

**TRANSATLANTIC COMMUNICATION  
IN THE 19<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY  
ASPECTS OF THE CORRESPONDENCE  
BETWEEN ALEXANDER VON HUMBOLDT  
AND GEORGE TICKNOR\***

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**SUMMARY**

The Prussian explorer Alexander von Humboldt (1769-1859) and the North American scholar George Ticknor (1791-1871) met in 1817 in Paris, after Ticknor had studied languages, history, and natural sciences at the University of Göttingen. Two years later, he became the first Harvard Professor of the French and Spanish Languages and Literatures. When Ticknor visited Europe in 1836 and 1856, Humboldt was his guide in the Prussian Capital. Both, Humboldt and Ticknor were mediators between the Old World and the New Continent at a time when nationalism was fashionable both in literature and in politics. Humboldt and Ticknor did not agree on all political questions. However, their respect for each other helped them avoid controversial topics in their correspondence, and possibly in their conversations. With their ability to rank the things they had in common higher than their differences they were able to maintain a fruitful transatlantic dialogue over forty years.

KEY WORDS: Alexander von Humboldt, George Ticknor, USA, Europe, literature, politics.

**RESUMEN**

El explorador prusiano Alexander von Humboldt (1769-1859) y el erudito norteamericano George Ticknor (1791-1871) se conocieron en 1817 en París, después que Ticknor había estudiado idiomas, historia y ciencias naturales en la Universidad de Göttingen. Dos años más tarde, llegó a ser el primer Profesor Harvard de Lenguas y Literatura francesa y española. Cuando Ticknor visitó Europa en 1836 y 1856, Humboldt fue su guía en la capital prusiana. Humboldt y Ticknor fueron mediadores entre el Viejo Mundo y el Nuevo Continente en una época en que el nacionalismo

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\* The correspondence between Humboldt and Ticknor will be published in *Alexander von Humboldt und die Vereinigten Staaten von Amerika - Briefwechsel*. Ed. Ingo Schwarz. (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2004).

estaba de moda en la literatura y la política. Humboldt y Ticknor no estaban de acuerdo en todas las cuestiones políticas. Sin embargo, el respecto que existía entre ellos evitó los asuntos controvertibles en su conversación y posiblemente en su correspondencia. Con su habilidad para clasificar las cosas tenían en común por encima de sus diferencias ser capaces de mantener un diálogo fructífero trasatlántico durante cuarenta años.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Alexander von Humboldt, George Ticknor, Estados Unidos, Europa, literatura, política.

«You will remember, my dear friend, the antediluvian times, when two ingenious Americans of classical education, Ticknor and Everett, traveled all over Europe. Ticknor from Boston is now re-appearing on the horizon. Receive him in a friendly way, just the way you know how to receive guests. Ticknor has been a friend of my family.»<sup>1</sup>

With these words, Alexander von Humboldt announced George Ticknor's second visit to Europe to Baron Bunsen, the Prussian envoy in London. At that time, Humboldt and the American visitor had known each other for almost twenty years. The Prussian scientist and the much younger literary historian from Boston had a lot in common. They were travelers in both hemispheres. They saw the countries they visited with open eyes, friendly but critical. Both were eager to bring home new experiences and to share them with the people at home. They were patriots and, each in his own way, citizens of the world. Neither Humboldt nor Ticknor were revolutionaries but they put much energy into reforming institutions with which they were affiliated. Their respect for each other helped them avoid topics in their correspondence, and possibly in their conversations, on which they could not agree. Ticknor's biographer David B. Tyack has called his hero «a militant mediator between the Old World and the New in a day when nationalism was as fashionable in literature as in politics»<sup>2</sup>. The same could be said of Alexander von Humboldt. Humboldt and Ticknor had a similar social status, they were highly respected by their contemporaries, both had common scholarly interests as well as the ability to make friends among the intellectuals and political leaders of their time. These might be sufficient reasons for a friendship

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<sup>1</sup> Letter from Humboldt to Bunsen, May 24, 1836, in: *Briefe von Alexander von Humboldt an Christian Carl Josias Freiherr von Bunsen* (Leipzig: F. A. Brockhaus, 1869), p. 23-24 (Transl. from the German).

<sup>2</sup> TYACK, David B. (1967), *George Ticknor and the Boston Brahmins* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, p. 2.

which started in 1817 in Paris and was only ended by Humboldt's death in 1859. Nonetheless, this relationship has remained almost unmentioned in biographies of Humboldt<sup>3</sup>. An explanation might be that Humboldt's correspondence was so extensive that his biographers simply overlooked the comparatively small number of letters to and from Ticknor. Another reason could be that the American scholar, though famous in his day, fell into oblivion while his literary friends Ralph Waldo Emerson and William H. Prescott remained well-known – their works are still being read today.

George Ticknor was born on August 1, 1791. He belonged to a Boston family that had first settled in Massachusetts before 1646. His father was an educator and successful businessman, and his mother had also worked as a teacher. George studied law but soon discovered his deep interest in foreign languages and literature. When in 1814 his friend Edward Everett —at that time a young pastor of a Unitarian congregation in Boston— decided to study at a German university, Ticknor saw a new chance for his own education as well. Both Everett and Ticknor sailed for Germany in 1815 to study at the University of Göttingen. In a way, they served as pioneers for other Americans who later felt attracted by German universities.<sup>4</sup>

Ticknor tackled his preparations for the journey to Europe with much enthusiasm. He taught himself German, and practiced it, as it were, by translating Goethe's «Leiden des jungen Werther» into English.<sup>5</sup> In the winter of 1814/1815 the young scholar traveled to New Haven, New York, Philadelphia, and Washington in order to win influential friends for his project. A highlight of this trip was his visit to Monticello, where he was cordially welcomed by Thomas Jefferson who equipped him with letters of introduction to his European friends. It is unlikely, though, that Ticknor carried a letter from Jefferson for Alexander von Humboldt.

In Göttingen, classical philology and philosophy —but also natural history— attracted the Bostonian's interest. Among his teachers were the famous naturalist

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<sup>3</sup> An exception is Helmut de Terra who mentioned Ticknor as one of the Americans who visited Humboldt in Berlin. See Helmut de Terra, *The life and times of Alexander von Humboldt, 1769-1859* (New York: Alfred E. Knopf, 1955), p. 351.

<sup>4</sup> On the attraction of German universities to young New England intellectuals in the first decades of the 19th century see Henry A[ugust] Pochmann, *German Culture in America. Philosophical and literary influences 1600-1900*. Madison (Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1957), p. 66-77.

<sup>5</sup> Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *George Ticknor's The Sorrows of Young Werther*. Edited with introduction and critical analysis by Frank G. Ryder (New York: Johnson Repr., 1952).

Johann Friedrich Blumenbach<sup>6</sup>, the literary historian Friedrich Bouterwek and the philologist Georg Ludolf Dissen. In October 1816, Ticknor and his friend Edward Everett made a pilgrimage to Weimar where they met Goethe.

Before the end of 1816, Ticknor was offered the Smith Professorship of the French and Spanish Languages and Literatures at Harvard which caused him to shift his interests away from the German toward the Romance languages and literatures. He traveled to Italy, Spain, England, and France in order to gain the necessary knowledge and —what was even more important— to establish personal relationships for his new position. While staying in Paris, Ticknor met Humboldt. On April 26, 1817, the young American scholar wrote in his journal:

«The two most interesting acquaintances I have in Paris, thus far, are [August Wilhelm] Schlegel and [Alexander von] Humboldt; and the manner of living adopted by both of them is original. Schlegel's is such, indeed, as partly to account for his success as a man of letters, and as a member of the gay society of Paris. He wakes at four o'clock in the morning, and, instead of getting up, has a candle brought to him and reads five or six hours, then sleeps two or three more, and then gets up and works till dinner at six. From this time till ten o'clock he is a man of the world, in society, and overflowing with amusing conversation; but at ten he goes to his study and labors until midnight, when he begins the same course again.

Humboldt's is entirely different, but not less remarkable. For him, night and day form one mass of time which he uses for sleeping, for meals, for labor, without making any arbitrary division of it. It must be confessed that this power, or habit, is convenient in the kind of life which must be led in a great metropolis by one who, with great talents, wishes to be at once a learned man and a man of the world. M. de Humboldt, therefore sleeps only when he is weary and has leisure, and if he wakes at midnight he rises and begins his work as he would in the morning. He eats when he is hungry, and if he is invited to dine at six o'clock, this does not prevent him from going at five to a restaurant, because he considers a great dinner only as a party of pleasure and amusement. But all the rest of the time, when he is not in society, he locks his door and gives himself up to study, rarely receiving visits, but those which have been announced to him the day previous, and never, I believe, refusing these, because, as he well explained to me, when he can foresee an interruption, he prepares himself for it, and it ceases to be such. All this is, to be sure, very fine; but then, such a life presupposes two things: a constitution able to resist all fatigue, physical and moral; and a reputation which puts its possessor above the conventions of society, and allows him to act as a king. Baron Humboldt unites them both. His ample and regular frame, his firm step, and the decision and force with which he marks every movement, indicate the man who has survived the tropical heat of the Orinoco and ascended the peak of Chimborazo; ... while, on the other

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<sup>6</sup> Blumenbach had also been a teacher of Humboldt's.

hand, his prodigious acquirements, extending nearly on all sides to the limits of human discovery, kindled by an enthusiasm which has supported him where every other principle would have failed, and prevented from being oppressive or obtruding by a sort of modesty which makes it impossible for him to offend, - all together render him one of the most interesting men in the world, and the idol of Parisian society»<sup>7</sup>.

On May 14, Ticknor took down these impressions:

«This evening I passed delightfully at Benjamin Constant's. [...] There were several distinguished men of letters there this evening. [...] They were all assembled to hear the Baron de Humboldt read some passages out of an unpublished volume of his travels. [...] Everything this evening was purely French; the wit, the criticism, the vivacity, even the good-nature and kindness, had a cast of nationality about them, and took that form which in France is called amiability, but which everywhere else would be called flattery. I was therefore amused, and indeed interested and excited; but the interest and excitement you feel in French society is necessarily transient, and this morning my strongest recollections are of Humboldt's genius and modesty, and his magical descriptions of the scenery of the Orinoco, and the holy solitudes of nature, and the missionaries.»<sup>8</sup>

Before Ticknor left the French Capital in August 1817, he had several more occasions to see Humboldt and his new friends, many of whom later remained in contact with the American scholar.

Two years later, Ticknor was back in Boston. Full of energy and with rich experiences, great knowledge and outstanding personal relations, he started his teaching career at Harvard in August 1819. He held this position for 16 years. With his focus on modern languages and literatures Ticknor attracted a considerable number of students. However, most of his proposals to reform the College—to divide it into departments that would group related studies, for example—were not implemented. David B. Tyack has summarized the importance, the chances and the limits of Ticknor's time as a Harvard professor:

«When he resigned in 1835, he was not sorry to leave Harvard. He had found an eminent successor in Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. His attempts to reform Harvard had helped to stimulate similar ventures elsewhere – James Marsh's innovations at the University of Vermont, and his friend Francis Wayland's later re-

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<sup>7</sup> *Life, Letters, and Journals of George Ticknor*, ed. by George Hillard, Mrs. Anna Eliot Ticknor, and Miss Anna Eliot Ticknor. 12th ed. (Boston: James R. Osgood and Company, 1876), vol. 1, p. 129-130.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 134.

forms at Brown, for example. However, no attempt to create universities in the European sense was successful in the period before the Civil War. Yet Ticknor and his fellow reformers<sup>9</sup> paved the way for the revolution in higher education after the Civil War.»<sup>10</sup>

In June 1835, Ticknor left the United States for a second trip to Europe, this time accompanied by his wife Anna and their daughters Anna Eliot and Eliza Sullivan. In May 1836, the family visited Berlin, and Alexander von Humboldt was their guide. This fact is recorded in a letter from Humboldt to Gustav Adolf Fintelmann<sup>11</sup>, the Royal Gardener on «Pfaueninsel», a location the Ticknors wanted to visit<sup>12</sup>. Here are Ticknor's impressions, written in his journal on May 27, 1836:

«This morning, early, Humboldt sent me a truly courtly note, to say that he had made arrangements to have certain collections opened for us to see, - not forgetting, however, at the end of all his courtliness, to give a cut at M. Ancillon, - and at eleven o'clock he came in his carriage to take us to see them. First, he carried us to the Bau-Akademie, - the Academy of Architecture, an institution which has been arranged and formed by the King to suit Schinkel. ...

From the Academy of Architecture, M. de Humboldt carried us to the University, a large and massive palace, built by Frederic II. for his brother Henry, 1757-64, and given by the present King for purposes of knowledge. His object was to show us collections in mineralogy, geology, and zoölogy ... In the collections of zoölogy we found Professor [Martin Heinrich] Lichtenstein, the well-known traveller, who spent six years at the Cape of good Hope, 'when it was little better', as Humboldt said, 'than a *ménagerie*.' I saw him here twenty years ago, and he was then, as he is now, pleasant and obliging, with much the air and bearing of a man of the world. He carried us, I think, through sixteen halls, all of them respectable in their appearance, but the halls of birds really wonderful. Here Humboldt left us, to keep an appointment at the palace, reminding us that we should meet at dinner ...

One thing struck me very much this morning; I mean the great deference shown everywhere to M. de Humboldt. Our valet-de-place and the people of the inn where we lodge, look upon us as quite different persons, I am sure, since he has chaperoned us; and nothing could exceed the bows and the 'excellencies' with which he was received everywhere»<sup>13</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> For example Edward Everett, Joseph Green Cogswell, George Bancroft, Henry W. Longfellow.

<sup>10</sup> Tyack, *George Ticknor and the Boston Brahmins*, op. cit., p. 126-127.

<sup>11</sup> Letter from Alexander von Humboldt to Gustav A. Fintelmann, [Berlin] Friday [May 27, 1836], ALS, Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard University, The Houghton Library Autograph File H.

<sup>12</sup> «Peacock island», a Royal park with a small castle in the Havel river near Berlin

<sup>13</sup> *Life, Letters, and Journals of George Ticknor*, op. cit., vol. 1, p. 500-501.

The Ticknors next planned to travel to Vienna. The following day, Humboldt wrote a letter of introduction to the Austrian Chancellor Prince Metternich. This is how Humboldt introduced the American:

«Presque Américain moi même j'ose Vous prier en grâce d'accorder quelques minutes d'entretien à un Américain très spirituel qui vient tout exprès de Boston à Vienne pour jouir du bonheur de voir le Prince de Metternich. Mr. Ticknor est, depuis 20 ans, l'ami de notre famille. Il a déjà une fois parcouru la plus grande partie de l'Europe»<sup>14</sup>.

Humboldt and Metternich had met in 1807 in Paris where the Austrian statesman was serving as his country's envoy. The Prince respected Humboldt not for his political ideas, but for his promotion of the sciences, in which Metternich was also interested. Thus, the Prussian could recommend his American guest to the Chancellor.

The recommendation turned out to be a success, and on June 24, 1836 Ticknor was received by Metternich. Here are a few passages from the visitor's diary for that day:

«When we were both seated, he fastened his eyes upon me, and hardly took them off for an instant while I remained. He asked me how I had left M. de Humboldt, said that M. de Humboldt spoke of me as an *old* friend, but that he thought he had the advantage of me there, as he had known M. de Humboldt for three-and-thirty years, which by my looks could hardly be my case etc., etc.»<sup>15</sup>.

Metternich and Ticknor met again July 1, this time for a five-hour conversation. Humboldt learned about the meetings and wrote Ticknor the following September:

«Le Prince Metternich, que j'ai vu à Teplitz, a été ravi des entretiens qu'il a eus avec vous. Né dans une république, vous aurez, pourtant, paru plus raisonnable à ses yeux, que ce qu'il appelle mon libéralisme»<sup>16</sup>.

After his return to the United States, Ticknor dedicated most of his time to writing his monumental and, at its time, very influential «History of Spanish

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<sup>14</sup> Letter from Alexander von Humboldt to Prince Metternich, Berlin, May 28, 1836, ALS: Prague, Státní ústřední archiv. A. Humboldt - Metternich'sches Familienarchiv, Acta Clementina C 22, no. 15.

<sup>15</sup> *Life, Letters, and Journals of George Ticknor*, op. cit., vol. 2, p. 3-4.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20.

Literature»<sup>17</sup>. Of course, Humboldt received a dedication copy from the author after its completion.<sup>18</sup> The Prussian scientist not only took a lively interest in all scientific developments in the U.S., he was also aware of important developments in literature and historiography. Thus he praised Ticknor's work as well as William H. Prescott's «History of Ferdinand and Isabella» (1838). He saw these works as good examples of cultural progress in the New World<sup>19</sup>.

In 1852, Ticknor was called to a committee dedicated to the foundation of a public library in Boston. Four years later the influential scholar left his city for a third journey to Europe. This time his mission was to buy books for the new institution. It was twenty years after their last meeting, that Humboldt and Ticknor met again in Berlin. The following letter was directed to the German traveler and writer Balduin Möllhausen<sup>20</sup>, who, with Humboldt's help, had gained a position as librarian in Potsdam. This note illustrates once again Humboldt's role as a guide to his old American friend:

«Mr. George Ticknor the famous author of the History of Spanish Literature is going to leave this city by train tomorrow, Tuesday at 10 o'clock together with his wife, a German-speaking daughter and a niece. They are going to Potsdam and are looking forward to expecting you at 10.30 at the Einsiedler<sup>21</sup> where they want to dine. You will do me the good turn and see them to  
the Friedenskirche<sup>22</sup>  
Sanssouci and the  
Picture Gallery<sup>23</sup> only because of the hall  
the Neues Palais<sup>24</sup>  
the Statue of the Queen<sup>25</sup>

<sup>17</sup> George Ticknor, *History of Spanish Literature*, vol. 1-3 (New York: Harper and brothers, 1849).

<sup>18</sup> Henry Stevens, *The Humboldt Library. A catalogue of the Library of Alexander von Humboldt* (London: H. Stevens, 1863; reprint: Leipzig: Zentral-Antiquariat, 1967), p. 724, No. 10208.

<sup>19</sup> See letter from Humboldt to Johann Gottfried Flügel, U.S. Consul in Leipzig, Sanssouci, June 19, 1850, in: *Memoiren Alexander von Humboldt's* (Leipzig: Ernst Schäfer, 1861) . vol. 2, p. 145-148.

<sup>20</sup> Humboldt to Balduin Möllhausen, [Berlin] Monday [September 1, 1856], ALS: Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin - Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Handschriftenabt., Sammlung Runge. IV, 1180 (translation from the German).

<sup>21</sup> A restaurant in Potsdam.

<sup>22</sup> Church in the park of Sanssouci, built in 1848.

<sup>23</sup> Castle in Potsdam, built for king Friedrich II; the Picture Gallery is a part of the castle.

<sup>24</sup> Castle in the park of Sanssouci.

<sup>25</sup> Marble statue of queen Luise by Christian Daniel Rauch in the park of Sanssouci.



Charlottenhof<sup>26</sup>

the Marmorpalais?<sup>27</sup> or even better Babelsberg castle<sup>28</sup>.»

Here is Ticknor's farewell letter, dated Hôtel St. Pétersbourg, Saturday, September 20:<sup>29</sup>

«My dear Sir,

I have remained in Berlin another day in order to go to Tegel, and have been amply repaid for it by my visit there. I had even a little sunshine, when I was on the hill, and looking towards Spandau. I saw every thing you indicated to me, and saw it all with a most mournful interest; - especially the monument and the *Spes* in the house, which I saw when Thorwaldsen first modelled it in 1818 and Mad. de Humboldt ordered it. But every thing on the place and in the rooms is full of recollections; the whole house is tapestried with them.

Mad. de Bülow has, no doubt, forgotten me, but I took the liberty to leave my card for her.

And now, my dear Sir, I cannot leave Berlin, (which I must do to-morrow morning at 10. o'clock), without once more renewing to you the expression of my very sincere and deep gratitude for all your goodness and kindness to me and mine. We shall none of us ever forget it.

I will beg you, also, to offer the King the homage of my thanks for his favorable regard. His conversation is among what is most remarkable for brilliancy and effect in the society of our time; and I esteem myself most happy to have been permitted to enjoy a little of it<sup>30</sup>.

And now, my dear Sir, I bid you farewell! Since 1817, when I first saw you in Paris, you have been foremost among my *memorabilia*. You will always remain there.

Very faithfully

Your friend and servant

George Ticknor».

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<sup>26</sup> Villa in the park of Sanssouci; reconstructed from an old mansion for king Friedrich Wilhelm IV.

<sup>27</sup> Palace on lake Heiliger See, built for king Friedrich Wilhelm II.

<sup>28</sup> Castle near Potsdam.

<sup>29</sup> Letter from Ticknor to Humboldt, [Berlin] Saturday, September 20 [1856], ALS: Marbach am Neckar, Schillet-Nationalmuseum/Deutsches Literaturarchiv, Handschriftenabt., A: Humboldt 62.2137.

<sup>30</sup> King Friedrich Wilhelm IV had invited Ticknor on September 18, 1856 to Potsdam for a dinner.

Humboldt added the following note to the letter and sent it to his niece Gabriele von Bülow:

«Read the letter at your leisure and keep it. Ticknor said he saw you as an amiable girl. I believe him. I see thee at Philippi»<sup>31</sup>.

From a note to Prescott we get an idea of how Ticknor saw Humboldt during his last visit to Berlin:

«Humboldt was much changed, as might be anticipated; for the difference between sixty-seven and eighty seven is always much greater than between forty-seven and sixty-seven; these being, respectively, the intervals of my acquaintance with him. But his faculties seem as active, and his pursuits of knowledge as eager as ever; while, at the same time, his benevolence seems to grow with his years.»<sup>32</sup>

In November of 1856, Ticknor summed up his experiences in Berlin once again in a letter to the same correspondent<sup>33</sup>:

«On looking over your letter to see if there is anything to answer, I notice with pleasure what you say of Humboldt. He is, indeed, a man worth knowing, and even more so now, than he was when I was first acquainted with him in 1817-19. His kindliness increases with his years. Every day of the fortnight I was in Berlin he did something for me, and every day I either saw him or had a note from him. The minuteness of his care would have been remarkable in a young man. One day, when, at our own lodgings, we expressed a doubt about going to Potsdam, he urged us so strongly to go, and said so much about the changes since we were last there, that we told him we would take the next day for it. The same evening there came a long note entitled 'Plan stratégique pour Potsdam,' containing the minutest directions about going and returning, with a list of everything we ought to see there. On arriving, we found the librarian of the library of Frederic II<sup>34</sup>. waiting to receive us, with a similar note of detailed directions in his hand, and pleased, from reverence for Humboldt, to show the whole, exactly in the order he had appointed, and then see us to the cars to go back. Once, as we were going along a walk where a cord had been stretched, to signify that the passage was forbidden, he removed it and told us to go through. I hesitated, and objected on account of the prohibition. 'I should like,' he replied, 'to see anybody, in Potsdam or Berlin, who will stop me when I have these

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<sup>31</sup> William Shakespeare: *The Tragedy of Julius Cæsar*, IV, 3: «Why, I see thee at Philippi then.» Humboldt's note translated from the German.

<sup>32</sup> *Life, Letters, and Journals of George Ticknor*, op. cit., vol. 2, p. 330.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 340-341.

<sup>34</sup> Balduin Möllhausen.

crooked lines that everybody knows' —taking out Humboldt's note— 'telling me to go on.'

Just so it was when I dined with the King, in consequence of a letter to him from the King of Saxony. It was a large dinner in honor of the arrival of the Duke of Baden, who was married three days afterwards to the beautiful and only niece of the King. Humboldt, as you know, dines with the King every day, and sits in the stranger's place of honor, opposite to him at a narrow table. He had me introduced by the proper person to all the family, and introduced me, himself, to everybody else that I could possibly desire to know, and more than I can now remember; intimated —I have no doubt— to the King that he would like to have him talk to me, —for he did it, a long time after dinner,—and placed me at the table opposite to the bride, as he said, that I might see how handsome she was, and near himself, who, like many men of extreme age, eats very largely, yet still talked all the time, as if he were doing nothing else. He had the great collections in the arts opened to us in the most thorough manner; met us at Rauch's studio; at the time when he knew Rauch had invited us to be there,<sup>35</sup> and so on, and so on, seeming to care for us constantly. I do not believe there is another man in Europe who would have taken such trouble for a person of so little consequence, and from whom he could expect only gratitude».

Only a year before his death, Humboldt wrote a long letter to Ticknor which, at the author's request, was widely circulated in the U.S. as one of the famous Prussian's last missives:

«MY DEAR AND EXCELLENT FRIEND, - Bonds of friendship which have their origin so far back in my family, and the affection felt for you by my brother, William von Humboldt, when you lived in Germany as a young man, seem to impose on me the very pleasant duty of giving you some sign of life, - that is to say, a renewed proof of my attachment to you, and my interest in your country, and a brief account of my labors.

My physical strength declines, but it declines slowly. My steps are more uncertain in their direction, owing to a feebleness (a relaxing) of the ligaments of the knees; but I can remain standing for an hour without being fatigued. I continue to work chiefly at night, being unrelentingly persecuted by my correspondence, which increases the more as one becomes an object of public curiosity. What is called literary celebrity is especially the result of a long endurance of life. This kind of eminence increases, therefore, in proportion as imbecility becomes more manifest. I am never really ill, but often incommoded, as is to be expected at the age of eighty-nine.

Since we were only two persons in the American Expedition (the unfortunate Carlos Montufar, son of the Marquis de Selvalegra, of Quito, fell a victim to his

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<sup>35</sup> Editor's note: «Taking with him the lately arrived folio of the 'United States Expedition to Japan,' which he had just learned that Mr. Ticknor had not yet seen.»

love for the liberty of his country), it is somewhat remarkable that we should both have reached so advanced an age. Bonpland, still much occupied with scientific labors, even cherishing the hope of visiting Europe again, and of bringing in person back to Paris his rich and beautiful collections in botany and geology, is eighty-five years old, and enjoys greater strength than I do.

I have just published in German the fourth volume of 'Cosmos,' and they are now printing the fifth volume, which completes that work, so imprudently begun and so favorably received by the public. General Sabine writes me that the English translation is finished and will appear immediately. The same news comes to me from France, from M. Galuzzi<sup>36</sup>, who has been passing the winter in the south, at Cannes.

The great and beautiful work of Agassiz (the first two volumes)<sup>37</sup> reached me only a few days since. It will produce a great effect by the breadth of its general views, and by the extreme sagacity of its special embryological observations. I never believed that this illustrious man, who is no less a man of a constant and beautiful nature, would accept the offers nobly made him in Paris. I was sure that gratitude would bind him to a new country, where he finds a field so immense for his researches and great means of assistance. I hope he may be inclined, together with his great anatomical and physiological labors among the inferior organisms, to give us also the specific ichthyology of the numerous basins of the 'far West,' beginning with the *Holy Empire of the Mormons*.

Science has lately met with an immense loss here by the unexpected death of the greatest anatomist of our century, Prof. Johann Müller. This loss is as great for science as was for art the death of the immortal sculptor, Rauch. The universality of his zoological knowledge in the inferior organizations places Johann Müller near Cuvier, having a great pre-eminence in the delicacy of his anatomical and physiological work. He made long and painful voyages, at his own expense, on the shores of the Mediterranean and in the Northern Seas. It is scarcely two years since he came near perishing by shipwreck on the coast of Norway. He sustained himself by swimming for more than half an hour, and considered himself quite lost, when he was wonderfully rescued. I lose in him a friend who was very dear to me. He was a man of great talent, and at the same time of a noble character. He was admirable for the elevation and independence of his opinions. By making enormous sacrifices he was able to form a choice library, not only of anatomy, physiology, and zoölogy, but one that extended over all the physical sciences. It consists of more than three thousand volumes, well bound, and of as many more volumes containing dissertations, so difficult to collect. Mr. Müller spent nearly eight hundred thalers a year for binding alone. It would be sad to see a collection dispersed and broken up which was made with so much care. Since duplicates are dreaded in Eu-

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<sup>36</sup> Charles Galuski.

<sup>37</sup> Louis Agassiz, *Contributions to the natural history of the United States of America. Vol. 1, part I: Essay on classification; part II: North American Testudinata. Vol. 2, part III: Embryology of the turtle* (Boston and London: Little, Brown and Co, 1857).

rope, I cannot help fearing lest this fine collection should cross the great Atlantic river. I have almost the air of exciting your appetite when I thus present myself before you as a citizen of the world, while the 'Church Journal' of Vienna calls me, in capital letters, a naturalist assassin of souls, *Seelenmörder*.

Accept, I beg you, my dear and respected friend, the renewal of the high and affectionate consideration which, for so many years, I have given to your talents and to your character.

A.v.Humboldt

BERLIN, 9 May, 1858.

Since so many benevolent persons, colored as well as white, in the United States, take an interest in me, it would be agreeable to me, my dear friend, if this letter, translated into English by you, could be printed, without omitting what relates to our mutual friendship. If you think it necessary you can add that I have myself begged of you this publication, because I leave unanswered so many letters that are addressed to me»<sup>38</sup>.

Ticknor's answer, written in Boston on July 8, 1858,<sup>39</sup> was the final message in a dialogue that had lasted for more than forty years:

«My dear and venerated friend,

I was much surprised to receive your letter of May 9. – I was still more gratified. Indeed I cannot tell you how much I was gratified by it. It contained such excellent news of yourself; —it was so flattering to me, that you should write to me at all—.

You are quite right in supposing that Agassiz will remain in the United States.<sup>40</sup> In fact he has never doubted. He is happily married. His social position is as agreeable as we can make it. His pecuniary resources are quite sufficient for his wants. The field for his peculiar labors is new and wide; and he is not only able, from his fine physical nature, to go over a large part of it himself; but he is forming a school which will carry on what he may leave unfinished. I think therefore, that, by remaining here, he not only does well for himself, but for the cause of science, to which he so earnestly and effectively devotes his life.

I gave him, at once, so much of your letter to me as related to him personally. He was very much gratified with it, and immediately sent to me for you, with his most ample acknowledgements for your kindness, three pamphlets on the subject of the fishes to be found in the basins of our 'far west.' This subject, to which you desired his attention to be called, is a very important part of the Ichthyology of all North America, to which he has devoted himself ever since he has been among us and has made a col-

<sup>38</sup> Letter from Humboldt to Ticknor, printed in the New York Herald, June 20, 1858, p. 2.

<sup>39</sup> Letter from Ticknor to Humboldt, Boston, July 8, 1858, ALS: Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin - Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Handschriftenabt., Sammlung Darmstaedter 2m 1823 (3): Ticknor, George; BL. 3r-4v.

<sup>40</sup> In September 1857 Agassiz had received the offer for an attractive position in Paris.

lection which is already become of great value, and to which he is constantly making large additions. The three pamphlets in question, I forwarded to you immediately, sending them through Mr. Cass our Secretary of State and the diplomatic channel; - so that, if you have not already received them from our minister in Berlin<sup>41</sup>, he will, no doubt, transmit them to you very soon after this letter reaches you.

I enclose you a copy of the translation of your letter to me. I caused it to be published first in the Boston Courier of June 9, and from that journal it has been copied all over the country into all sorts of newspapers. I think that not less than half a million of such copies of it have thus been distributed; - so universal is the interest felt in your person and fame throughout the United States. Every where it has produced the same effect; - astonishment and gratitude for your continued health and strength; - and for your unimpaired intellectual resources and supremacy. In America, we thank God for all these things and count them among the blessings and honors of the age, in which we live.

I suppose you hear much about the United States and its public policy that is disagreeable. Indeed I know you do. But I pray you to believe as little of it as you can. I have never belonged to the party that brought Mr. Buchanan into power and never expect to sustain its measures on any national subject. Still I do not impute to Mr. Buchanan all the political extravagancies that are sometimes charged on him by my more ardent friends. That he desires the extension of slavery I much doubt. That he cannot succeed in extending it, even if he desires so to do, I feel sure. Be persuaded, I pray you, that Kansas will be a free state. I felt certain of this, when I had the happiness of seeing you in 1856, and I have never doubted it for a moment since. It may be a year or two before this result can be accomplished. But it is, in my humble judgement, as certain as any thing future can be. Nor will one square mile belonging *now* to the territory of the United States be cursed with slavery which is not, at this present moment, cursed with it. - Of course, I do not speak of Cuba or Mexico; - I only pray that they may never be added to our confederacy. Nor will they be except with the consent of Europe.

Mrs. Ticknor and my daughter who do not forget your kindness to them when they were in Berlin desire gratefully to be recalled to your recollection. At the same time I beg leave to renew to you the assurances of my respect and veneration.

George Ticknor.»

These last two letters are somewhat typical of the ways in which the two partners liked to communicate. Humboldt praised the works of American scientists and filled his friend in about his own work and his personal situation, especially his health. The final remark, regarding the accusation that he was a «Seelenmörder» (assassin des âmes, assassin of souls) because he did not talk about God as the Creator in his «Cosmos», appeared in many letters

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<sup>41</sup> Joseph Albert Wright.

to various correspondents and is a sign of how deeply Humboldt was hurt by this misunderstanding.

In his reply, Ticknor refers to most of Humboldt's remarks, except for the request regarding the sale of Müller's library in the United States, a task which was probably beyond Ticknor's capabilities. Finally, Ticknor gives his assessment of the political situation in his country, knowing that Humboldt would take an interest in it and might publish it. In this regard, Ticknor's letter to Humboldt appears to be very similar to his communications to King John of Saxony<sup>42</sup>.

George Ticknor was quite influential in the intellectual life of New England in the first half of the nineteenth century. As a Unitarian, he was tolerant in religious questions, interested in the sciences, as well as in literature and culture, both at home and abroad. He was proud of his democratic values and his high moral standards. Ticknor saw himself as a representative of an American elite and found it natural to establish and maintain contacts across the Atlantic with famous scholars and scientists, writers and artists, and aristocrats. Humboldt's role in this network of communication was that of a mediator. He liked being in contact with the American, particularly because Ticknor was willing to help others. Being a master of public relations, Humboldt used the American scholar's influence to have his own fame spread in the New World. On the other hand, Humboldt was happy to use his own connections in order to make Ticknor's European travels real successes.

Humboldt and Ticknor did not agree on all political questions of their time. To give only one example, Humboldt was deeply opposed to slavery in the United States and therefore favored its abolition, even though he knew this would jeopardize the Union. Ticknor regarded the Union as so important that he supported compromises between North and South, even if they included inhuman regulations – this was the case, for instance, with the notorious «Fugitive Slave Act» of 1850, which Humboldt severely criticized. However, Humboldt and Ticknor found their personal relationship more important than these differences. Their ability to rank the things they had in common higher than their differences helped them to maintain a transatlantic dialogue over forty years, which seems to be worth remembering today.

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<sup>42</sup> See *Briefwechsel König Johanns von Sachsen mit George Ticknor*, ed. by Johann Georg Herzog von Sachsen together with E[rnst] Daenell (Leipzig and Berlin: B. G. Teubner, 1920).