

Markus Alexander Lenz

A pioneer of Literary Aesthetics?

Humboldtian Writing in the Mirror of Modern Ecopoetics

ABSTRACT

The article examines the extent to which Alexander von Humboldt can be regarded as a pioneer of modern ecopoetry. Humboldt combined scientific-empirical penetration with aesthetically sophisticated verbalization of ecosystems and human-nature relationships, creating unique and literarily refined depictions of nature. Humboldt's writings show a deep connection with nature that goes beyond mere description, establishing an existential relationship with the world. His approach of aestheticizing nature without instrumentalizing it suggests an alternative both to the Cartesian separation of man and nature and to identitarian concepts of nature localization. Based on this assumption, the article discusses the significance of Humboldt's work for modern ecopoetry.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Der Artikel untersucht, inwieweit Alexander von Humboldt als Vorreiter der modernen Ökopoese betrachtet werden kann. Humboldt verband wissenschaftlich-empirische Durchdringung mit ästhetisch ausgefeilter Versprachlichung von Ökosystemen und Mensch-Natur-Beziehungen. Auf diese Weise schuf er einzigartige und auch literarisch anspruchsvolle Naturdarstellungen. Humboldts Schriften zeigen dabei eine tiefe Verbundenheit mit der Natur, die über die bloße Beschreibung

hinausgeht und eine existenzielle Beziehung zu der Welt herstellt. Sein Ansatz, die Natur zu ästhetisieren, ohne sie zu instrumentalisieren, bietet eine Alternative sowohl zur kartesischen Trennung von Mensch und Natur als auch zu identitären Konzepten der Naturverortung. Der Beitrag diskutiert die Bedeutung von Humboldts Werk für die moderne Ökopoese.

RÉSUMÉ

L'article examine dans quelle mesure Alexander von Humboldt peut être considéré comme un précurseur de l'écopoésie moderne. Humboldt a combiné la compréhension scientifique et empirique avec une verbalisation esthétiquement sophistiquée des écosystèmes et des relations entre l'homme et la nature. De cette manière, il a créé des représentations de la nature uniques et exigeantes sur le plan littéraire. Les écrits de Humboldt montrent un lien profond avec la nature, qui va au-delà de la simple description et qui établit une relation existentielle avec le monde. Son approche, qui consiste à esthétiser la nature sans l'instrumentaliser, pourrait ouvrir une alternative à la séparation cartésienne entre l'homme et la nature d'une part, et aux concepts identitaires de localisation dans la nature d'autre part. L'article discute de l'importance de l'œuvre de Humboldt pour l'écopoésie moderne.



To what extent can Alexander von Humboldt – in his epistemological and aesthetic orientation, in his typical style of writing in and about nature – be described as a forerunner of what is known as ‘ecopoetics’? The latter concept being closely related to the philosophical current of ecocriticism (Berdinesen 2018), the question is particularly important from a ‘Western’ perspective: after all, being a poetic elaboration of the rootedness of the individual in nature, ecopoetics also feeds ambivalent identity-political concepts ranging from the mostly emancipatory-open ecofeminism (Warren 1997; Salleh 1997; Gaard 2011) to exclusivist-racist ecofascism (Jahn 1991; Moore 2022; Guenther 2023). How can Humboldtian writing be categorized in this context? Could its aesthetics and epistemology serve as an antidote to a certain groups’ exclusivist claim to nature awareness and at the same time preserve the depth of a poetic closeness to nature – the feeling ecopoetry seeks to create for the individual reader? The present article is not trying to put Humboldt into the tradition of place-bound Anglo-American nature writing; this would not do justice to how complexly and dynamically he depicts the interweaving of nature and civilization. Indeed, such a view would place the globally and trans-disciplinary oriented writer in a one-sided position of romantic ‘closeness’ to nature, which is frequently based upon the perceived superiority of a European-American, often socially privileged observer. In this, I agree with the American Germanist Caroline Schaumann, who in her article “Humboldtian Writing for the Anthropocene” relativizes Andrea Wulf’s (2015) focus on Humboldt as the ‘Inventor of Nature’:

Nature Writing as a form of personal reflection that combines scientific rationale with spiritual rapture has traditionally been written from a position of privilege, and Humboldt would be no exception here. [...] Humboldt’s global concerns, in contrast, supersede the parochial idea. Indeed Humboldt was precisely not interested in particular landscape, but always thought to relate and compare local phenomena – whether climate, vegetation, fauna, rocks, or buildings, artworks and hieroglyphs – to the global.” (Schaumann 2020, pp. 122–123)

Despite Humboldt’s more global and multi-relational perspective on ‘nature’ and ‘civilization’ and in contrast to the paradigmatic American nature writers such as Henry David Thoreau (1854) or Ralph Waldo Emerson (1836), Humboldt’s texts contain concrete references to nature, presented without mystical exaggeration on the one hand or indifferent distancing on the other. These testify to Humboldt’s qualities as a nature writer and even a nature poet, which arise in situ, ‘in the face of things.’¹ Nevertheless, the question should be allowed whether one could even go one step further. At a time when the question of sustainability and the protection of natural environments should have the highest priority, we must discuss the role of literature and the aesthetic constitution of a relationship to the world as a path that leads beyond the ancient subject-object dualism. With ‘the world,’ I mean ecosystems and natural spaces, their perception and preservation as anthropological objects; the challenge is to talk about it without falling into a reactionary nature mysticism of a romantic hue. The instrumentalizing of nature as it was shaped by the pioneers of European modernity such as René Descartes and Georg Friedrich Wilhelm Hegel (Bowler 1997; Bormann 2000) has long been exposed by thinkers such as Michel Serres (1990), Philippe Descola (2005), and Bruno Latour (2015) in its one-sidedness and its colonialist implications of exploitation, destruction, and alienation.²

1 On the epistemological relevance of nature aesthetics, as expressed in the concepts of ‘total impression’ (*Totaleindruck*) and ‘writing in the face of things’ (*Schreiben im Angesicht der Dinge*), cf. Ette 1991; Kraft 2014; Kraft 2016; Schneider 2016; Thiele 2016.

2 For a detailed problematization of the nature-culture dichotomy in Humboldt cf. Ette 2016.

An earth song: alienation and reconciliation with nature by language and literature

I follow the British Shakespeare researcher Jonathan Bate in his definition of the term ‘ecopoetry’. He describes it in one of the founding texts of this literary movement, his 2000 study *The Song of the Earth*, which is dedicated to English Romanticism, but also to Jean-Jacques Rousseau and 20th and 21st century ecopoets such as the Australian Les Murray (1938–2019). According to Maurice Merleau-Ponty, literary hermeneutics is always constituted through textual engagement. Building on this premise, Bate suggests that poetry allows for an aesthetic reenactment – and possibly a renewed sensory experience – of nature:

Ecopoetry is not a description of dwelling with the earth, not a disengaged thinking about it, but an experiencing of it. By ‘poetry’ here I mean poiesis, making, the medium of which may as well be, say, painting as writing. Thus the philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty on the experience of looking at a painting: ‘When I see the bright green of one of Cézanne’s vases, it does not make me think of pottery, it presents it to me.’ Ecopoetry is not synonymous with writing that is pragmatically green: a manifesto for ecological correctness will not be poetic because its language is bound to be instrumental, to address questions of doing rather than to ‘present’ the experience of dwelling. We will, then, need to hesitate over the complex of intersections and contradictions between ecopoetics and ecopolitics (Bate 2000, p. 42).

Ecopoetics is not ecopolitics. It must renounce the tendency to instrumentalize nature, which is inherent in the linguistic representation of nature – even if the goal of this instrumentalization is to protect nature. Ecopoetics deals with writing and speaking about nature as a problem of alienation and domination. This reference to the world has been a given since René Descartes’s *Discours de la Méthode*, where he not only speaks of a ‘practical philosophy’ in favor of possession and dominion over all things but also anticipates the triumph of technology.³ The communication theorist and pioneer of ecocriticism Michel Serres has summarized the effects of these long-fulfilled Cartesian dreams regarding Western modernity as follows, expressing the now global extent of this axiomatics as an ecological and philosophical dilemma of our time:

What, beyond enormous metropolises, considered either as aggregations of individuals or as networks of relations? Our tools, our arms, our efficacy, in the end our reason, about which we’re so legitimately vain: our mastery and our possessions. Mastery and possession: these are the master words launched by Descartes at the dawn of the scientific and technological age, when our Western reason went off to conquer the universe. We dominate and appropriate it: such is the shared philosophy underlying industrial enterprise as well as so-called disinterested science, which are indistinguishable in this respect. Cartesian mastery brings science’s objective violence into line, making it a well-controlled strategy. Our fundamental relationship with objects comes down to war and property (Serres 1995, pp. 31–32).

3 “[...] because they showed me that it is possible to acquire knowledge which would be very useful in life; and that instead of the speculative philosophy taught in schools, there is a practical philosophy which might let us know the power and actions of fire, water, air, the stars, the heavens, and all other bodies that surround us, as clearly as we know the various trades of our craftsmen. Like these craftsmen, we could employ this knowledge for all suitable purposes and thus master and own nature.” Descartes 1824 [1636], p. 192, transl. Alexandra Berlina.

What kind of individual relationship to the world, environment, and language could effectively counteract this instrumentalizing and distancing way of thinking? Philosophically and linguistically, how might we forge a new relationship with the world and a new way of being, moving beyond our alienation from nature? Awareness of language itself as the primary psychological and anthropological mechanism that distances humans from their objects holds significant emancipatory potential. It is precisely this linguistic awareness embedded in human consciousness that underlies the liberating possibilities of Cartesian rationality, rescuing humanity from various forms of fanaticism, be they eschatological, animistic, or driven by animalistic vitalism and brutality. In contrast, rational purpose and self-awareness promise harmony. Unsurprisingly, Jonathan Bate renounces the global metaphysics of Romanticism with its ascetic fantasies of fusion in order to craft an ontology of space. He finds a way out of the metaphysical pitfalls of rationalism and idealism in the concept of “dwelling” (*Wohnen*) by Martin Heidegger:

[...] dwelling occurs only when poetry comes to pass and is present ... as taking a measure for all measuring. This measure-taking is itself an authentic measure-taking, no mere gauging with ready-made measuring-rods for the making of maps. Nor is poetry building in the sense of raising and fitting buildings. But poetry, as the authentic gauging of the dimension of dwelling, is the primal form of building. Poetry first of all admits man's dwelling into its very nature, its presencing being. Poetry is the original admission of dwelling (Heidegger 1971, p. 227).

Heidegger's philosophical stance towards Cartesians, Hegelians, and Romantics is well known: like no other, he placed the problem of language at the center of an ontology relating to the world and thus opened up new possibilities for poetry, poesis and also for an aesthetics of space. He thus created an ontic relationship to environment, an antimetaphysically modern antidote to alienation from nature.⁴ Heidegger's attachment to place, in all its oppressive heaviness, is not easy to bear for the reader socialized in Germany and with German history – but Bate makes the concept more palatable by placing in the context of the natural aesthetics of English Romanticism, of William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Still, we cannot forget Heidegger's sympathies for the Nazis and his deep antisemitism, fully revealed at the latest since the debate about the *Black Notebooks* (Di Cesare 2018). Consider only the following sentences:

Only if we are capable of dwelling only then can we build. Let us think for a while of a farmhouse in the Black Forest, which was built some two hundred years ago by the dwelling of peasants. Here the self-sufficiency of the power to let earth and heaven, divinities and mortals enter in simple oneness into things, ordered the house (Heidegger 1971, p. 160).

Heidegger's contempt for any 'inauthentic' mode of existence presents an ideological danger, of which Bate is well aware. He not only talks about the appeal of Heidegger's philosophy to a nature-loving Bavarian chicken farmer named Heinrich Himmler but also feels compelled to defend Heidegger's philosophy through the work of a Jewish poet. When Paul Celan, who admired Heidegger's thinking if not his politics, visited the Black Forest resident after the death of many of his family members in the Nazi extermination camps and hoped for an insight, if not an apology, he was disappointed. Celan was not to hear a word of regret from Heidegger.

4 On Martin Heidegger's concept of nature and its relationship to language, see Strolz (1986). His examination of Johann Peter Hebel's poetry shows that this also had eco-poetic implications (ibid., pp. 132–135).

The poet responded to this disappointment with his poem *Todtnauberg*,⁵ which defended Heidegger's thinking against Heidegger the man and his ideology – an impressive piece of eco-poetics (Bate 2000, pp. 268–275). In it, form and metaphor intertwine to link the horrifying past and the disappointing, oppressive present with a hope for the future, as derived directly from the natural reference of the Black Forest landscape. I refer the reader to Jonathan Bate's brilliant interpretation of the poem (ibid.). So could Humboldtian writing also be understood as a precursor of such eco-poetics as the verbalization of existential dwelling in nature – and if so, to what extent must we ignore the Cartesian man, the 'measurer of the world' (Kehlmann 2005): Alexander von Humboldt as a contemporary of the last currents of the late Enlightenment?⁶

Alexander von Humboldt's poetic dwelling in nature

Bate only refers to Alexander von Humboldt in one brief passage in his study, in connection with Montesquieu and climate theory, in a chapter that quotes Lord Byron's poem "Darkness" from 1816. In this same year, the 'year without a summer,' aesthetic perception of nature permeated European poetry and painting due to the eruption of the Indonesian volcano Tambora; it was also the year in which Alexander von Humboldt became a Fellow of the Royal Society in London. However, Bate only mentions the climate and plant researcher Humboldt, who seemed to have recognized the great connections of ecology in his dictum of "everything is interaction" (*Alles ist Wechselwirkung*, Humboldt 1803/1804, p. 27r), but could not use this discovery in the distanced role of the natural scientist:

The modern Constitution was above all premised on a strict separation between culture and nature. Yet in 1748, Charles-Louis de Secondat, Baron de Montesquieu published an analysis of "The Spirit of the Laws" of different societies in relation to their respective climates, and in 1807 Alexander von Humboldt produced an Essay of the "Geography of Plants" which argued that history was a function of environment, that humans are products of their climate, that the imaginative and aesthetic sense of different peoples is shaped by landscapes, the very rock-formations, which surround them. The varying configurations of the human species may be mapped by climate and soil, just as the distribution of plants may be so mapped. We who claim to be modern have taken the Cartesian Constitution for granted and ignored the insistence of Montesquieu and Humboldt that ideology may be influenced by the weather (Bate 2000, p. 101).

Although Bate recognizes Humboldt's early ecological consciousness and awareness of the human interconnectedness with the environment, he does not mention Humboldt's position in regard to the dilemma he outlines throughout his study. This dilemma can be summarized as follows: When it comes to their relationship with nature, modern humans *still* seem forced to choose between the instrumentalization of nature (through scientific and linguistic repre-

5 Arnica, eyebright, the / draft from the well with the / star-die on top, / in the / Hütte, // written in the book / – whose name did it record / before mine? –, / in this book / the line about / a hope, today, / for a thinker's / word / to come, / in the heart, // forest sward, unlevelled, / orchis and orchis, singly, / raw exchanges, later, while driving, / clearly, // he who drives us, the mensch, / he also hears it, // the half- / trod log- / trails on the highmoor, // humidity, / much (Celan as translated by Pierre Joris; Joris 2014, p. 254).

6 On Alexander von Humboldt's extremely complex positioning in the field of the European Enlightenment, cf. Ette 2002; Ette 2019; Müller 2007.

sentation) and being overpowered in spatial and identitarian terms. Alexander von Humboldt's literary-aesthetic relations to world and environment might have helped Bate transcend this dilemma. Alexander von Humboldt was neither a romantic nor a 'cold' Cartesian, but a mediator through his scientific poeticity. Therein lies his relevance to ecopoetry even today.

At this point, Alexander von Humboldt himself, despite his detail-obsessed scientific methodology and his skepticism toward Rousseau-like enthusiasm (Heyl 2007, p. 66, FN 51), considered the problem of verbalizing the *feeling* of nature (*Naturgefühl*) in all his works.⁷ Therefore, the aesthetics of Humboldt's nature representation is not a purely didactic nor rhetorical strategy: rather, Humboldt perceived the Cartesian division also as a problem of human language – as an aesthetical *and* cognitive problem.⁸ This makes Humboldt still relevant from a literary-aesthetic perspective, emphasizing the *poetic quality* of his writings from the perspective of late-modern ecopoetry. Humboldtian writing is not only a depiction of nature, but an immediate, i.e., ontological reference to the world, conveyed through language. His enormous work provides a wealth of examples; we would like to limit the evidence to two revealing passages from his *Views on Nature (Ansichten der Natur, 1808)*. Though its very title evokes the most Cartesian of all senses, the eye, the text actually repeatedly states that it is not enough to derive thinking from seeing (and language from thinking) to determine the Whole of Nature in its relationship to individual and collective consciousness.⁹ The following passage reveals both deep psychological insight and skepticism towards the subject-object relationship:

Das Verlangen, welches man nach dem Anblick gewisser Gegenstände hat, hängt gar nicht allein von ihrer Größe, von ihrer Schönheit oder Wichtigkeit ab; es ist in jedem Menschen mit vielen zufälligen Eindrücken des Jugendalters, mit früher Vorliebe für individuelle Beschäftigungen, mit Hang nach der Ferne und einem bewegten Leben verwebt. Die Unwahrscheinlichkeit, einen Wunsch erfüllt zu sehen, gibt ihm dazu einen besonderen Reiz. Der Reisende genießt zum voraus die Freude des Augenblickes, wo er das Sternbild des Kreuzes und die Magellanischen Wolken, die um den Südpol kreisen, wo er den Schnee des Chimborazo und die Rauchsäule der Vulkane von Quito, wo er ein Gebüsch baumartiger Farren, wo er den Stillen Ozean zuerst erblicken wird. Tage der Erfüllung solcher Wünsche sind Lebensepochen von unverlöschlichem Eindruck: Gefühle erregend, deren Lebendigkeit keiner vernünftelnden Rechtfertigung bedarf. In die Sehnsucht nach dem Anblick der Südsee vom hohen Rücken der Andeskette mischte sich das Interesse, mit welchem der Knabe schon auf die Erzählung von der kühnen Expedition Vasco Nuñez de Balboa gelauscht: des glücklichen Mannes, der, von Franz Pizarro gefolgt, der erste unter den Europäern, von den Höhen von Quarequa auf der Landenge von Panama, den östlichen Teil der Südsee erblickte. Die Schilfufer des caspischen Meeres, da wo ich dasselbe

7 Cf. Humboldt's theoretical reflections on his aesthetic ideal in the second volume of his *Kosmos* (Humboldt 1847), especially his comments on the 'feeling of nature' (*Naturgefühl*) from a cultural-historical perspective, *ibid.* pp. 6–75, note as well Humboldt's admiration for Goethe's nature poetry, whose *Werther* he quotes at the end of the chapter (*ibid.* p. 75).

8 On the connection between Humboldt's aestheticization of nature and notion of *pathos* as a scientific concept, cf. König 2023; on the epistemological significance of literary language for Alexander von Humboldt and other contemporary explorers, cf. Görbert 2014.

9 Although Humboldt was not a Romantic, there is a close connection to Romanticism in his epistemology as soon as it comes to the relationship between intellect and physique, although it is empiricism that retains the upper hand as the "rational permeation [*Durchdringung*] of nature," cf. Köchy 2002, p. 12.

zuerst an dem Mündungs-Delta des Wolgastromes gesehen, sind gewiß nicht malerisch zu nennen; und doch war mir ihr erster Anblick um so freudiger, als mich in frühester Jugend auf Carten die Form des asiatischen Binnenmeeres angezogen hatte. Was so durch kindliche Eindrücke, was durch Zufälligkeiten der Lebensverhältnisse in uns erweckt wird, nimmt später eine ernstere Richtung an, wird oft ein Motiv wissenschaftlicher Arbeiten, weitführender Unternehmungen (Humboldt 1849, p. 362: Das Hochland von Caxamarca).

The desire one feels upon seeing certain objects does not depend solely on their size, beauty, or importance; in every human being, it is interwoven with many random childhood impressions, with early preferences for individual pursuits, with a longing for distant places and an eventful life. Moreover, the improbability of seeing a wish fulfilled gives it a special appeal. The traveler anticipates the joy of the moment when he shall see the Southern Cross and the Magellanic Clouds circling the South Pole, when he shall see the snow of Chimborazo and the column of smoke from the volcanoes of Quito, when he shall see a thicket of trees growing like ferns, when he shall first see the Pacific Ocean. Days when such wishes are fulfilled become epochs in one's life, leaving an indelible impression: they stir emotions whose vividness needs no (pseudo)rational justification. Inside the longing to see the South Seas from the high ridge of the Andes, there was the interest of a boy listening to the story of the daring expedition by Vasco Nuñez de Balboa: the lucky man who was the first European to see the eastern part of the South Seas from the heights of Quarequa on the Isthmus of Panama, a path on which he was followed by Francisco Pizarro. From where I first saw them, at the delta of the Volga River, the reedy shores of the Caspian Sea are anything but picturesque; and yet my first sight of them was joyful because the shape of the Asian inland sea had attracted me on maps in my early youth. What is awakened in us by childhood impressions and by the coincidences of life later takes on a more serious direction, often becoming a motive for scientific work and far-reaching undertakings (Trans. Alexandra Berlina).

The anti-Cartesian statement “they stir emotions whose vividness needs no (pseudo)rational justification” can be understood as derailing Humboldt in the direction of Romantic nature mysticism – but this is only because the writer Humboldt is still perceived as separate from the empirical researcher. Actually, Humboldt approached a wide variety of literary techniques and genres in his writing (Ette 2021). At the same time, the quotation reveals Humboldt's early rejection of the picturesque as merely a detached, narcissistic reflection of the Romantic individual – well before Heidegger's critique of a “penchant for faraway places and an eventful life”. It expresses skepticism about metaphysics and the linguistic representation of nature – but this skepticism does not derive its ontology from an exclusively individualist aesthetic of “actuality.” Instead, it mobilizes phenomenology to promote an understanding of human existence that dissolves divisions: between ego and world, local and global positioning of existence, the individual (“a boy”, “the lucky man”, “where I saw”) and collective history (“awakened in us”), contingent circumstances (“coincidences of life”) and definite outcomes (“later takes on a more serious direction”), as well as between sensation and thought. Existence here is not ‘worry’ or ‘care’ (*Sorge*) for one's individual existence but concern for the common, for a shared animated world, which opens up to a liveable future: not only to “scientific work and far-reaching undertaking,” but also to further feelings and impressions, further world relations.

In addition to this opening towards a ‘we’ and ultimately towards an ‘authentic dwelling’ in the moment, Humboldt gives nature itself a voice, as Bate demands in his conception of eco-poetics when he poses the question of the “voice of nature” on the basis of Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (Bate 2000, pp. 68–93) and the air spirit Ariel. Again, caution is called for here:

Humboldt does not let nature speak like an allegorical realm of metaphysical knowledge filled with neopagan spirits and souls. Firmly anchored in descriptive language, nature in his work is not so much personified as charged with agency in Bruno Latour's sense, as 'power to act' (Latour 2014, pp. 3–4) in the form of thoroughly immersive, yet impersonal interactions that involve the viewer, the ego. In Humboldt's verbalization of nature, the individual elements of a landscape can no longer be separated from the feeling and sensing viewer who attempts to capture them in more or less scientific language. Nature unfolds in the poetics of drama, which builds up tension by integrating narration and condensation into a temporal structure of revelation. Nevertheless, everything in nature remains precisely located and precisely captured:

Die Aussicht auf die ferne Steppe ist um so auffallender, als man lange im Dickicht der Wälder, an einen engen Gesichtskreis und mit diesem an den Anblick einer reichgeschmückten Natur gewöhnt ist. Unauslöschlich wird mir der Eindruck sein, den uns die Llanos gewährten, als wir sie auf der Rückkehr vom Oberen Orinoco, von einem Berge, der dem Ausfluß des Rio Apure gegenüber liegt, bei dem Hato del Capuchino, zuerst in weiter Ferne wiedersahen. Die Sonne war eben untergegangen. Die Steppe schien wie eine Halbkugel anzusteigen. Das Licht der aufgehenden Gestirne war gebrochen in der Schicht der unteren Luft. Weil die Ebene durch die Wirkung der scheinrechtlichen Sonnenstrahlen übermäßig erhitzt wird, so dauert das Spiel der strahlenden Wärme, des aufsteigenden Luftstroms und der unmittelbaren Berührung ungleich dichter Schichten der Atmosphäre die ganze Nacht über fort (Humboldt 1849, Ueber die Steppen und Wüsten, p. 50, Anmerkung 3: Man glaubt den küstenlosen Ozean vor sich zu sehen).

The view of the distant steppe is all the more striking after spending a long time in the thicket of the forests, growing accustomed to a narrow field of vision and to the sight of richly decorated nature. First seeing the Llanos again in the distance on our return from the Upper Orinoco, from a mountain opposite the mouth of the Rio Apure, near Hato del Capuchino – that was an indelible impression. The sun had just set. The steppe seemed to rise like a hemisphere. The light of the rising stars was refracted in the lower layer of the air. Because the plain is excessively heated by the sun's rays falling perpendicularly, the interplay of radiant heat, rising air currents, and the direct contact of unequally dense layers of the atmosphere continues throughout the night (Transl. Alexandra Berlina).

The stylistic device of accumulation, the sudden change in tenses between a personal past and a cosmic present tense – all this renders both nature and language (in its poetic function) visible: Humboldt lingers here poetically in nature and thereby 'creates' it. Although it seems as if nature was acting, it is only an 'as if' ("the steppe *seemed* to rise"). The 'play'/'interplay' (*Spiel*) of natural elements ultimately reveals the categories of activity and passivity to make little sense when it comes to grasping the human ego in the context of its relationship to the world and nature: Who is acting here? The viewer, the subject, nature, the object? Or rather the dynamics of an interplay that seeks to express itself linguistically?

Conclusion

Humboldt's writing and his emphasis on an aesthetically thought-out description not only of scientific knowledge but also of an existential dwelling in nature point to a deep awareness which makes the 'father of ecology' (Schleucher 1984, p. 252) a fruitful source for modern eco-poetics, especially when it comes to overcoming the Cartesian divide. Humboldt reflects on the aesthetic effects produced by the representation of nature: nature ultimately remains re-

presented in language, but speaking about it nevertheless is an existential reference to the world, which remains vivid beyond the moment of feeling, originating in movement, but always arising 'in the face of things'.

Humboldt's reference to the world can never be reduced to just one point, be it the Black Forest, Latin America, or Siberia. For Humboldt, movement in space has a much more decisive function in his definition of the 'authentic' than for Heidegger, as can be seen in the statement "The traveler anticipates the joy of the moment". But still and despite Humboldt's love of technological innovation, the reader does not find in his work any drifting off into the inauthentic and impersonal. Rather, the world that Humboldt has been 'clearing' (*gelichtet*) over the course of his long life, to use Heidegger's jargon, is richer than that of the philosopher from the Black Forest, interweaving as it does natures and civilizations, individual and collective existence. In fact, Heidegger's natural world is ultimately abstract despite its wooden roots. Humboldt makes sense of the world by constantly recreating and updating relations between space and time, between past, present, and future experiences in different places at different stages of his life. Humboldt's mode of existence is not one of worry and concern, but one of seeking experience, of placing oneself and other human beings in relation to the animated and liveable world. A glance at Humboldt's American travel journals is enough to recognize this. In his *Book of Encounters*, Ottmar Ette points out the close interweaving of this mode of existence and summarizes it there and elsewhere in the concept of 'Knowledge for Living' (*Lebenswissen*):

The knowledge for living unfolded in this literary way is based on an experiential knowledge that still opens up to today's readership in an impressive way. The "writing in the face of things" so often emphasized and repeatedly staged by Humboldt creates people and faces that we experience through our senses and that we remember in a sharply contoured way (Ette 2018, p. VI).

What is a more fitting supplement to Jonathan Bate's important literary-political insight into the proactive role of poetry in creating an ecological consciousness than this literarily re-experienced knowledge? Complementary to the eco-political demands of the present; contrary to the neo-romantic and often reactionary nature mysticism as well as the eco-fascist concepts of an identity tied to a 'homeland'/'fatherland,' Alexander von Humboldt appreciated the individual (re-)experience of the many relations to nature. This awareness always guides his descriptions of local environments and regional ecosystems. So can Alexander von Humboldt's writing be considered among other precursors of modern ecopoetry? The answer to this question and further research into it should, above all, subject the nature writer Humboldt to deeper aesthetic analysis. It would further emphasize the Humboldtian literary aesthetics, which appeal to the individual's existential experience of nature despite the distancing power of language. Beyond that, it would deal with an aesthetics of nature that always refers local surroundings to their planetary embedding. This interconnectedness is steeped neither in Romantic lonely spirituality nor in individualist exclusiveness but enlivened by other living beings, cultures, and languages.¹⁰

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