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*Aesthetics and Politics in  
Wilhelm von Humboldt*

Edited by  
Isabella Ferron

with a foreword by  
Marco Ivaldo

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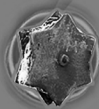
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# Why Humboldt Now? Does His Legacy live on?

An Introduction

Isabella Ferron

Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767-1835), who is universally known as a cosmopolitan linguist, philosopher, statesman and writer, is the focus of this monographic issue of “Odradek”. The basic idea underlying our interest in his thought is that, in times of great complexity such as ours, his reflections on language, politics, education etc., give us tools to interpret and better understand the present times. The figure of Wilhelm von Humboldt and his ideas still fascinate scholars across different disciplines – from Philosophy to Linguistics and philosophical Anthropology – and constitute a focus of research. In the Italian scholarly world, new publications and studies testify to this enduring interest in Humboldt’s work, as illustrated for instance by Carrano, Massimilla and Tessitore, *Wilhelm von Humboldt, duecentocinquant’anni dopo. Incontri e confronti* (2017).

Humboldt spent most of his life in Berlin, but also in other important European cultural centers such as Paris, which he experienced during the French Revolution, London, Vienna, and Rome – where he was in close contact with the great minds of his time,

including Schiller, Goethe, Fichte, Schleiermacher, and Kant. He saw his whole life as work in progress, as an incessant journey in the service of Science. Born and bred in the milieu of the Berlin Enlightenment, Humboldt made the study of man in all his empirical manifestations his primary interest, as shown by his idea of philosophical Anthropology, his research on human language, and his idea of the State. The starting point of the following reflections is the analysis of Humboldt's political thought, which is especially interesting, as it is was innovative for its age and remains highly relevant today, particularly as it regards the idea of the role of the State in people's lives, and the concepts of individuality and human diversity. His first political ideas go back to 1791-92; however, his works *Ideen über Staatsverfassung* (1791) and *Ideen zu einem bestimmten Versuch, die Graenzen der Wirksamkeit des Staates zu bestimmen* (1792) were published posthumously. These texts are very important as they help us to understand the genesis and the development of his ideas, and hence to interpret them. Humboldt's political reflections constitute a guiding thread running through all his works, whether they deal with literary criticism (*Ästhetische Versuche. Erster Theil. Über Göthe's Herrmann und Dorothea* [1799]; *Über Schiller und den Gang seiner Geistesentwicklung* [1830]), with the study of languages (*Pindars "Olympische Oden"* [1816]; *Aischylos' "Agamemnon"* [1816]; *Über das vergleichende Sprachstudium in Beziehung auf die verschiedenen Epochen der Sprachentwicklung* [1820]), or with Anthropology (*Über den Geschlechtsunterschied*

*und dessen Einfluss auf die organische Natur* [1794]; *Über männliche und weibliche Form* [1795]; *Plan einer vergleichenden Anthropologie* [1797]). Philosophical Anthropology, Aesthetics, History, Religion, the study of Language (Linguistics, Historical Linguistics), and Philosophy represent the main aspects of Humboldt's ideas and can be analyzed from different points of view, according to different methods and ways of thinking. It is not only a question of examining its development during Humboldt's era, but also of finding possible traces of his work in different periods of time and in particular authors, such as for instance Stuart Mill, who cited Humboldt's *Ideen zu einem bestimmten Versuch, die Graenzen der Wirksamkeit des Staates zu bestimmen* in his Preface to *On Liberty* (1859), or Noam Chomsky, whose linguistic theories developed Humboldt's ideas on language and languages (linguistic universals, the idea of a language structure etc.) in new ways.

As both the figure of Humboldt and his thought have been studied in detail, it is not an easy task to say something original about them. By attempting to investigate his thought from a cross-cultural and cross-disciplinary perspective, the contributors to this volume provide different and original analyses of Humboldt's thought and reveal its enduring significance. The word 'thought', in this context, refers to his attempt to describe several human manifestations as scientific objects not just from the outside, but also from an internal point of view. The clearest example of Humboldt's thinking is his work on language: language is not

only an object of analysis, but also the constitutive and generating force behind the whole process of human knowledge. With his study of language he points out and highlights human diversity, the multitude of perspectives that is given through different languages, but also within every language, every individual speaker, and at every moment of speaking. Language is therefore not only a medium to communicate, but also a form of cognition that has to do with our idea of the world and ourselves. Through language human beings come face to face with the experience of the world in all its breadth and diversity, and hence understand their place in society. Humboldt believes that – without language – there cannot be a human world. If language is more than a tool to communicate, it also suggests that – for Humboldt – meaning is not preconceived, but comes up each time in a new discourse. Therefore, defining language as a world-view provides access to meaning. The world is constantly created through the knowing subject's dialogical reaction to the other and to others, and can be seen as an open, creative and communal process. This implies flexibility with respect to our ideas and an openness to the future; hence, it makes Humboldt's thought relevant to this time of crucial decisions for the humanities. His views on language, politics, art and education still touch us and allow us to reflect on some of the most enduring questions, i.e. questions of identity and otherness, of individualism and universalism, which are still central to how we deal with the most pressing social issues, such as mass migration, multiculturalism and



multilingualism. The articles of this monographic issue, which includes contributions by some of the most renowned Humboldt specialists, is an attempt to better understand his thought across a wide range of concrete topics.

The present issue bears witness to the breadth of Humboldt's thought, which encompasses the fields of linguistics, language policy, translation theory, philosophy and political thought. It is striking that throughout these contributions, and in all the fields touched upon, the dialogical comes up as a crucial element. The issue begins with Gerda Haßler's *Humboldts Konzept einer sprachlichen Weltansicht und seine Stellung in der Geschichte des sprachlichen Relativismus*: Haßler shows how the idea of a linguistic world-view was clearly expressed in German national Romantic thought in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, where language was seen as the expression of the spirit of a nation. In this context, Wilhelm von Humboldt declared that every language shaped its speakers' world-view, but he also saw a possibility to improve human knowledge in the interaction of languages. Haßler points out how, after the Neo-Humboldtian school revitalised the idea of an influence of language on thought in a reductionist way, certain authors, such as John J. Gumperz and Stephen C. Levinson, tried to rethink linguistic relativity and to prove it by empirical results.

In their essay *Wilhelm von Humboldt filosofo del linguaggio e il relativismo linguistico*, Gensini and De Luca focus on Humboldt's influence on linguistic studies through his theory that a speech community's

native language shapes the way in which it organizes thought. Since the 1920s, Humboldt's idea that language is not just a simple instrument, but rather a condition of possibility for human knowledge, has been the backbone of so-called "linguistic relativism", traditionally known as the "Sapir-Whorf hypothesis". In the first part of the article (§§ 1-4), the two scholars reconstruct Humboldt's argument, placing it in the context of the history of Western linguistic thought, while in the second part (§§ 5-7) they provide a brief history of the relativistic hypothesis, highlighting how linguistic relativity represents a theoretical and methodological alternative to the Chomskian universalism. In *Dall'antico al moderno: l'unificazione dopo la scissione*, Carrano sets out from the difference between antiquity and modernity, in order to show how Humboldt kept alive the tension between the two terms with a political view to the reunification of 'virtue' and 'happiness', coherently with an 'aesthetic' way of conceiving the ultimate task of existence. In *Forma e materia. Wilhelm von Humboldt sulla differenza di genere*, Pinna analyzes the two essays on sexual difference published by Humboldt in 1795, *Über den Geschlechterunterschied und dessen Einfluß auf die organische Natur* and *Über die männliche und weibliche Form*. The author argues that the complementarity of the sexes must be regarded as foundational of the relationship between organic nature and cultural life and, therefore, that Humboldt can be considered a forerunner of gender studies. The first part of the article briefly examines the conceptual and cultural premises of Humboldt's

discourse; it then moves on to consider the second essay, *On the Form of Masculinity and Femininity*, to which much less attention has been paid. Pinna suggests that Humboldt develops an epigenetic-evolutionary interpretation of the Kantian problem of the sense-intellect duality, and – in doing so – provides Winckelmann’s classicist aesthetics with a sort of anthropological and naturalistic foundation. In such a way, he establishes an essential relationship between the concept of beauty and the sexual attractiveness of the human body. While the concept of “mutual action” (*Wechselwirkung*) between masculinity and femininity is generally considered a significant advance towards the recognition of gender equality, it actually consolidates the bias of the “naturalness” of the social and intellectual subordination of women.

In *Der Individuumsbegriff in Wilhelm von Humboldts Sprachwissenschaft und Philosophie*, Ferron focuses on the concept of the individual, which plays a basic role not only in the works on politics, but also in those dealing with Anthropology, Language, and History. The individual constitutes the centre of Humboldt’s philosophy, with respect both to his idea of language as the most important expression of the human spirit and to the history and development of his political theory.

In *L’Agamennone nell’interpretazione di Humboldt: per un’ermeneutica del traducibile e dell’intraducibile*, Arsena engages with the German translation of Aeschylus, *Oresteia*, and focuses on Humboldt’s reflections on it. While pondering on the meaning

of the idea of people, Humboldt showed that a translation (of a text, of an historical account, or of a work of fiction) is not just a linguistic problem – which, in this context, provides a pretext for a philosophical investigation – but also an eminently hermeneutic problem.

Thus, starting from the premise that Humboldt's theories continue to fascinate scholars across a wide range of disciplines, our goal is not to offer a complete analysis of his thought, but rather to grasp some of its features as work in progress.