

Joanna Szczukiewicz

Summary

Title: The epistemic function of the letter: The concept of wholeness in Karl August Varnhagen von Ense's correspondences with Alexander von Humboldt and Ignaz Paul Vital Troxler

This study considers the epistemic function of the letter, i.e. its role as a medium for the transmission of knowledge, in the correspondence of the publicist and diplomat Karl August Varnhagen von Ense (1785-1858) with the naturalist, polyhistor, Alexander von Humboldt (1769-1859) and the Swiss physician and philosopher Ignaz Paul Vital Troxler (1780-1866), using the concept of wholeness as an example.

The study follows current research on forms of knowledge construction and transmission, which emphasises the role of dialogic forms of communication. It refers to a research approach that has led to an increased interest in the study of epistolary communication characterised by its hybrid form, combining features of oral and written translation, and the recognition of its particular epistemic potential.

Two nineteenth-century bodies of correspondence are analysed in this paper. In this period correspondence played a significant role as a common practice of scientific communication. The transformation of the scientific system at the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries contributed to this, as a result of which a new cognitive approach emerged, which postulated the study of relationships and dependencies between phenomena. This required scientists to adopt an interdisciplinary approach and cooperation with representatives of other disciplines. The letter turned out to be an appropriate medium for establishing scientific cooperation, facilitating the new way of perceiving the world and enabling contacts to be made quickly, irrespective of the geographical distance separating the interlocutors.

The correspondences of Karl August Varnhagen von Ense with Ignaz Paul Vital Troxler from 1815 to 1858 and with Alexander von Humboldt from 1827 to 1858 are, due to the intellectual output of the correspondents, representative examples of the cognitive model developed at the turn of the century. They document the letter-writers' interdisciplinary approach to the issues under study, and allow us to observe their dialogue and the interpenetration of ideas. The individual reflections of the correspondents, i.e. the naturalistic views of Humboldt, the philosophical views of Troxler and the literary considerations of Varnhagen, are brought

together through epistolary exchange. The juxtaposition of the two correspondences was determined by the intellectual proximity of the conversation partners, their similar involvement in political matters and their interest in journalistic issues. In addition to substantive issues, formal considerations such as the degree of preservation of the two bodies of correspondence were also relevant. The basis for the present study were the editions of the letters published by Ludmilla Assing in 1860 (Humboldt-Varnhagen) and Iduna Belke in 1953 (Troxler-Varnhagen), which document the course of the analysed intellectual exchanges with varying degrees of accuracy.

The aspects outlined above are considered in relation to the concept of wholeness, which is central to all three correspondents. It has a long scientific tradition, has been known since antiquity and involves reflections of an ontological and epistemological nature. Around 1800, new philosophical, scientific and political insights brought the issue up to date, with the periods characteristic belief in the importance of the complexity of phenomena and their interrelationships, i.e. connections and influences. The starting point for these assumptions was the consideration of the role of the subject in the process of cognition, which was given a central position in the production and transmission of knowledge. The events of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars, which necessitated a redefinition of national politics, were no less important in shaping this issue. As a result, there was a growing need for an integrated view of individual phenomena that had previously been considered as separate.

The indicated model of thinking had a significant influence on the intellectual activities of Alexander von Humboldt, Ignaz Paul Vital Troxler and Karl August Varnhagen von Ense. Humboldt and Troxler adopted this model of thinking in their scientific practice and popularised it through naturalistic (Humboldt) and philosophical (Troxler) research. Varnhagen, unlike his interlocutors, did not formulate a coherent theoretical concept. The texts he produced (e.g. diaries, biographies, reviews) were not scientific in nature and focused on narratives about historical events or the current political situation. Within the scope of this study, it has been possible to demonstrate for the first time that Karl August Varnhagen von Ense's concepts were also based on a model of holistic thinking, which the publicist applied to literary issues.

Humboldt's concept of the wholeness of nature, Varnhagen's wholeness of literature and Troxler's holistic view of man were discussed by the intellectuals in their correspondence and considered in relation to each other. Treated as a medium of intellectual exchange, the epistemic function comes to the fore in the letters. The correspondence of Karl August Varnhagen von Ense with Ignaz Paul Vital Troxler and Alexander von Humboldt documents the long years of

their intellectual exchanges. This allows one to observe the interpenetration of individual concepts and to identify the common projects that emerged from their clash of views.