

SQ 20016-17
PHL 500-301-0990
Naturphilosophie and the Search for the Unity of Nature
Wednesdays 3:00-6:15 p.m.
Clifton Building, Room 155.33

Professor Elizabeth Millán Brusslan, emillan@rocketmail.com
Office hours: Mondays 1:00-2:30 p.m. at the Department of Philosophy, 2352 N. Clifton, Suite 150, Office 150.9 and by appointment.

Course Description:

The late 1700s and early 1800s were years of intense and innovative intellectual development in German speaking lands; the arts flourished and aesthetics developed as a serious branch of philosophy. Philosophers, scientists, and artists collaborated without the borders to which we have become all too accustomed. Part of this collaborative spirit arose out of necessity, as certain fields had not yet defined their borders. As John Reddick points out, “[w]e need to appreciate the real enormity of the problems faced by life-scientists in the half-century or so before Darwin did for biology what Newton had done for physics almost two centuries earlier; even the very word ‘scientist’—not coined until 1834 (by William Whewell)—is an anachronism that tends to beg essential questions.”¹ Alexander von Humboldt (1769-1859), working and writing before the “magnificent vantage point that Darwin”² was to construct, did not have an established scheme into which to place his contributions to our understanding of the natural world. Given that Humboldt’s investigation of nature took him on a voyage to America (1799-1804), he also faced the problem of presenting a radical new landscape to his European readers. Charting uncharted territory became Humboldt’s specialty, and it resulted in approaches to his subject matter and literary forms that were (and remain) difficult to characterize. Humboldt dealt with the problem of science’s disarray by carving out new spaces for his areas of inquiry. Yet I hasten to add, that even if, during the time of Humboldt’s writing, the term ‘scientist’ had not come into its present-day use, and even if the fields in which he was working had not yet been sharply defined, he was seen as a “scientist” by figures such as Goethe, Schelling, Schiller, and Schlegel. In part, something as banal as his use of instruments and data collection sealed his identity as a scientist. Yet, as Humboldt himself was well aware, the data collected by means of those instruments, could not tell us the full story of nature’s meaning. If we were to come to a full understanding of natural phenomena, we needed not only to measure the phenomena of nature, but also to approximate them aesthetically.

How should we categorize Humboldt’s blend of empirical and aesthetic methods? Was he a *Naturphilosoph*? A *Naturforscher*? A philosopher of nature? Are these terms that point to a meaningful difference? Or are we dealing with distinctions without difference? Humboldt himself seemed to waver in what his response to these questions might be. Over the next ten weeks, as we read his work in a conversation with some of Goethe and Schelling’s work on nature. I hope we will come to greater clarity of Humboldt, Goethe, and Schelling’s contributions to our understanding of nature, and also to a deeper understanding of just what *Naturphilosophie* is.

Evaluation:

There will be a 15-20 page paper due at the end of the quarter. The paper should address a topic that we have discussed in class, or, if you would like to expand a paper you have written for another (related) course, adding detail from readings we have done, that would be fine too. I would like each person to come to see me or contact me via email before the fifth week, that is, before April 26, to discuss the topic

¹ John Reddick, “Georg Büchner and Naturphilosophie,” in Andrew Cunningham and Nicholas Jardine, eds., *Romanticism and the Sciences* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 322-340, at p. 330.

² Ibid.

and organization of the paper. Ideally, each student would have a draft finished well before the end of the quarter so that I could offer feedback for the final version.

In addition, each participant is expected to do one in-class presentation of 20 minutes. The paper may be a longer version of what you present in class. I will distribute a list of presentation topics.

Required Texts:

1. *Goethe's Botanical Writings*, translated by Bertha Mueller (Woodbridge, CT: Ox Bow Press, 1989).
2. Alexander von Humboldt, *Views of Nature*, edited by Stephen T. Jackson and Laura Dassow Walls, translated by Mark W. Person (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014).
3. Friedrich Joseph von Schelling, *Ideas for a Philosophy of Nature as Introduction to the Study of this Science* (1797), translated by Errol E. Harris and Peter Heath, with an introduction by Robert Stern (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

Some other texts will be posted on d2l.

Recommended Texts:

Karl Ameriks, editor, *The Cambridge Companion to German Idealism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

Frederick Beiser, *The Fate of Reason* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987).

Ibid., *German Idealism: The Struggle against Subjectivism, 1781-1801* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002).

J.M. Bernstein, *Classic and Romantic German Aesthetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

Andrew Cunningham and Nicholas Jardine, editors, *Romanticism and the Sciences* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

Laura Dassow Walls, *The Passage to Cosmos. Alexander von Humboldt and the Shaping of America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

J.G. Fichte, *Introductions to the Wissenschaftslehre*, translated and edited by Daniel Breazeale (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1994).

G.W.F. Hegel, *The Difference between Fichte's and Schelling's System of Philosophy*, translated by H.S. Harris and Walter Cerf (Albany: SUNY Press, 1977).

Terry Pinkard, *German Philosophy 1760-1860: The Legacy of Idealism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

Judith Norman and Alistair Welchman, *The New Schelling* (New York: Continuum, 2004).

Novalis, *Philosophical Writings*, translated and edited by Margaret Mahony Stoljar (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997).

Robert Richards, *The Romantic Conception of Life: Science and Philosophy in the Age of Goethe* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

Friedrich Schlegel, *Philosophical Fragments*, translated by Peter Firchow, foreword by Rodolphe Gasché (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991).

Jochen Schulte-Sasse et. al., editors and translators, *Theory as Practice. A Critical Anthology of Early German Romanticism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).

Schedule of Topics and Readings

Weeks 1-4: Humboldt's Search for the Unity of Nature

Wednesday, March 29 Introduction to course and themes. For 4/5, read *View of Nature*, front matter-115.

Wednesday, April 5 Concerning the Steppes and Deserts: Humboldt's *Naturgemälde*. For 4/12 read *Views of Nature*, 117-140 and 141-153. Also, *Oldest Programme for a System of German Idealism* (1796) (on d2l).

Wednesday, April 12 How is Humboldt presenting nature? Is it in keeping with the ideas sketched in the *Programme* text? For 4/19, read *Views of Nature*, 155-241 and Goethe's *Botanical Writings*, p. 122.

Wednesday, April 19 Ideas for a Physiognomy of Plants. For 4/26, read Goethe's *Botanical Writings*, 21-29 and 215-245.

Weeks 5-7: Goethe's Morphology and the Unity of Nature

Wednesday, April 26 How do we see the unity of nature? For 5/3 read Goethe's *Botanical Writings*, 31-105.

Wednesday, May 3 Morphology and *Naturphilosophie*. For 5/10 read Schelling's, *Ideas for a Philosophy of Nature*, front matter-55 and Snelders, "Romanticism and Naturphilosophie and the Inorganic Natural Sciences 1797-1840: An Introductory Survey" (on d2l).

Wednesday, May 10 Humboldt, Goethe, and Schelling on Nature.

Weeks 7-10: Schelling's Naturphilosophie

Wednesday, May 17 Schelling's blend of speculation and empirical investigation. For 5/24 read Schelling's, *Ideas for a Philosophy of Nature*, 182-92 and Humboldt's *Concerning the Structure and Action of Volcanoes in Various Regions of the Earth* (*Views of Nature*, 243-59).

Wednesday, May 24 Forces in Nature.

Wednesday, May 31 Concluding Discussion.