through the mediation of Humboldt—and, at least in the realm of literature, put into practice there. In our context, however, this question can only be mentioned in passing.

For our present concerns it is more important to point out that the mode of presentation chosen by Humboldt in his *Relation historique* underlines his rejection of unqualified textual linearity. This is certainly not the only reason for his long-windedness and the many insertions, but from a literary point of view this interruption of a linear narrative sequence can probably be interpreted as the only solution to this dilemma open to Humboldt if he did not wish to forego precisely what the American continent symbolized for him, namely the abundance of nature.

This sheds new light on Humboldt's endeavors to realize his plans for a *pasigraphy*, i.e. a system of writing for universal use with characters representing ideas instead of words, which was meant to make it easier to represent geographical facts and their interpretation. His reasons for embarking on this undertaking bear witness to his motives:

Neither most attentive reading of my work nor looking at the illustrations make it possible to *embrace at a glance* the wealth of facts contained there. It therefore seemed to me important to find a way of remedying this flaw. (Humboldt 1797, I: 90; italics OE)

Here again the urge for a simultaneousness of perception is expressed, and it is the eye, the gaze that is destined to absorb it. Here Humboldt is taking up ideas that were widely accepted in the French-speaking world towards the end of the 18th century,¹⁵ namely the introduction of a generally understood universal language of science independent of individual languages. In his opinion such a pasigraphy could help to overcome the deficiencies of everyday language and at the same time make it possible to order the enormous wealth of materials in a generally accessible and, as it were, simultaneous manner.

The frequently used metaphor of the nature painting indicates the direction in which Humboldt's aporetic intentions inclined without in any way changing anything about the literary, or rather textual, status of his travel account. Humboldt's style, which Goethe acknowledged as that of a brilliant *causeur*

when he wrote of Humboldt to Zelter on 5.10.1831: "Our conqueror of the world is perhaps the greatest orator,"¹⁶ shows distinct traces of being an oral one. This is not only true of those publications that were directly or indirectly derived from his many lectures, aimed as they were at reaching as wide an audience as possible. Oral language is rather a basic characteristic of all his writings to be found in all his works and probably associated with his love of digression. Humboldt repeatedly emphasized the importance of the living word, which he viewed as an indispensable element of the interplay of dialogue in the scientific "unveiling of truth"¹⁷, too. The oral nature of his literary expression, a feature he also admired in his mentor Georg Forster, is closely connected with his aim of transposing the sensual element into his portrayal of nature. In this respect it is in my opinion interesting to note that Humboldt achieved an aesthetic realization of certain ideas put forward by late representatives of the French Enlightenment who—like, for example, Destutt de Tracy—on the one hand identified the written language with the analytic/logical use of language and on the other hand associated it with painting and the oral tradition, thus clearly distinguishing these two areas from one another.¹⁹ Humboldt's long stays in Paris, often extending over decades, are likely to have familiarized him with such concepts.

If we look at the *Relation historique* as a literary text, the question of the "motors" of the narrative arises. Various levels of narration are to be distinguished in the *Relation historique*. On the one hand, there is the figure of the narrator himself, who is characterized by spoken language, occasionally also with a strong literary flavor, and who at the same time serves as a figure with whom the reader can identify since he participates directly in the events (as a result of which the reader becomes, as Blumenberg puts it, the "spectator of the spectator" [Blumenberg 1983: 292]). Then, at a central point, there is in the background a narrative authority organizing the account (and thus intratextually, for instance, also Humboldt's *Reisetagebücher*²⁰) from a "loftier standpoint" and intervening on one occasion with scientific treatises and on another with philosophical comments. In addition, at least one further narrative level is to be distinguished, one which might be called that of the "scientific mediator." The latter supplies the text with footnotes and extensive sets of statistics allowing the interested reader scientific access to the topic and field being reported on, processes the literature, or points to further reading. In continually incorporating the latest results of scientific research as he was writing, Humboldt was following the tradition of Enlightenment historiography and scientific investigation in which extensive statistics were supplied in the appendix to provide support for the theory, a habit which came into widespread scientific usage.²¹ The travel book thus at the same time assumes the character of being "work in progress," making, as it were, the advancement of knowledge visible in its own corpus.

For Humboldt these various levels of narration naturally constitute a single unit. In the introduction to the first edition of his *Ansichten der Natur* Humboldt already assures the reader that his enjoyment, based as it is on "direct perception," will be increased through "insight into the inner interconnectedness

of natural forces," which is why he "appended *scientific* explanations and additional information to each article" (Humboldt 1808: vii).

Humboldt's holistic conception of nature is reflected in his objective of presenting objects in their totality and without mediation. This objective is in turn linked with the concept of education advocated by the Enlightenment and Humanism, aiming as it did at a comprehensive education of the citizen.

The *conscious inclusion of the reader* in the writings of Alexander von Humboldt makes it necessary, indeed imperative, in the context of our present investigations to take a closer look at the implicit reader in the work in question.

On his departure from Spain at the beginning of his account of his travels Humboldt gives an impressive description of what he felt on seeing the last sign of the old continent, the tiny light of a fisherman's cottage near Sisarga. Looking back towards the Spanish coast turns into a looking-back at "la côte du pays natal" (1970, I: 62): Spain disappears from the departing author's gaze and makes way for Europe; Spain, for him in fact a foreign country, is absorbed into the greater entity from which he stems, namely, Europe.

In this context Hanno Beck (1959-61, I: 137) pointed out that it here "dawned on" Humboldt for the first time that Europe was his home. This may be true even though it is to be remembered that as far as his scientific research was concerned Humboldt moved in European research circles which in the 18th century as a matter of course crossed national boundaries. His transformation into a European in this passage is nevertheless to be understood as a message to the reader, indicating first of all that the travel book, written in French though it is, is addressed to a European readership and emphasizing above all that Humboldt, after a time of preparation, is now setting off for Latin America *as a European* and thus about to see the other continent through the eyes of a European. At the same time this passage makes clear that the expectation of the *otherness* of the Latin American continent puts one's native continent in a new perspective, in fact reshapes it.

Humboldt's European perspective is frequently recognizable in his accounts of and treatises on the American continent. At the beginning of his examination it already becomes clear that he intends to proceed contrastively, comparing the geological and geomorphic (or rather geomorphographic) phenomena of the Andes—he often speaks of the "American Alps"—with those of the European Alps in order to shed light on each by means of this comparison. This contrastive perspective embraces even wider phenomena. In his *Ideen zu einer Physiognomik der Gewächse* Humboldt points out that the Nordic peoples have not been given the full and complete enjoyment of nature granted to the inhabitants of tropical zones; the "sickly plants" in European greenhouses were in his opinion merely

a poor reflection of the majesty of tropical vegetation. But a rich source of compensation is offered in the development of our language, in the fiery imagination of the poet, in the pictorial art of the painter. From it our imagination draws its living images of an

exotic nature. In the cold North, on the desolate heaths, a lonely person can acquire knowledge of what is being discovered at the far corners of the globe; thus he creates in his innermost self a world that is the work of his spirit and equally free and everlasting. (1986: 260f.)

The intended reader is named here: the lonely reader inwardly compensating through his reading for the lack of riches proffered by nature in his latitudes. The European perspective oriented towards this type of reader is represented in literary terms above all by the narrator figure and turns up in unexpected contexts such as in the *Llanos del Orinoco*, the "wild scene of free animal and vegetable life," far removed from the various "fates of mankind" (1986: 20).

Here, in a skilfully constructed literary passage, Humboldt depicts from the perspective of European animals which had "followed man all over the globe" the painful existence that horses and cattle would have to lead in a struggle against indigenous animals (e.g. crocodiles, huge bats, water-snakes or jaguars) in distant climes (1986: 33) and assures them of the sympathy of the "serious observer."

Further examples of such a position as an observer could be added—for instance, the width of the Seine in Paris is taken as a measure against which to contrast the Orinoco. What, however, now seems of greater importance is to contrast the *European* with the *Eurocentric* perspective. For it is not a preset objectivity but rather the awareness and conscious incorporation of one's own origins that make an adequate perception of otherness possible at all.²² Humboldt, it seems to me, was giving a clear signal by beginning his account of his travels with a description of his "transformation" into a European.

According to T. Todorov (1985: 56) it is possible to specify more exactly the "elementary expressions of experiencing otherness" that appeared in the European tradition at the latest with the discovery of America and the *Conquista*: either equality is postulated for what is different so that it swiftly degenerates into identity, thus denying any distinction between what is one's own and what is different, or a difference is conceded and very soon transformed into concepts of inferiority and superiority. Not even Humboldt always succeeded in escaping this dilemma. Rooted in the tradition of the Enlightenment and Humanism, he believed in a unity of mankind which would grow ever greater and broader through various stages of civilization in a process of unilinear progress. The high point of this development to date was in his opinion undeniably European culture, an opinion he shared with Georg Forster.²³ The advancement of world communications seemed to him to promise a strengthening of this positive development. Today we find ourselves—or at least we think we find ourselves—at the end of this development, at a point at which we are forced at least to question the idea of a universal history of mankind as a guiding pattern inasmuch as its implicit Eurocentricity may threaten or annihilate the cultural identity of other peoples and cultures and instead to think more in terms of particular

histories.²⁴ Humboldt's work, on the other hand, stands, although not at the beginning of it, nevertheless in a period of acceleration of this development to which it also itself contributed.

Humboldt certainly recognized the negative aspects of this process and pointed them out, for example in the already quoted allusion to the "uniformité de mœurs et d'institutions qui ont été transplantées sur des rives étrangères par des colons européens" (1970, I: 32). However, he was too deeply rooted in the Enlightenment tradition to have cast doubt on this idea of universal progress within one single history of mankind. This in no way detracts from the significance of Humboldt's works—not least of all for the Latin American republics, too—with their precise, detailed investigations and their clear advocacy of a more liberal political and intellectual development for Latin America. Nevertheless, to overlook this ambivalence would mean failing to perceive a central contradiction in Alexander von Humboldt's thinking, a contradiction that was typical of his times.

This dilemma is still recognizable in his late work the *Kosmos*, which, in contrast to the *Relation historique*, clearly bears the traces of the discontinuity established by Michel Foucault (1974: 271) for whom History in the 19th century marks the origin of all speech about empiricism. In his outline of the "major elements in a history of the physical world-view," in which he establishes a "progressive expansion of global consciousness" (Humboldt 1845–62, II: 154) from the Middle Ages on, he characteristically depicts the fifteenth century, the "epoch of the greatest spatial discoveries" (Humboldt 1845–62, II: 266), as a period in which "the irrevocable movement towards a given goal" (Humboldt 1845–62, II: 266) became manifest. For as a result of the discovery of America "the world of objects now forced itself [. . .] on the reasoning mind" (Humboldt 1845–62, II: 267), which for the first time enabled the "universality" (*Allgemeinheit*) of earthly nature to be grasped: "Even the firmament unfolded to the still unarmed eye new realms, hitherto unseen constellations, individually rotating clouds of mist [. . .]" (Humboldt 1845–62, II: 267).

Here it becomes more than obvious that it is the eye of the European discovering *hitherto unseen* constellations; and it is the viewpoint of the European looking at the stages in his own history that thinks itself able to distinguish epochs in the history of *mankind*. History, having now finally become the organizing principle of discourse, incorporates from a European perspective "the world of objects," i.e., the empirical aspect or what can be empirically registered about otherness.

When Humboldt was completing the introduction to his *Relation historique* in February 1812, the struggle for the independence of Latin America, "une de ces grandes révolutions qui agitent de temps en temps l'espèce humaine" (1970, I: 36) had long since begun. Humboldt had no doubts as to the final victory of the forces of progress which would introduce a new social order. And then, when "des progrès rapides vers la prospérité publique" (1970, I: 37) had been made, other readers would gain access to his work:

Si alors quelques pages de mon livre survivent à l'oubli, l'habitant des rives de l'Orénoque et de l'Atabapo verra avec ravissement que de villes populeuses et commerçantes, que des champs labourés par des mains libres occupent ces mêmes lieux où, à l'époque de mon voyage, on ne trouvait que des forêts impénétrables ou des terrains inondés. (Humboldt 1970, I: 37f.)

Culture will then have subdued nature and taken its place. Agriculture and trade will, so this vision of the future foretells, have led Latin America along the road to progress. On the other hand, this vision of a future America seen by a progressive European thinker at the beginning of the nineteenth century eradicates the otherness of Latin America: the essential equality of all mankind has become identity with Europe and consequently brought about a loss of individual *identity*. The eyes of the Orinoco-dweller looking at his origins and his own history are now European eyes.

* * *

In the struggle for the independence of Latin America Fray Servando Teresa de Mier (1763–1827) played an active, although not always happy role in his writings and deeds. In the *Independencia* movement he found in the words of Lezama Lima “la plenitud de su rebeldía” (1969: 91), not least of all because this political conflict allowed him to escape from passivity, from merely reacting to new dangers, and to grasp what lay at the root of his persecution and actively take a stand for his ideas.

The sufferings of Fray Servando, as we shall call him, began with his memorable sermon on 12 December 1794 on Our Lady of Guadalupe (Mexico). This marked the beginning of a persecution that was to continue for over half of the more than sixty years of his life. In his sermon Fray Servando had fallen back on a tradition that had developed in the first years after the *Conquista*. Based on manifold analogies between Aztec and Christian rites, the idea had arisen that the new continent had already been Christianized or come into contact with Christian teaching before the arrival of the Spaniards.²⁵ Fray Servando took up this argument to defend the Faith and the apparition of the Blessed Virgin in Guadalupe, Our Lady of Guadalupe having long since become the patron saint of Mexico and, as it were, a symbol of nationhood. The picture of herself that she left behind did not, Fray Servando argues, date from after the Spanish conquest but went back to the first mission to America, namely that conducted by St. Thomas, who continued to be venerated there under the name of Quetzalcóatl.

This syncretic combination of two religious traditions into a symbol of nationhood²⁶ became politically explosive in that it placed God's appearance on the American continent before that of Columbus and thus deprived the Spanish *Conquista* of its logical legitimation in the history of salvation.