

The Humboldts' Marriage and the Gendering of Intellectual Space

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My subject today is the marriage of Wilhelm and Caroline von Humboldt:

Wilhelm, the diplomat, linguist, and architect of Prussia's—and the world's—first comprehensive system of public education; and Caroline, collector of art, connoisseur of literature, letter writer, and *salonnière*, regarded by no less a luminary than Goethe as “the most important woman of the age.”¹

My sources are the letters Bill and Li—as they called each other—exchanged between 1808 and 1810.² In 1808 Wilhelm left Rome, the idyllic seat of his ambassadorial appointment to the Vatican, and traveled over the Alps for what was to become a two-year separation. From Berlin, and later from Königsberg, where the Prussian court had fled in fear of Napoleon, Wilhelm and Caroline conducted a marriage by post while he oversaw the reform of Prussian education. The Humboldts' children remained with Caroline, all except for Theodor, whose father brought him north to receive a German education; another son, conceived beforehand, was born after he left.

Wilhelm's letters contrast the privations of winter in Königsberg and commodity shortages in Berlin with his nostalgia for family promenades on sundrenched Roman *corsi* and their spacious villa near the Spanish Steps. His devotion to duty amidst bureaucratic infighting and court intrigue points up the love and warmth of wife and family enjoyed in aristocratic independence. Throughout, he juxtaposes the Romantic melancholy and grimness of the North with the classical beauty and repose found in the South.

Caroline, for her part, writes less floridly and more directly about the difficulties of the separation, about sculptures and family portraits commissioned from Rome's colony of German and Danish expatriate artists, about family vacations to Naples and the countryside, and of course, about their children, both living and dead—particularly the beloved 9-year-old Wilhelm, who had tragically succumbed to fever in 1803. Even allowing for the possibility that fewer of her letters are preserved, the exchange remains lopsided, with Wilhelm the much more voluble, emotionally effusive, and philosophically expansive partner, and Caroline in many ways the franker, more down-to-earth, more sympathetic one.

Letters took about three weeks to reach Rome from Berlin and vice-versa, about a month to and from Königsberg, and sometimes arrived in clumps or out of sequence, making any semblance of synchronized exchange impossible. It was a conversation in fits and starts conducted across long pauses. This situation afforded an unusual amount of space for individual rumination, and in Wilhelm's case, virtuoso philosophizing, with Caroline the idealized, passive, absent interlocutor. Correspondence under such conditions also required unusual emotional supportiveness and literary deftness, lest the other spouse be alienated by an insincere, unclear, or wounding turn of phrase.

Bildung and marriage

The letters are as rich in detail about the pursuit of intellectual self-cultivation, or *Bildung*, within marriage as they are deficient in insight about the Prussian reforms themselves. It is striking how vivid and multi-threaded the partners could be while almost consciously suppressing the substance of Wilhelm's work, whose significance lay

precisely in institutionalizing the ideal of *Bildung* at all levels of Prussian public culture and education. Speaking of the university in Berlin that became a citadel of pure scholarship, or *Wissenschaft*, he wrote “we have established a great foundation for the future, something which...will make history in Germany. The details are too long for a letter.”³ In general, Wilhelm treats the practical motivations and even the philosophical underpinnings behind Prussian educational reform with casual indifference and characteristically Olympian detachment.

The letters, rather than offering private commentary on Humboldt’s public actions, instead provide a fully developed counterpoint to them. The couple’s own interests and concerns predominate: attending to the education of their children, assembling their art collection, passing judgment on the characters of their friends and contemporaries, and using financial worries to sort through the types of lives they can and want to lead. Yet all these were equally a part of the Humboldtian project of self-cultivation Wilhelm and Caroline shared.

The value of the letters, then, is precisely in the seemingly insignificant or incidental particularities of the couple’s marital life during a period of domestic separation. Clearly the couple saw domesticity and official activity as separable spheres of life nonetheless animated by the same principle of *Bildung*. I say “separable” not “separate” since we now know from Anne-Charlott Trepp that the separate spheres model is largely inapplicable to the period around 1800.⁴ Trepp’s rehabilitation of male emotional life, which illuminates the possibilities for men to act as sensitive husbands, caring fathers, and supportive intimates, in fact fits Wilhelm perfectly; so too, her depiction of “autonomous femininity” suits Caroline. At the same time, the couple’s

voluntary and mutual decision to remain apart for two years required conscious effort to sustain and bespeaks, if nothing else, their commitment to explore the ideal of separate spheres in practice and on a number of fronts.

In what remains, I would like to ask how this unusual marriage might also illuminate the gendered nature of intellectual life. By exploiting Wilhelm's dual identity as family man and educational reformer, I use the letters as a foil to the reforms themselves. Rather than merely arguing that his reforms carved out a male-dominated sphere of *Wissenschaft* at the newly-constituted research university, which they certainly did,⁵ I aim to show other, more nuanced ways the life of the mind took on gender-differentiated characteristics during the Humboldts' generation and within their social class and nation.

Child-rearing as *Kindererziehung*

I turn first to the raising of children, *Kindererziehung*, considered as an aspect of moral tutelage or *Erziehung* more broadly. One accomplishment of Humboldt's reforms was to segregate *Erziehung* from *Wissenschaft* by locating them at different educational stages. *Erziehung* became the province of primary schools and secondary-level *Gymnasien* designed to foster character development in childhood and adolescence, respectively. *Wissenschaft*, scholarship, became the province of the research university. Resisting those, like Fichte, who envisioned the university as a residential colony consecrated to the grooming of philosopher-kings, Humboldt's university let unmarried young male students loose in the big city without any kind of oversight. Private tutors who became professors, like Fichte and Hegel, were thus freed from the vestigial duty to stand *in loco*

parentis. And scholarship itself was conceived as a character-building experience of “loneliness and freedom” needed to produce original research.

Humboldt’s canonical reform writings make all this clear. But the letters show that within marriage, Wilhelm by no means regarded the raising of children and the formation of their character as a mere routine preparatory stage for higher intellectual activity. In a woman, these activities were the highest ongoing expression of her *Bildung*.

The capacity to exert moral tutelage, for Wilhelm, was vouchsafed only to the most cultivated women. Most mothers, he told Caroline, only took an interest in their children *after* their “powers are developed, and thoughts and feelings are determined.” Culling higher thoughts and emotions from the raw experiences of daily life was an indescribably subtle art beyond most women’s reach. “They have no taste for the quieter, more powerful, more beautiful weaving of nature in the preparation and formation of the whole, of which thought and feeling are only individual and daily appearances.” By contrast, women like Caroline, though assimilated to nature, acted as agents as enculturation, with the uniquely feminine ability “to feel a part of a creative, living, active nature.” Thanks to her efforts, each of the Humboldt children had acquired his or her own distinct character at an early age.⁶

Educating children was entirely consistent, in this view, with a highly intellectual but resolutely non-scholarly form of *Bildung* possessed by the wife. Motherly intimacy, for Caroline, was not an expression of her emotional absorption in children and her subsumption, with them, under the rubric of immaturity. It was closer to what Rebekka Habermas calls “disinterested parenting.”⁷ Indeed it gave Caroline a much more active

role as educator dispensing love and guidance—as well cultural refinement, as we will soon see—from an adult vantagepoint alongside her husband.

In fact the wife's moral tutelage did not stop with her children, but was continued throughout adult life in her relations to the husband himself. Without Caroline, Wilhelm repeatedly asserted, “the best in me would have been submerged...I would have never experienced the Ancients, never recognized the inmost and deepest in humanity.”⁸

Woman's capacity to influence those around her was in fact manifest at the highest level of intellectual activity: through writing. Uncovering a cache of her letters at the family estate in Thuringia, Wilhelm marveled at Caroline's epistolary brilliance. “It presupposes the entire soul...One feels how in the writing itself the language reacts back on you, how it always awakes ideas and feelings, and this living reciprocity is actually what the art of writing rests upon.”⁹ Not only does the passage about awakening thought and feeling echo Wilhelm's thoughts on child development, but Caroline's immersion in language also parallels her immersion in nature: and for Wilhelm, language was the highest expression of intellect and culture.

Wilhelm lamented that women so often lacked the ability to publish. “It is painful that with women, all greatness that they and *the world in them* creates to some extent perishes unrecognized.” But, he continued, female writing had all the more concentrated an effect for being directed at the intimate sphere rather than the public sphere: “I am convinced that the power that women exert is far greater than that which proceeds from men. Without willing it, women in all their relations put a stamp on the minds around them.”¹⁰

Art collecting as *ästhetische Erziehung*

A second, far less appreciated, aspect of Humboldt's institutional reforms consisted in sundering music and the fine arts from scholarship or *Wissenschaft*. To create a new university he had first had to contend with the various learned academies for scholarship, music, and fine arts found in Berlin as in many other European capitals. The *Akademie der Wissenschaft* he let stand, but reduced its importance; breaking with those, like Schleiermacher, who would have subordinated university teaching to an independent research academy, he famously upheld the unity of teaching and research as parts of the same scholarly mission. And rather than assimilate any of the arts academies to the university's research mission, he fought to free them from the pedantries and petty rivalries of scholars and art critics and thus found truly public institutions for artistic enlightenment and education. Humboldt's reforms also paved the way for the later development of Berlin's famed museums, a task he returned to help complete in the 1820s.¹¹

In all this Humboldt owed much to Friedrich Schiller, for whose close friendship he had Caroline herself to thank. Schiller had made art appreciation the cornerstone of his famous treatise *Über die ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen* and his own inspiration, Kant, made the faculty of aesthetic judgement the central and crowning theme of his third *Critique*.

Within the Humboldt marriage, however, it was Caroline who took the leading role in collecting, commissioning, and restoring works of art. While Wilhelm had waded in Roman ruins and rummaged in libraries, Caroline frequented the Vatican museums, favored the modern arts, and interacted with living people. She consulted with experts in

Rome, Paris, and Berlin on restorations of sculptures and handled the finances and contracts for these projects. She also gathered a group of younger men around her in Rome, most of them northern Europeans, many of them destined to acquire formidable reputations as sculptors or painters. She fed them, paid their debts, convened them for conversation in her salon, commissioned artworks from them, and brought them into the family circle. These male artists mediated Caroline's interaction with Roman high society and intellectual life. Among them, Christian Daniel Rauch in particular was an important source of intellectual, emotional, and possibly romantic sustenance during Wilhelm's absence.

Caroline's interest in art receives about as much attention in the letters as Wilhelm's activities on behalf of education—which is to say, not much. When the subject did come up, Wilhelm consistently deferred to her taste and judgment and insisted that she not retrench in her purchases despite the threat to the family wealth represented by the possible loss of their estates in Poland and Westphalia. Here he used the same tone as *she* did when offering him encouragement in his latest bureaucratic skirmish: art was her turf.

Even though she once called it “fun,” collecting was clearly central to Caroline's view of her own intellectual calling and of her contributions to the marriage. Picking up a thread from one of Wilhelm's letters, Caroline launched into an uncharacteristically philosophical tangent on the importance of music, sculpture, and architecture to the pursuit of *Bildung*. Wilhelm had praised the generosity of a family friend, claiming that “humans and their sentiments...are the only fixed things in the world.” Caroline countered that works of art provided even greater solace and inspiration:

“*Flexibility* in the moral world is the only constant and indestructible thing. So the thought of man lives and weaves, undyingly, and it is this which, unseen, holds together human generations and ties together centuries and speaks to us, livingly, from the abiding song, from the form that it has stamped in stone on figures and great monuments.”

In the very next sentence, she connected artistic education to child-rearing, *ästhetische Erziehung*, in Schiller’s terms, to *Kindererziehung*, endorsing precisely the exalted intellectual aspects of maternal care that Wilhelm praised her for elsewhere: “Blessed and happy is the one who can express the force of his spirit [in producing works of art], blessed also is the one who in quiet and holy love implants it in other souls through the gentle care of children.”¹²

Expressing one’s humanity by producing works of art and imparting it to children were of a piece, she concluded. “It is always one and the same: where there is fullness and energy and health of feeling, these always express themselves powerfully.” All of her activities, it is worth underlining here, were thus manifestations of an active *Erziehung*, the product of “Fülle,” “Kraft,” “Drang,” and “Ausdruck,” not a passive or retiring femininity.¹³

Despite excellent works by James Sheehan, Susan Crane, and others, it seems we know little about the gendered nature of collecting during this period.¹⁴ Clearly Caroline’s art connoisseurship did not simply reflect a general feminization of *Erziehung* during this epoch, as male schoolteachers and male artists attest. Still, *Bildung* as *Erziehung* was more compatible with feminine intervention in both children’s and husbands’ development than with the masculine assertiveness and independence embodied in the ideal of *Bildung* as *Wissenschaft*. In outfitting the Humboldt villa—and

later, Schloß Tegel—with fine art, Caroline created an atmosphere not just of domestic enjoyment and conspicuous consumption but of genuine moral uplift and, in Schiller’s sense, higher education. The nonobtrusive nature of her aesthetic pursuits not only did not conflict with the autonomy of the liberal male individualist, Wilhelm, but instead complemented it perfectly.

Conclusion

Among the many conclusions the letters afford is that the Humboldts saw child-rearing and art collection both as distinctively feminine and intellectually exalted activities. I should emphasize that an aristocratic woman need not have circumscribed her intellectual activity to the household in these ways, least of all in Rome. Eighteenth-century Italy was a haven for female intellectuals acting as improvisational poets, literary academicians, even university professors and natural scientists. Germaine de Staël, herself the Continent’s most influential female intellectual, even researched her 1807 novel *Corinne* during several months as the Humboldts’ next-door neighbor in Rome.¹⁵ *Corinne* became famous in the nineteenth century for its exaltation of woman’s capacity for intellect and genius and clearly had its factual basis in Roman high society, but if Caroline had any contact with the world it depicts, it leaves no trace.¹⁶

Caroline’s activities as an intellectual were simply less public than Wilhelm’s or Staël’s, and pursued outside the public sphere that they inhabited. Paradoxically, Caroline’s intellectualism was by some token purer by the standard of autonomous self-cultivation that her husband himself theorized and to this day embodies. Clearly he envied her for it. “It is the true and just vocation of women not to permit that men, who

are nothing other than slaves chained to particular tasks, be consigned to knock about in material and everyday life, isolated from better and higher freedom.”¹⁷

Wilhelm did not identify *Wissenschaft* as an indispensable aspect of *Bildung*, or even always a desirable one. He had yet to make his own scholarly reputation as a linguist. He had little but contempt for the character of the scholars he was trying to woo to Berlin. And he recognized that Caroline was a much better writer than he.

The key lies in realizing that *Bildung* within marriage represented for both partners a fuller and richer alternative to *Bildung* through scholarship, which is what his reforms have come to represent. It was just as thoroughly gendered, though less predicated than we have been conditioned to think on the simple exclusion of women from the formal academic institutions that today bear his name. In this paper I have tried merely to map out some of the fuller space of intellectual activity in which these reforms took place.

Endnotes

¹ Basic biographical references on Wilhelm include Paul Sweet, *Wilhelm von Humboldt: A Biography* (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 1978-80), 2 vols.; and Eduard Spranger, *Wilhelm von Humboldt und die Reform des Bildungswesens* (Berlin: Reuther & Reichard, 1910). And on Caroline: Hermann Hettler, *Karoline von Humboldt: Ein Lebensbild aus ihren Briefen gestaltet* (Munich: Koehler & Amelang, 2001); and Gustav Sichelschmidt, *Caroline von Humboldt: Ein Frauenbild aus der Goethezeit* (Düsseldorf: Droste, 1989), with the reference to Goethe.

² The entire exchange is published in Anna von Sydow (ed.), *Wilhelm und Caroline von Humboldt in ihren Briefen* (Berlin: Ernst Siegfried Mittler und Sohn, 1909), vol. 3 (hereafter: **Sydow**).

³ Wilhelm to Caroline, 18 Aug. 1809 (Sydow, p. 223). For background on the reforms, see esp. Karl Schleunes, *Schooling and Society: the Politics of Education in Prussia and Bavaria, 1750-1900* (Oxford: Berg, 1989); and Michael J. Hofstetter, *The Romantic Idea of a University: England and Germany, 1770-1850* (New York: Palgrave, 2001).

⁴ Anne-Charlott Trepp, *Sanfte Männlichkeit und selbständige Weiblichkeit: Frauen und Männer im Hamburger Bürgertum zwischen 1770 und 1840* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1996); and idem, “The Private Lives of Men in Eighteenth-Century Central Europe: The Emotional Side of Men in Late Eighteenth-Century Germany (Theory and Example),” *Central European History* 27 no. 2 (1994): 127-152.

⁵ See Patricia M. Mazón, *Gender and the Modern Research University: The Admission of Women to German Higher Education, 1865-1914* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003); and Bonnie G. Smith, *The Gender of History: Men, Women, and Historical Practice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998).

⁶ Wilhelm to Caroline, 30 Nov. 1808 (Sydow, pp. 33-4): “Für das stillere, mächtigere, schönere Weben der Natur im Bereiten und Bilden des Ganzen, wovon Gedanke und Empfindung nur einzelne und tägliche Erscheinungen sind, haben sie keinen Sinn.” Caroline, by contrast, took “Freude an werdenden Kindern” and possessed the uniquely feminine “Genuß...sich als Teil der schaffenden, lebendig wirkenden Natur zu fühlen.” See also Wilhelm to Caroline, 29 Jun. 1809 (Sydow, p. 193).

⁷ Rebekka Habermas, “Parent-Child Relationships in the Nineteenth Century,” *German History* 16 no. 1 (1998): 43-55.

⁸ Wilhelm to Caroline, 29 Jun. 1809 (Sydow, p. 192): “das Beste wäre in mir untergegangen...ich hätte nie die Alten empfunden...nie eigentlich das Innerste und Tiefste des Menschen erkannt.” See also Wilhelm to Caroline, 12 Sep. 1809 (Sydow, pp. 232-3), where he faults Schiller, his artistic genius notwithstanding, for a certain “egoistic tendency” that his wife, unlike Caroline, was not successful in overcoming.

⁹ Wilhelm to Caroline, 17 Mar. 1810 (Sydow, p. 359): “Es setzt die ganze Seele voraus...Man fühlt wie im Schreiben selbst die Sprache auf Dich zurückwirkt, wie sie wieder Ideen und Empfindungen weckt, und diese lebendige Wechselwirkung ist es eigentlich, auf der die Kunst des Schreibens beruht.” See also Wilhelm to Caroline, 3 Jan. 1810 (Sydow, pp. 308-9), commenting on Goethe’s appreciation of her published descriptions of Spanish paintings and reassuring her, somewhat patronizingly, that she is an excellent writer.

¹⁰ Italics added. Ibid.: “Es ist schmerzlich, daß mit Frauen alles Große, was sie und die Welt in ihnen ausbildete, gewissermaßen ungekannt hinstirbt...Ich bin sicher überzeugt, daß die Macht, die Frauen ausüben, unendlich größer ist, als die, welche von Männern ausgeht. Ohne es zu wollen, prägen Frauen in allen Verhältnissen die Gemüter nach sich um.”

¹¹ Humboldt’s partnership with Karl Friedrich Schinkel, ensuring Berlin’s *Altes Museum* would act as a public museum rather than scholarly academy, was only completed much later. See Sheehan (n. 14 below) as well as Theodore Ziolkowski, *German Romanticism and its Institutions* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 314-318. In 1808-10 his activities focused less on art than on music (for which he personally had no taste or aptitude) in crucial partnership with Carl Friedrich Zelter. See his letters to Caroline of 11 Mar. 1809 (Sydow, pp. 111-2) and 19 May 1809 (pp. 161-2). On the broader constellation of musicians and composers, scholars and critics, and musical publics in the period, see David Gramit, *Cultivating Music: The Aspirations, Interests, and Limits of German Musical Culture, 1770-1848* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

¹² Italics added. Caroline to Wilhelm, 24 Jun. 1809 (Sydow, p. 188), responding to Wilhelm's contention that "Menschen und ihre Empfindungen... sind das einzig Feste in der Welt": "das Bewegliche in der moralischen Welt [ist] eigentlich allein das Stete und unvernichtbare. So lebt und webt unsterblich der Gedanke des Menschen, und er ist's der unsichtbar Menschengeschlechter zusammenhält und Jahrhunderte verknüpft und uns lebendig anspricht aus dem überlebenden Lied, aus der Form, die er dem Stein in Gestalten und großen Monumenten aufgedrückt hat. Selig und glücklich, wer den Drang seines Gemüts *so* hat aussprechen können, selig auch wer in stiller und heiliger Liebe ihn in der zarten Pflege der Kinder in andere Seelen überträgt. Es ist immer eins und dasselbe: Wo Fülle und Kraft und Gesundheit der Empfindung ist, drückt sie sich immer mächtig aus."

¹³ These concepts are also typical of the *Wilhelm's* theory of *Bildung*, ultimately derived from Leibniz. See David Sorkin, "Wilhelm von Humboldt: The Theory and Practice of Self-Formation (Bildung), 1791-1810," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 44 no. 1 (1983): 55-73, esp. pp. 58-61.

¹⁴ James Sheehan, *Museums in the German Art World from the End of the Old Regime to the Rise of Modernism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), esp. 56-8, 79-81, 104-6 on Wilhelm von Humboldt; and Susan Crane, *Collecting and Historical Consciousness in Early Nineteenth-Century Germany* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000).

¹⁵ In the winter of 1804-05. See Sweet, *Wilhelm von Humboldt*, vol. 1, 271-2. See also, in addition to Staël's *Corinne: Or Italy* itself, Paola Giuli, "Women Poets and Improvisers: Cultural Assumptions and Literary Values in Arcadia," *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture* 32 (2003): 69-92, and the references therein.

¹⁶ Wilhelm himself regarded Staël as a rationalist ultimately incapable of feeling true pain and passion, as Caroline could, and Caroline's own friendship with her always remained quite cool. This stereotypically German depth and inwardness, Wilhelm declared, that made Caroline the embodiment of "deutsche Weiblichkeit." Wilhelm to Caroline, 7 Nov. 1808 (Sydow, p. 12).

¹⁷ Wilhelm to Caroline, 4 Mar. 1810 (Sydow, p. 354): "Es ist das die wahre und rechte Bestimmung der Frauen, nicht zu gestatten, daß die Männer, die einmal nicht anders als ein an gewisse Arbeiten gekettete Sklaven, bestimmt sind, sich im materiellen und realen Leben herumzutreiben, der besseren und höheren Freiheit fremd waren."