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The Kosmos on Whitman's Desk

Introduction: A Strange Term

In the first edition of his monumental poem *Leaves of Grass*, in the section that he would subsequently call the "Song of Myself," Walt Whitman makes a rare move, and speaks of himself directly, as a discrete individual. He describes himself to the reader as "an American, one of the roughs, a kosmos."[1] One may wonder, as an early reviewer did, why Whitman would have dug up this strange old Greek term to talk about himself; one may wonder, further, why he would specifically use the peculiar "k" spelling of the word, when English translations of the word tended (and still do tend) to use the more familiar "cosmos." This second problem cannot necessarily be chalked up to editorial carelessness. Although he did make a few typographical errors in the first edition, his idiosyncratic spelling of certain words ("loafe," for example) suggests that there was a purpose, some poetic need to use this strange spelling.

As various commentators have noted, the term and the associations that came with it were most likely taken from Prussian naturalist Alexander von Humboldt's own consummate tome, *Kosmos*. Laura Dassow Walls writes that Whitman "was said to have written *Leaves [of Grass]* with a copy of *Cosmos* on his desk," and that he "took notes on Humboldt and preserved newspaper clippings about him."[2] David Reynolds writes that "Whitman's sense of 'kosmos' was deeply influenced by Humboldt," and that "if Humboldt uses the word to present a theory of the earth and the heavens, so does Whitman" because of this influence.[3] Any number of other commentators agree that it was almost certainly from his reading of Humboldt that Whitman adopted this term that would become so significant for his poetry.

Whitman used this word as the title of a new poem added to the updated 1860 version of Leaves; it is a poem that personifies the kosmos, leaving the

reader unsure whether Whitman is describing nature itself or a person who is like nature. We will come back to this ambiguity in the later sections of this paper. Furthermore, in every edition of the "Song of Myself," with its various edits and omissions and additions, he left the term as one of the words with which he personally identified. Because of all these reasons, a proper understanding of the term is so crucially important for a full understanding of Whitman's project writ large. In what follows, I will focus primarily on the importance of the term, 'kosmos' in its capacity as a predicate for the poet himself. Other writers have already done a thorough job of interpreting the 1860 poem and the thematic importance of cosmic thinking in Whitman's work, but it does not seem that an adequate explanation has yet been offered as to why Whitman finds it necessary to present himself, the character of 'the poet' in *Leaves*, as a 'kosmos.' Dassow Walls mentions the problem, but quickly moves to other issues more at the center of her study in *The Passage to Cosmos.*

It seems necessary to investigate this term and its Humboldtian associations for two reasons. The first is primarily academic, and follows from what I have already said above: for a robust interpretation of Whitman's artistic work, and for a 'correct' reading of his poetry, we must know why he identifies the poet with the kosmos. As we will see, addressing this matter in more detail will allow us to have an understanding of the internal machinations of the work, the way that the author and the work interact with one another, and the structural and technical conditions for the possibility of the text. That is, to help us understand the problem of 'why' Whitman, as poet, writes his work in the various lists for which he is famous, why he participates in the diffusion of his identity into all the men and women about whom he speaks, and so on. Furthermore, an explication of the identification of the poet with the 'kosmos' will give us an insight into Whitman's philosophical position on the role of the poet and of poetry as political, even perhaps material, insofar as he believes it can change the world. Any reader of Whitman knows that his aspirations were not merely poetic; he did not view his poetry as being confined simply to the realm of artistic production. More properly, we might say that he hoped that he would participate in and anticipate what Jacques Ranciere calls the "transformation of the forms of sensible experience, of ways of perceiving and being affected," and "a mode of intelligibility of these reconfigurations of experience."[4] Poetry, for Whitman, is not simply about a personal, mystical, aesthetic experience, but works to transform the conceptual and even material possibilities of experience.

That is, poetry is for him of political and even world-historical significance. This isn't simply narcissistic posturing on Whitman's part. Rather, he believes that the work of the poet, as he explains in his essay on "Democratic Vistas," is

to provide an "esthetic conscience," without which "our modern civilization, with all its improvements, is in vain, and [is] on the road to a destiny, a status, equivalent, in its real world, to that of the fabled damned."[5] Without going into the reasons for Whitman's belief in the political and national importance of poetry,[6] suffice it to say that without poetry, Whitman believes that America, and any nation for that matter, will be reduced to economic, material, and therefore mechanical and spiritless success; a prediction that has, it seems, all but exceeded in coming to fruition.[7]

So, in order to begin considering Whitman's arguments concerning the actual importance of poetry outside of the field of aesthetics, we should begin to consider the significance of his identification of the poet with the kosmos. In so doing, this section grounds his philosophical claims about the world-historical significance of poetry, thereby working toward the fundamental ground of Whitman's thought in the work of the poet. My claim is that Whitman's use of the term 'kosmos' synthesizes the Humboldtian and Early German Romantic understanding of the work of representations of Nature in literature. In order to begin making a case for this claim, I will begin with what Humboldt himself claimed to have found in the idea of the 'kosmos.'

1. Humboldt's *Cosmos*

As early as his 1807 publication, *Ansichten der Natur*, Alexander von Humboldt's stated aim in his work is twofold. The first is to propose an "aesthetic treatment of matters of natural history" and to "provide the reader with but a portion of the enjoyment that a receptive mind finds in immediate inspection [of nature]."[8] His second aim is "purely scientific": "through the increase of knowledge, to enrich life with ideas."[9] That is, to provide accurate, technical, and scientific information to his reader in order that they might, as he wrote decades later, "gradually [subdue] a great portion of the physical world to his dominion" as a means of improving humanity's objective understanding of the world and improve its quality of life[10]

It is clear that Humboldt's end goal, through these two aims, is not to provide mankind with the means of harming nature, but rather to bring nature nearer to his reader, through artistic, scientific, poetic, and objective means, so that we can better understand our place within the grand play of the universe.

The first goal, traditionally, is taken as a purely aesthetic and ethical aim, geared toward improving our appreciation of the manifold presentation of nature. We can find this sort of idea at least as far back as Kant, who held that "beauty [is] the symbol of morality."[11] Through the aesthetic consideration of nature, as Emily Brady points out, philosophers have argued that "human

capacities which contribute to the development of moral character and to making skilled moral decisions are capacities practised in a focused and deep way through aesthetic engagement" (Brady, 17). In layman's terms, if we consider something to be beautiful, we will correspondingly desire to take care of that thing. "The beautiful," as Kant writes, "pleases immediately . . . without any interest" and is "universal . . . but not as knowable by any universal concept."[12] That is to say that, in the terms of the antinomy of taste, we cannot capture our desire for the moral impulse toward the beautiful in a concept, but we must present and think of this impulse as something universal.[13] Aesthetic consideration of the world means that we can, and must, hold that which we find beautiful to be of some kind of ethical consideration. Humboldt's presentation, which gives the natural world not just in representative terms, but preserves "the breath of nature" by means of engagement with the whole of our senses: description of the auditory, the olfactory, the visual, the spiritual, and the tactile; all of this makes that which is already beautiful live in the mind of the reader.

The second aim, traditionally understood, means just the opposite. To become "masters and possessors of nature" through our scientific knowledge, in a Cartesian or Fichtean sense, means to have the ability to bend the workings of nature to our will. That is, a precise knowledge of the workings of nature provide humanity with the capacity to more effectively pursue ends that it sets for itself; whether that means knowing the average rainfall in a particular area to better plan for crop planting, or developing explosive devices through a deep understanding of the chemical process of combustion, and to use those explosives to break open, and more efficiently mine, mountains containing coal.

While this tension is normally resolved by limiting *some* exploitation of nature in order to justify the rampant use of resources outside of specially designated "nature preserves," for Humboldt, it seems that we ought to dissolve the contradiction in exactly the opposite direction. The technical and scientific explanation and measurements given of the natural world in his work serve primarily to deepen the aesthetic and moral engagement with the natural world that he proposes. We know that this is the case because of what he says in the introduction to *Cosmos*, largely understood to be the ideological centerpiece of the text. There he writes that "the most important result of a rational inquiry into nature is . . . to establish the unity and harmony of this stupendous mass of force and matter . . . and to analyze the individual parts of natural phenomena without succumbing to the weight of the whole."[14] I take this to mean that the purpose of a rational analysis of nature is to more robustly generate an (aesthetic) vision of the whole as an ordered and absolute system. This goal, which corresponds to the former aim mentioned above, is (at risk of making this sound non-rigorous) a quasi-mystical project. Humboldt means to say that

while the whole, as an absolute totality, cannot be meaningfully conceptualized, this does not mean that we ought to hold at arm's length an image of the whole that would present together its disparate parts.

The poetic presentation of the elements of nature acts as the glue holding together the whole of the cosmos in human consciousness even when it cannot be scientifically rendered in terms of a rational connection of cause and effect. This follows the dicta of the German Romantics, who held that, as Novalis writes, "we look everywhere for the Unconditioned Absolute, and all we find are the conditions."[15] While the unconditioned absolute cannot be held in consciousness in the way that we could hold together any given specific understanding of a natural law, we can, through poetic language, hold the absolute, the condition for all other contingent conditions, as an image, as *Ansichten*.

Humboldt's name for this poetic representation is *Cosmos*. The idea of cosmos as an aesthetic whole is one that is given evidence by the endless enumeration of scientific data given in the footnotes of the *Views of Nature* and the various volumes of *Cosmos*. Without the specific data of scientific observation, the idea of cosmos is effectively empty, i.e., a pure idea bred of human imagination. Without the idea of the cosmos to hold together this data, the science is isolated, incomplete, and fragmentary.

Thus, the idea of the cosmos is philosophical. It is the linguistic and rational representation of a whole that cannot be represented simply by conceptual language. It makes a whole of the concrete information that would otherwise be disconnected. It makes moral significance of the whole of reality through an aesthetic enlivening of the brute facts of science. It folds the potentially exploitative understanding of nature into one that finds ethical meaning in every moment of natural existence.

Humboldt's various texts, from *Ansichten der Natur* to *Kosmos*, all utilize this play between poetic and scientific prose to incorporate scientific work into the wider project of introducing the individual to a moral view of nature. His endless enumeration of scientific observations in these texts are propaedeutic to the more essential project of transforming the individual into a subject capable of viewing herself as a moment of the aesthetic whole, of letting the reader find in every beautiful moment of the cosmos more evidence of her moral interconnectedness with the all of reality.

Given this understanding of the ultimate aim of Humboldt's work, any reader of Whitman's can recognize the similarities between his project and Humboldt's. Both seek to find, in the apparently mundane enumeration of mundane facts and images, the path toward a quasi-mystical comprehension of the whole. Both seek a transformation of the individual into a subject—for

Humboldt, the name of this subject was the 'terrestrial physicist'—receptive of the potential connection that she has to all other moments of nature.

But this presents us with another problem. While it is clear, given Whitman's reference to the work of Humboldt and his attendance to the *Kosmos* on his desk, that his understanding of this term is taken from Humboldt, how do we account for the nature of the individual's relation to the cosmos in each thinker's work? For Humboldt, the cosmos is an entity that is external to the subject, a least superficially. It is an aesthetic representation of the natural world *to* which the subject is related. It serves as a term that allows for the subject to incorporate herself into the world in a more meaningful way.

Whitman, on the other hand, defines the cosmos in his journals as a "noun masculine or feminine, a *person* who[se] scope of mind, or whose range in a particular science, includes all, the whole known universe."[16] Even in the "canonical" literature, i.e., the "Song of Myself," he refers to the poet as a kosmos. How can it be that a particular person can be understood as that which is thought of in Humboldt's work as the totality of nature? In none of the extant literature is this problem adequately thought through. Reynolds and Walls both give a passing answer to this problem by referring to the way in which, for both Humboldt and Whitman, the cosmos is presented as earth-centric and anthropocentric. But this is not philosophically rigorous. The terms are not adequately defined. In order to more acutely resolve this problem, we must turn to the philosophical forebears of these two thinkers, the early German Romantics, in order to adequately explain this issue.

2. Romantic Poetry, the Role of the Poet

In order to understand the relationship that the poet has to the cosmos in Humboldt and Whitman, I would like to begin to consider the relationships that Nature, Freedom, and Poetry have to one another particularly in the thought of Friedrich Schlegel. To understand these ideas, we must consider several problems that Schlegel is dealing with in his own work. Primarily, the way that Schlegel is operating in a thought-space beset on all sides by the problems of dualism. Chief among these is, of course, the opposition between nature and freedom. We will turn to this dichotomy first, by giving a review of the constellation of concepts present in German philosophy at the turn of the 19th century.

Kant pointed out that we cannot be certain whether or not we are actually free beings, but that we must assume this is the case to resolve ourselves to the moral necessity of the *Second Critique*. This essentially entails a division between the causal necessity of the natural world and the spontaneous

freedom of the moral order which can be resolved in only two ways. First, "humanity could be absorbed back into nature" in the manner of the various scientific materialisms that would dominate the 19th century, like Darwinism, Freudianism, Marxism, etc. Or second, "nature could be re-absorbed into, or derived from, free and autonomous human subjectivity" in the manner of the various subjective German idealisms to come in the next twenty to thirty years, J.G. Fichte chief among them.[17] These two solutions are both influential on the work of the Jena romantics, particularly in Schlegel's work.

As to the latter solution, Fichte states in the introduction to his *Wissenschaftslehre* that we can either opt for freedom or determinism, arbitrarily. He argues, further in the introduction, that the former is more "reasonable," since the latter is essentially dogmatic; it arbitrarily assumes the existence of an exterior world from which we must derive our own existence. Transcendental idealism, the system which takes freedom as its axiom, is able to necessarily derive the external world from the existence of the free 'I,' but the same cannot be said of the inverse operation. The argument for this is complex, but essentially comes down to the conclusion that in order to prove the existence of freedom, the subject must externalize her freedom and shape the world, infinitely. This is a moral imperative which strives vainly to bring the world and the subject into a unity. It is infinite striving. Whereas later idealists will seek to find a primordial unity which is brought into actuality by the action of some form of subjectivity, for Fichte, the gap between these two realms is always being strived towards, never achieved.

J. M. Bernstein shows that this is an idea ontologized and aestheticized by Hölderlin, who writes that "the blessed unity of being . . . is lost to us," and that "neither our knowledge nor our action reaches . . . a point where all strife ceases." Bernstein takes this to mean that "we have torn ourselves loose from [the unity of nature and freedom] in order to reach it."[18] In the process of attempting to ground the unity of reason, where necessity and freedom coincide, Kant essentially and forever sundered us from the possibility of such a unity. Fichte, as we saw above, confirmed this metaphysically; Hölderlin, and the Jena romantics following him, turned this into a spiritual and aesthetic imperative. Hölderlin, like Fichte before him, saw our project as one of striving toward a unity of being, but unlike Fichte, he saw this as an essentially tragic undertaking.

Enter Schlegel for whom, as Alison Stone writes, "human beings are dependent on nature because nature is an all-encompassing whole which develops into manifold articulations, including humankind, which as such is merely one part of the natural world."[19] This claim is supported by a striking aphorism in Schlegel's *Ideas*: "Man is Nature creatively looking back at itself."[20] Conceived this way, mankind is in a particular position

within nature. Mankind is one particular articulation of nature, which has a manifold manner of expressing itself, and which seeks to understand nature. Again, mankind is nature attempting to grasp itself; trying to reach itself. This is interesting for many reasons, mostly because it's just a really painfully beautiful thought which Carl Sagan expressed in as many words when he said that "we are made of star stuff; we are the way for the cosmos to know itself." Philosophically and historically, it is interesting because of what we have seen about the space in which Schlegel was working, carved as it was by the work of Kant, Fichte, and Hölderlin. For his predecessors and contemporaries, the essential divide between nature and freedom, nature and mankind, is characterized by either the passionate and infinite striving of Fichte, or the tragic loss and desire for an impossible reconciliation of Hölderlin. In these cases, nature and mankind are still understood as irreconcilable.

In Schlegel's thought, we must resign ourselves neither to the scientific materialisms dominating the 19th century, nor the subjective idealisms of Fichte and his successors. This is because he finds the alienation of mankind from nature to be intrinsic to nature itself. That is, mankind is neither simply integrated into nature as a continuous part—as it is in biopolitical scientific materialism—, nor is it a categorically different kind of thing which has to somehow create nature *ex nihilo* to suit its own image of itself as a free subject—we might read Fichte this way.[21] If nature is understood as a thing which seeks to understand or reconcile itself to itself, with mankind as the medium of that understanding, then mankind is at once integrated within and alienated from nature. As Alison Stone writes, "[the romantics] absorb humanity into a nature that already organises itself and thus prefigures human freedom." (Stone, 49)

But how exactly does this happen? Poetry seems to be the key term here. Schlegel writes in his *Dialogue on Poetry* that

> artificial works or natural productions that bear the form and name of poems . . . what are they in comparison with the formless and unconscious poetry which reigns in the plant, radiates in the light . . . ?—Yet this is first, original, without it there could certainly be no poetry of words . . . All the holy plays of art are only distant imitations of the infinite play of the world, the eternally self-forming art-work. (53-4)

For Schlegel, in other words, nature is the ur-poem. He is perhaps following the Kant of the first part of *Critique of Judgment* here, who writes of a kind of "purposiveness" in nature, which we can understand only "artistically, in accordance with the general but at the same time indeterminate principle of a purposive arrangement of nature."[22] The third *Critique*, after all, is Kant's

own attempt to work through the problem of the division between nature and freedom.

In the first part of that text, Kant suggests that in order to bridge the gap between nature and freedom, we must conceive of nature as purposive, neither absolutely free nor absolutely mechanical. This means that it is must be conceived as an aesthetic phenomenon. As I said above, it seems Schlegel is following Kant here. Nature, understood as a work of art, is at once following the laws of nature and acting mechanically, and at the same time breaking the laws and acting freely. It is like a good poem in this sense, keeping with the laws of traditional forms while overcoming its own restrictions.[23] Goethe, in his treatises on the metamorphoses of plants and animals, presents a similar line of thought. He writes:

> Hence we may observe that the plant is capable of taking this sort of backward step, reversing the order of growth. This makes us all the more aware of nature's regular course; we will familiarize ourselves with the laws of metamorphosis by which nature produces one part through another, creating a great variety of forms through the modification of a single organ. (5-6)

Nature is best understood as a work of art because it operates as a work of art, a poem writing itself; neither conforming strictly to eternal law, nor proceeding in an entirely chaotic and arbitrary manner.

This need not be read as a dogmatic claim, nor one that is not philosophically rigorous. If philosophy is a discipline that seeks to analyze the concepts with which we make sense of the world, then we can understand the identification of nature with poetry insofar as it seems that nature does in fact change, grow, and act out a kind of poesis. As we noticed above, nature operates within the rule of creative evolution, creating endless new forms of life as well as non-organic structures.[24] To resolve the contradiction of freedom and necessity by viewing nature as a poem is to utilize a concept (the poem) to rigorously and usefully serve a philosophical end.

For Schlegel, mankind (the part of nature creatively looking back at itself) creates works of art and lives creatively as a way of approximating this poetic action of the world. This is why he writes in the *Ideas* that "the mind understands something only insofar as it absorbs it like a seed into itself, nurtures it and lets it grow into blossom and fruit."[25] Our minds operate as nature does, by incorporating material and letting the material grow and express itself as a natural process. Nature sows itself as seed within us as a means of allowing our minds to process it poetically. In explaining this relation, between philosophy and poetry, Schlegel writes that "whoever has

religion will speak in poetry" and says further that "to seek and find religion, you need the instrument of philosophy."[26] Poetry without philosophy/theory/science is groundless, philosophy without poetry cannot aspire to the absolute. Philosophy without poetry cannot reach the absolute since, as we have said, the absolute, nature, reality, is essentially poetry; a self-alienating natural process which wants to but cannot reconcile the realms of necessity and freedom. Poetry without philosophy cannot reach the absolute because without some kind of theory, we cannot understand nature as purposive, or self-organizing. In his piece on Goethe's *Meister*, Schlegel writes further that without theory, "whatever our talents, we would lack a sense of the whole."[27] Given what we have said above, we might say this in another way: we cannot effectively achieve the goal that nature has set for us without conceiving (perhaps even just simply as a regulative ideal) of nature as a whole.

In the *Letter about the Novel*, Schlegel notes that the novel form of expression is what is so great about Goethe, and Richter A novel is at once an admixture of forms, of song, of history, of fairy-tale, of narrative, and at the same time a kind of a whole. The novel (as a "romantic book") emulates nature and as such is a way that allows us to understand nature itself.

However, this philosophy leads to a unique kind of problem. Stone writes that "the Romantics…equate nature with the Absolute and both with the entire world. This reflects their conviction that humanity is dependent on, derivative of, and part of nature."[28] As Schlegel writes in *On Incomprehensibility*, the absolute is the "single subject" which we "designate the Nature of Things or the Destiny of Man."[29] This "single subject," however, is "incomprehensible" insofar as it "[stimulates our thought] to ever deeper thought." In this way, it is like Kant's "aesthetic ideas," not able to be grasped by concepts. Schlegel seems to take the theory of aesthetic ideas to the extreme here, stating that the very nature of nature is an aesthetic idea. This shouldn't surprise us, given what we've seen thus far. If nature is, as Schlegel thinks, a kind of ur-poem, constantly reiterating itself and taking on new forms, then even the best approximation of poetry to nature will always be articulated too late. He acknowledges this earlier, in the *Athenaeum Fragments* when he writes that the "romantic kind of poetry is still in the state of becoming" and that "that, in fact, is its real essence; that it should forever be becoming and never be perfected."[30] If we are supposed to be the way that nature comes to understand itself, this understanding will never be complete, since nature always becomes otherwise than itself. For this reason, it is essentially incomprehensible. It cannot be comprehended because there is not concept which is adequate to infinite becoming.

This point is best illustrated by reference to the way that nature and poetry relate to time. Since nature is, of course, always changing, no single

presentation will be able to capture it all at once. It takes time to write a poem, and in the time it takes to write this poem, the world has already changed. Even if we posited some infinitely fast poet, one that was capable of articulating every aspect of reality instantly, the world will still have changed by the time that this author sits back to breathe a sigh of relief at having worked so diligently. It is perhaps for this very reason that in the first edition of Whitman's *Leaves*, he tends toward expansive lists, but only when speaking about the world, and not himself. That is, in "Song of Myself," when he speaks of the soul, or the body, or the quasi-mystical union the poet experiences with her deeper self, he is most philosophical; at least insofar as he makes claims and takes a position. When writing about the world, he speaks in highly active and painterly terms, or launches into expansive lists that seem to anxiously accelerate as they seek to mention every new phenomenon that passes under his gaze.[31] This enumeration signals Whitman's intuition that the world itself cannot be given in any one iteration of any poem, but that there is always more to describe. His verse, in this way, signals its own inherent limitation: while the poet is supposed to reflect nature, but giving all of nature place to reflect itself, the closest that any one static text can come to emulating the self-generative and *poietic* power of nature is in the simulation, or embodiment, of this endlessly novel iteration of phenomena. In this sense, as authors articulating nature's attributes, the poet's work always arrives too late to entirely capture the whole of reality. As such, philosophy and theory, paired with poetry, is at best like calculus, approximating the curve without ever coming into contact with it.

3. Gostwick's *German Literature*

But how might have Whitman come into contact with these ideas? Is it legitimate to make the claim that there was some kind of transmission of ideas from the Romantics to the American bard? While we know that Whitman was educated, it seems that he did not at the beginning of his career have a synoptic understanding of the extant philosophical literature.[32]

At least as early as 1837, however, Whitman does make reference to the philosophy of Immanuel Kant, whose work would have most likely been available only through amateur translations or picked up in conversations with individuals who had read his work in German.[33] Another possible source of his early notes on German philosophy is a book we know he had access to, Joseph Gostwick's collection of German thought entitled, *German Literature*.[34] In this collection were pieces in translation from, and commentary on, Hegel, Schelling, Fichte, Herder, Kant, Schiller, Schleiermacher, and, interestingly, Schlegel. The book was published in 1854. We know for certain that he

owned a copy of Gostwick's text, or had ready enough access to the book to make notes on in for several years, from 1854 to the late 1850s, and he may have participated in a reading group of the text with more philosophically literate individuals with whom he was acquainted.

Of most interest to this paper is a scrap of marginalia from 1854-5, where Whitman makes explicit reference to "Frederick [*sic*] Schlegel," writing that "*He makes Literature the representative expression of all that is superior in a nation*—thus elevating it, especially poetry, far above the views of trivial and commonplace criticism, and regarding it as incorporating and being the highest product of human life and genius."[35] This idea will be important throughout Whitman's career, but we can see it most explicitly in his essay, "Democratic Vistas," where he writes, concerning poetry, that "I suggest, therefore, the possibility, should some two or three really original American poets, (perhaps artists or lecturers,) arise, mounting the horizon like planets, stars of the first magnitude, that, from their eminence, fusing contributions, races, far localities, &c., together they would give more compaction and more moral identity, (the quality to-day most needed,) to these States, than all its Constitutions, legislative and judicial ties, and all its hitherto political, warlike, or materialistic experiences," and that further, this poetry is "spinal and essential."[36] In other words, poetry, and literature more generally, express the greatest in a nation; far above the work of even law and politics.

We know that he read Gostwick, or had Gostwick's book nearby, for at least several years after this note on Schlegel. Edward Grier places a fragment concerning historian Barthold Niebuhr in the late 1850s, and in that fragment, Whitman makes direct reference to *German Literature*.[37]

As mentioned before, a reading group existed in Whitman's milieu around the publication of Gostwick's text. It seems likely that Whitman participated in this group, but it is at least undeniable that he held the book to be centrally significant for his development as a thinker and poet. Hegel, who he would have encountered through Gostwick, becomes estimated in an unpublished text from the 1860s as "Humanity's chiefest teacher and the choicest loved physician of my mind and soul."[38] While Robert Falk concludes that Whitman's reading of this text was with an aim "not historically with intent to understand, but impatiently to discover familiar ideas—in short to find philosophical confirmation for what he more or less intuitively felt to be true," it seems clear that under the guidance of philosophical readers present at the reading group, Whitman was able to come into contact with the work of Schlegel and the Romantics.[39]

The fact that he was able to read these texts first and second hand suggests that he at least was familiar with the concepts animating early 19th century German thought. That Falk feels confident in claiming that the ideas

Whitman found were those that he found to be "intuitively true" suggests that what he was in search of was a way to make use of philosophical concepts in his own work. That the reading group took place in 1854 and possibly 1855 means that these ideas were fresh in his mind, or contemporaneous with his writing of the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*.

4. Whitman, Humboldt, Schlegel

Earlier, we found that Whitman's use of the term kosmos in his 1855 version of *Leaves of Grass* was most likely lifted directly from the work of Alexander von Humboldt. We know this not only because he had a physical copy of Humboldt's *Kosmos* on his desk, or because it seems he took a particular interest in the life and work of Humboldt through his extensive newspaper clippings and notes on the man, but because the tactical purpose of both thinkers' use of the term seems to be the same. For both, the concept of *kosmos* is used as a means of radically shifting the perspective of the reader, to transform her into someone capable of recognizing her place within the moral universe, within the whole universe aesthetically conceived as an ordered totality. We noted that there was an apparent inconsistency in Whitman's understanding of the term, however. On one hand, if the term is taken completely from Humboldt, then the cosmos is not something reducible to the personality of the individual. It is at least in some way external to the reader or the subject, as an object to which the subject is related, or ought to be related. On the other hand, Whitman calls himself "a kosmos," and gives a very explicit definition in his journals of kosmos as "a noun masculine or feminine, a *person* . . ." Are we to think that Whitman misunderstood Humboldt? Or that he transformed the concept to suit his needs? Or is it rather that he recognized something in Humboldt's work that perhaps the Prussian author had himself overlooked?

Given what we know of the way that Schlegel and the Romantics understood the role of poetry, as the mode by which nature most clearly seeks to understand itself, I propose that we read Whitman's concept of the kosmos as a synthesis of Humboldt's scientific work and the poetic thought of Schlegel and the other Early German Romantics. While the method and terminology of Humboldt's work is, as Dassow and Reynolds claim, most likely the immediate inspiration for Whitman's identification of the poet with the kosmos, it seems that we cannot make sense of the personal nature of the kosmos, the identification of the poet with the kosmos itself, without considering the way that the Romantics find the poet as the medium of nature. We might go so far as to say that for the romantics, actual poetry is the very appearance of nature itself as self-reflexive. The poet, then, is the avatar

of nature, of the kosmos, as it manifests itself in its attempt to understand itself. Consequently, Whitman is right to identify the poet as "a kosmos," because she participates in the process of the kosmos as a whole coming to self-realization. In that sense, she *is* the kosmo*s*, or at the very least, a kosmo*s*, an image of the aesthetically understood ordered totality of the universe in its own process of self-comprehension.

Whitman thus reinterprets the Humboldtian concept of the kosmos through the lens of the thought of the Romantics, in order to practice the proper mode of philosophical inquiry that is simply theorized by Schlegel, the Romantics, and Humboldt himself.

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Notes

[1] Whitman, Walt, and Malcolm Cowley, Leaves of Grass, 1st ed. (New York: Penguin, 1986), 48.

[2] Walls, Laura Dassow, The Passage to Cosmos: Alexander Von Humboldt and the Shaping of America (Chicago: U of Chicago, 2009), 280.

[3] Reynolds, David S., Walt Whitman's America: A Cultural Biography (New York: Knopf, 1995), 245.

[4] Ranciere, Jacques, Aisthesis: Scenes from the Aesthetic Regime of Art (New York: Verso, 2013), ix.

[5] Whitman, Walt, and Leslie Jamison, Specimen Days and Collect (New York: Melville House Publishing, 2014), 247, 300.

[6] This is another project entirely, which will be undertaken at another time.

[7] Whitman, Specimen Days, 238.

[8] Humboldt, Alexander von, Mark Person, and Laura Walls, Views of Nature, ed. Stephen Jackson (Chicago: U of Chicago, 2014), 25, emphasis mine.

[9] Humboldt, Alexander von, Views of Nature, 27.

[10] Humboldt, Alexander von, Cosmos: A Sketch of a Physical Description of the Universe (London: H.G. Bohn, 1849), 23.

[11] Kant, Immanuel, and Paul Guyer, Critique of the Power of Judgment, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 2000), 225.

[12] Kant, Critique of the Power of Judgment, 227-28.

[13] This is a complex argument, and requires reference to at least §56-57 of Kant's third critique. In brief, one can intuitively understand Kant's point by considering the fact that one cannot assert the universality of one's own taste, but at the same time, in order for that consideration to be considered valid, one must in some way consider the evaluation made to be one that could be considered objectively true.

[14] Humboldt, Cosmos, 24.

[15] "Novalis," in J. M. Bernstein, Classic and Romantic German Aesthetics (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 2003), 203.

[16] Reynolds, Walt Whitman's America, 245-46, emphasis mine.

[17] Stone, Alison. "Alienation from Nature and Early German Romanticism," Ethical Theory And Moral Practice: An International Forum 17.1 (2014): 41-54, 47.

[18] Bernstein, Classical and Romantic German Aesthetics, xxiv.

[19] Stone, "Alienation from Nature and Early German Romanticism," 49.

[20] "Friedrich Schlegel," in J. M. Bernstein, Classical and Romantic German Aesthetics, 262.

[21] In fact, Whitman does just that in an unpublished text when he writes that "the chief forte of [Schelling's philosophy]—seeking to counterbalance and restrain Fichte's all-devouring egoism," or again, that "the difference between [Schelling] and Fichte is that Schelling's philosophy is more largely objective." Notebooks, p. 2015.

[22] Kant, Critique of the Power of Judgment, 17.

[23] Baudelaire, Rimbaud, and Mallarmé are all excellent examples of this conformity overcoming itself.

[24] Kant's analysis of crystalline formations is instructive here.

[25] "Schlegel," Classical and Romantic German Aesthetics, 261.

[26] Ibid., 262.

[27] Ibid., 273.

[28] Stone, "Alienation from Nature and Early German Romanticism," 49.

[29] "Schlegel," Classical and Romantic German Aesthetics, 297.

[30] Ibid., 249.

[31] See, for example, the sections that would come to be labelled #14, 15, 16, 26, and 33, or section #3 in "A Song for Occupations," among others.

[32] When Henry Thoreau read Whitman's work, and subsequently asked if he knew of the philosophy of India, Whitman was reported to have said, "no, tell me about them" (Henry David Thoreau, letter to GHO Blake, December 7, 1856).

[33] Francis Haywood's first English translation of the Kritik der reinen Vernunft was not published until 1838.

[34] Falk, Robert, "Walt Whitman and German Thought," The Journal of English and Germanic Philology 40.3 (1941): 315-30, 318.

[35] Whitman, Walt, "[Frederick Schlegel 1772–1829]," The Walt Whitman Archive, ed. Matt Cohen, gen. ed. Ed Folsom and Kenneth M. Price, accessed 12 April 2016 <http://www.whitmanarchive.org>.

[36] Whitman, Walt, Specimen Days and Collect (New York: Melville House Publishing, 2014), 243.

[37] Whitman, Walt, "[Barthold Niebuhr]," The Walt Whitman Archive, ed. Matt Cohen, gen. ed. Ed Folsom and Kenneth M. Price, accessed 12 April 2016 <http://www.whitmanarchive.org>.

[38] Whitman, Walt, Notebooks and Unpublished Prose Manuscripts / Notes and Index (New York: New York U Pr., 1984) 6:2012.

[39] Falk, "Walt Whitman and German Thought," 319.

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