

Translated excerpt

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***Georg Forster. Zwischen Freiheit und Naturgewalt***

Matthes & Seitz, Berlin 2015

ISBN 978-3-95757-090-1

pp. 7-17, 43-50, 178-183

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***Georg Forster: Between Freedom and the Force of Nature***

Translated by Bradley Schmidt



## **Prelude**

### *A dangerous word: nature*

When the world was still large, wide and unexplored, its bulk was weighted in experiences. Everything new was of importance, from the smallest insect in the tropical rainforests to the islands never previously marked on any map, to entire continents with strange plants and animals and even stranger people. There was nothing too trivial to find mention in the travelogues. The planet hadn't been circumnavigated often enough, maps suffered from vitiligo patches of white or dissolved in generalities. The European discoverers enjoyed the sublime privilege of naming bays, coasts, islands, and flora and fauna that no Europeans had laid eyes on before. An aging world seemed rejuvenated. Strange scents enlivened the air. Nutmeg was worth its weight in gold; distant islands on the far side of the world, in what we now call Indonesia, were the source of lusted-after cloves. So much was unknown, never seen before, beyond imagining. Only those who had seen this brave new world with their own eyes – or had pens as active as their imaginations – were in a position to report on it. Traditional knowledge was worth little. Preserved in dusty folios, it was subject to inflation and was worth less with every new discovery. Personal perspectives were the measure of all things. As a signet ring leaves its imprint in hot wax, impressions of the world yet to be discovered were imprinted on the viewer. Georg Forster was a nearly unadulterated medium for such visions. He combined attention to the smallest of details with comprehension of the big picture and never hesitated to express the emotions that nature unleashed in him. He was authentic and open to everything unknown, and was capable of expressing those experiences with astonishing eloquence – Georg Christoph Lichtenberg called him the “sorcerer of prose.” Forster thrived when constantly exposed to new impressions. If there was nothing new to see, he became tired, empty, and disgruntled. This book is about him.

And it is about a connection, the possibility of which has faded so greatly that one is inclined to deny that it ever existed. Today there is no longer a resonance between ‘nature’ and ‘politics’. But this is precisely what Forster was concerned about: in the

reality of a natural politics and with it, the essence of natural revolutions as a breakthrough of liberated self-expression, which would be victorious over the “devil of feudal servitude.” Foster spoke of “truth, freedom, nature and human rights” in one breath. He described revolutions in nature, volcanic eruptions or inundations, for instance, and he referred to revolutions as necessary upheavals of societal circumstances. For him, the two concepts were related by more than mere metaphor. As natural upheavals are not devoid of regularity, it could be that “political phenomena of a moment in time and place in the world... also have their cycle.” Forster looked for this law, which could link the natural world with political liberty. As a nature explorer and enthusiast, Forster possessed a concept of nature thoroughly steeped in observation: he had seen, tasted, smelled, touched, listen to nature, and he had drawn it before he had contemplated it. He always reacted emotionally to it. For him, nature was neither an ideal nor something profane, but rather an overwhelming power that could be experienced directly. Forster had a concept of nature that was tied to the observation of the world in the literal sense and which he only reflected upon and categorized in the intellectual coordinates of his era after the fact.

The time was ripe for an exploration of nature through direct experience: Captain James Cook undertook three voyages around the world in the second half of the 18th century, and Georg Forster – along with his father, Johann Reinhold – took part in the second. They were at sea for 3 years and 18 days. The total distance they covered was more than three times the circumference of the Earth. They were the first to cross the Antarctic Circle and came closer to the South Pole than any before. They crossed the South Seas, sighted New Zealand, Tahiti, Easter Island and Tierra del Fuego, discovered New Caledonia and South Georgia, they made contact with the natives of the South Pacific when it was still uncertain whether they were noble savages or cannibals, they saw fabulous animals and brought new species of plants back with them to England. The nature they discovered was of breathtaking beauty.

At the same time, as the century was nearing its end, a tide in political affairs was building that was to permanently alter the European order: the great revolution of 1789

was to proclaim the freedom and equality of all men and broke with the despotism of traditional systems of power. The time seemed ripe for change. The anciens regimes were rotten on the inside. The French Revolution was like an earthquake that shattered the foundations of the old power structures and caused the thrones of tyrants to crumble.

There can be few who were as involved in both breakthroughs as Georg Forster. He is the point at which the two most important coordinates of his time meet. In word and deed this brilliant writer, naturalist, explorer, translator, draughtsman, and focal point of revolution, combined the two critical concepts of the era in a spectacular manner: Nature and Revolution. During his circumnavigation of the globe with Captain Cook, Forster had developed an immeasurably profound understanding of nature. And he was at the center of political events when – inspired by the French Revolution – he proclaimed the Republic of Mainz in 1793, the first republic on German soil. Driven by his experiences, he dared to short-circuit the connection between nature and politics in the age of enlightenment in a way that no one else matched. The sparks that flew from his core concepts of ‘freedom’ and ‘forces of nature’ lit up the world for a moment: perhaps a ‘natural revolution’ was possible.

Forster played a significant part in the foundation of the modern political era, even if his visions may have foundered when confronted by political realities. The life of this euphoric dreamer, melancholy and self-doubting, the biography of this linguistic wizard and man of action, this supremely talented good-for-nothing, who knew the world and couldn't quite manage to find his place in it, this life seems to fragment like a broken mirror: here the naturalist who explored the ends of the earth with Captain Cook, there the revolutionary waving the banner of the republic.

All too frequently, only one aspect of his life or other is given any heed. For the majority, the easy fascination of his travel writing overshadows everything else. The biographies alone take both of the main foci of his life into account, in chronological order, without,

however, acknowledging the impact of the one upon the other. Yet the two were inseparable: perceptions of nature and of politics, exploration of the world and revolutionary freedom. That is what I want to demonstrate with this book: Georg Forster was naturalist and revolutionary in one, rooted in the German intellectual milieu of his times. Inspired by his impressions of experienceable nature during his voyage around the world, the returnee wanted to realize a new political order – an order that he considered to be the natural one. Combining the concepts of freedom and forces of nature allows one to keep in hand the Ariadne's thread that leads through the labyrinth of Forster's inconstant life: from teenage naturalist to political revolutionary. Forster's achievement lies not just in rounding the globe in a repurposed merchant coal ship, but also in being able to truly leave the old world behind him and to break through to a new era of modern politics.

The connection that Forster proposed between nature and political freedom may at first seem an exotic outlier in the history of ideas, but a closer look soon dispels this notion. In *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit*, Johann Gottfried Herder attempted to give natural history the rank of precursor to the development of human culture. After making his reckoning with the Earth itself and its place in the cosmos, and describing the plant and animal kingdoms, he turned the focus of his historical panorama to the influence of climate on human societies and illustrated the differences with comparisons of Arctic, African, and American peoples. Already, the link between nature and culture was being emphasized: "We never count on miracles in the natural world: we record the laws, which we find to be equally valid, immutable, and unchangeable regardless of location; how? and the kingdom of man with its forces, changes, and passions should somehow be exempt from the chains of nature?" In his opinion, Greek civilization – this was Herder's most telling example – was only capable of developing under the Mediterranean sun. "The entirety of human history is merely a natural history of human energy, activity, and compulsions dependent on time and place." The implied inevitability of nature influencing the development of culture did not, it must be said, seduce Herder into denying the possibility of human freedom. Climate, which he presented as the strongest influence upon cultural development "does

not impose, but does incline.” Natural influences predispose each culture to develop in a set way. Nevertheless: man is free, and culture is an expression of this very freedom. Yet man is not so independent from nature as the ideal of autonomous reason in the age of enlightenment seems to suggest.

Thinking along these lines was not uncommon. Jean-Jacques Rousseau had already postulated that “each climate has natural conditions from which the form of government can be deduced.” And Montesquieu saw multiple sources for the *esprit général* of a nation: religion, laws, constitution, historical example, customs and behavioral norms, and – above all – the climate.

Forster’s viewpoint was not dissimilar. He claimed to recognize a “changing of the seasons ... *in moral relations*.” He picked up the theme: “Knowledge of nature” was necessary not only for the maintenance of physical life, but also for the “edification of heart and soul.” After all, “all that is moral within us must have its basis in physical life.” It sounds harmless, but this formulation conceals a radical concept of natural anthropology: if nature imposes different conditions upon people in different regions of the world, how do they impact on the development of human abilities? “Would the negro,” Forster wondered, “not develop quite different capabilities if he and his progeny were transplanted to England? And vice versa the European in torrid lands?” Like Herder, Forster speculated on the variability of the human character through the prism of physical anthropology. Was there, and this was the central question, a natural law waiting to be detected, which would reveal order in variation and help define the influence of nature on culture? Was a fundamental principle of politics waiting to be discovered, which would help explain not just “the spirit of the present, but also reveal the sign of times to come?”

For Forster, these were not scientific questions with no relevance to current political events. His natural anthropology was drawn up with pragmatic intentions. To document the developmental conditions of the various peoples he planned a *Handbuch der*

*Naturgeschichte* (Handbook of Natural History), which although never realized had been planned out in a first draft schema that remained preserved among his papers. In it, he posed the question: “Is it not noteworthy that among the island dwellers, the Malays, the feudal constitution was decided upon as the first step towards a kind of liberty?” Does climate, one must ask, have an impact on man’s yearning for freedom? Is nature one of the foundations of political life? What reciprocal relationships exist between nature and politics?

That may all seem somewhat bizarre, especially since from today’s point of view the revolutions of this period seem to be an expression of popular sovereignty that contradicts the idea of a natural influence. “Freedom was the watchword of the hour, and Immanuel Kant, the leading figure of the German enlightenment, knew to cast freedom and nature in sharp contrast: Where nature is to be found – be that simply in our own inclinations – there is no freedom. For him, it could be found only beyond nature. In one word: freedom is self-determination. A rising bourgeoisie demanded bourgeois freedoms for itself in the first instance. Private life should be protected from state intervention. Increasingly, however, “political freedom” in the form of participation in political decision-making came to be demanded as well, particularly concerning control of the legislature. The revolutions were understood as being historical demonstrations of the inalienable right of a people to self-determination.

Nevertheless, in the 18th century, the idea of political action inspired and steered by nature, a revolution *au nom de la nature*, was common currency. Admittedly, one could not fairly claim there to have been a common definition of ‘nature’ during this period. It has rightly been pointed out that during the Enlightenment the word ‘nature’ was “an umbrella term for widely-varying desires for change and a battle cry against prevailing unworthy conditions.” And it had been demonstrated that “Opponents as well as proponents of the French Revolution claimed Nature to be on their side.” Diderot and d’Alembert’s *Encyclopédie* contained pieces on *Liberté naturelle* and *Egalité naturelle* which made revolt against despotic repression seem natural. Saul Ascher was convinced that “a political revolution is just such a natural phenomenon, equivalent to others.”

Furthermore, the “progression of the human spirit based in natural law” stood in contradiction to despotic power structures, for they acted “quite contrary to the purposes of nature, and a revolution shall be the result.” For Edmund Burke, a decided opponent of the revolutionary upheaval, in contrast, revolution had made “Every thing seems out of nature.” He saw the French nation as having “let loose the reins of regal authority, doubled the licence, of a ferocious dissoluteness in manners, and of an insolent irreligion in opinions and practices” and a rebellion “with more fury, outrage, and insult, than ever any people” before. “This was unnatural.”

And yet it was the rebels who wanted to restore the natural order in the face of the decadent excesses of modern civilization. The planting of liberty trees decorated with tricolore ribbons and Phrygian caps was visible symbolism of natural renewal of society through free and natural growth and development. Around 60,000 of these trees dedicated to freedom are believed to have been planted in Revolutionary France to “rededicate the commonweal to nature in the sign of the holy grove.” Revolutionaries as well as reactionaries believed nature to be on their side.

Nature – be that the nature of man, of a natural society, or *Natur* ‘per se’ – proved flexible enough to be applied to contemporary and contradictory political positions. That made the ambiguous concept ‘nature’ one of explosive rhetorical force. The buffets and frictions of the fractious zeitgeist had laden in it with electric charge. Whoever had nature on their side could claim with confidence what otherwise seemed beyond their reach. Nature was transformed into a concept that legitimated demands and objections in all areas of life. With a keen awareness of his times, Joseph Joubert noted in his *Carnet* on June 10, 1800 that nature had become “*un des mots les plus dangereux dans la langue française.*”

Forster had also drawn his concept of nature from a rigorous conception of societal development, which left every political theorist who set store by the relationship between practice and reason nervous. Forster’s writings contain a remark on the



naturalness of the epochal revolution in France that might easily be skipped over, yet is of central importance: “Your revolution,” he wrote in *Erinnerungen aus dem Jahr 1790* (Memories of 1790) “made itself.” Within it a power was at work that was not under human command. For Forster, the revolution was a force of nature that swept all before it. Nature was our destiny, down to political events.

In his penultimate letter, written on December 29, 1793 just a few days before his death, he remarked: “The Revolution is a tempest, who can stand in its path? A man, once set in motion by it, can do things that will be viewed with horror afterwards. But the perspective of justice is too elevated for mortals here. What happens, *must* happen. Once the storm has passed, the survivors will recover, and enjoy the peace that returns.” Are passages of this kind merely expressions of rhetorical arrogance? Or should they be taken more seriously than you might at first think? The powerful metaphor of the irresistible natural force of revolution is the conclusion of a line of thought that accepts no insurmountable barrier between nature and politics.

If one seeks an advocate who can lend support to this daring thesis, then one finds him in Goethe. Goethe, of all people! As an opponent of revolution he had scolded its unnaturalness – it didn’t correspond to his ideal of the gradual growth of productive forces. His core political concepts aligned with developmental processes found within nature. Yet even he saw the French Revolution and the fate of the executed French King Louis XVI as a “natural necessity.” “Nature, and nothing of what we philosophers are so fond of calling freedom.” To this, we shall return.

For Forster, the conclusions he was prepared to derive of the naturalness of political action were to prove catastrophic. Worse: by the end, he could no longer understand the political world. Nature had left him on his own. His experiences and ruminations had led him from observation of nature to political action that was confronted with lasting rejection and his own ostracism. His own father wanted – if we can believe Forster’s wife Therese – to see his son “on the gallows.” By the end, few had remained faithful.

“So poor Forster did indeed have to pay for his mistakes with his life in the end! Even if he escaped a violent death!” wrote Goethe after receiving word of Forster’s death. He “deeply regretted” his passing.

We owe thanks to those who have followed their logic into a dead end, because we know not to follow them. Forster’s writings should be read as biographical documents of developing thinking that reflect an incomparable richness of experience of which an attempt was made to recast it as political action. What follows is not about one man’s private life. The few decades of his life – Forster lived only to be 39 – should be explored with a different intention: to create a ‘biography of development’ that encompasses the relationships between experience and action, the lived and the thought, and nature and politics.

So it appears advisable to me to treat Forster according to Hans Stilett’s bravura example in regard to Michel de Montaigne – and consequently to “approach his vivacity with vivacity, making a life story of a life.” It was not for nothing that Forster, who was a brilliant letter writer, preferred the form of the letter in his books too, “because they make events seem more real for the reader.” Forster always had the reader in mind and appealed to him through an unpretentious, elegant and lively prose style. Effectiveness was uppermost in his considerations. Therefore, his writings can be seen as a continuation of his letters. His travel writing offers “nature painted in words that do not decay into dry verbosity,” and essentially, lively narration defined his way of thinking, from *Voyage round the World* to *Darstellung der Revolution in Mainz* (The Mainz Revolution). If one wants to get to the heart of Forster, it is necessary to follow this trail.

At the same time, Forster was an insatiable bookworm, who also explored continents of the intellect as the years passed. For a “thick book” that he was planning to write, he once said, he had “an ocean of citations ready.” It is no different for anyone writing *about* Forster. I believe that Forster should be allowed to speak for himself – one should not skimp on the quotations. He is the unread classic of German intellectual history. It is

well worth it to get to know him in his own words. With the help of collages of citations that draw significant observations first of all from the specific time and place of their writing – primarily from Forster’s extensive correspondence and his diaries – and then also more broadly from his entire corpus, bringing out a full profile of his experiences and reflections.

Forster was no actor driven simply by idealism. As profound as his experiences were, so decisively did he then act: for him, experience and action were “humanity’s great teachers.” His intellect sought always to reconcile the two, but it is better when one does not attempt to sum him up with one pregnant theory or even position. “Forster was no trained theoretician, no philosopher – he permitted himself to philosophize in his unphilosophical manner.” His preferred literary genre was the essay. The manner of thought demanded by the essay permitted reflection without the confines of systematism and provocation without unchallenged stringency. Above all, the essay served him as a means to educate the reader to a mature level, the reader being required to respond dialogically to the presented rather than simply being able (or compelled) to unthinkingly swallow it. Forster was a virtuoso when it came to teasing out lines of emancipatory thought. Friedrich Schiller recognized this fact, despite disagreeing with much of Forster’s thinking: “But even his most insupportable opinions are presented with an elegance and vivacity that made reading them an unusual pleasure.”

So, one should not be tempted to nobilitate Forster through any kind of retrospective systematization. He was quite happy to claim the “noble privilege” of a man to be “inconsequent and incalculable.” Yet at the same time, he was well aware of his limits: “I am only a very little man, and through my nature, through education, fate, and illness so particularly modified and restricted that my capacities do not harmonize with my cupidities.” In an era where the word ‘genius’ was common parlance, Forster saw himself as being mediocre. Extra-ordinary, though, were his many varying approaches to the world, his implication in the political events of the time, and above all his facility with words, which enabled him to capture everything in a wonderful storyteller’s idiom.

In basic terms, when he set off around the world, he was a page yet unwritten. Just 17, he boarded HMS Resolution, and it was to take a lifetime to work through all the impressions this voyage left him with. The practical exploration of nature demands, as he said much later, looking back: “Effort, assistance, and opportunities that we only can only receive with a particularly fortunate roll of the dice. My youth was dedicated to this wonderful career; the biggest arena that a man can tread, in order to observe the wonders of objective existence opened before me: I sailed the world. I can thank this voyage for the development of predispositions that have determined my course in life since childhood, that is to say an attempt to trace my ideas back to a general truth, to unite them, and thus within myself to lend more life and tangible reality to my intuition of the whole.” This “intuition of the whole” cannot support specialization, nor premature insight, nor a systematic framework. Consequently, its greatest import lies in tracing the “development of a predisposition” which over the course of Forster’s life led him from observing nature to revolutionary politics. This development also carried him over the boundary between the old world and the modern political age.

I am writing an experience-driven biography of thought based on Forster’s extensive writing: his significant works as well as the many stimulating but often obscure essays, his reviews and speeches, his diaries and finally more than a thousand letters. Together, they will allow Forster’s thinking to be cartographized and the meridians of his life delineated.

New York, October 2012

J.G.

## *The Sea*

Odysseus' wanderings must be understood as the punishment for a sacrilege. Odysseus is condemned to be at the mercy of the powers of the sea for years without being able to reach his home that he yearns for because he had – according to the constraints of ancient cosmology – taken an outrageous step: his odyssey is the consequence of violating a border. Whoever dares to go to sea leaves behind the area of life intended for humans. “Among the elementary realities we confront as human beings,” wrote Hans Blumenberg, “the one with which we are least at ease is the sea – with the possible exception of the air, conquered later on. The powers and gods responsible for it stubbornly withdraw from the sphere of determinable forces. Out of the ocean that lies all around the edge of the habitable world come mythical monsters, which are at the farthest remove from the familiar visage of nature and seem to have no knowledge of the world as cosmos. Another feature of this kind of uncanniness is that myth assigns earthquakes – since time immemorial incontestably the most frightening of natural occurrences – to the sea god Poseidon's realm.”<sup>1</sup> Going to sea always also means leaving firm ground under one's own feet. This can be taken metaphorically: the sea is the epitome of unpredictability.

A part of the history of the successful expansion of space habitable for humans is that the Mediterranean had already been successfully integrated into a cultivated area by antiquity.<sup>2</sup> The Romans called the Mediterranean *mare nostrum* – “our sea” – not only designating their claim to power over a territory, but also conveying the familiarity with the sea. The seafaring trade, fishery, even naval warfare were all attempts to ‘humanize’ the sea, quickly losing validity beyond the Mediterranean sphere of influence. Travelling the oceans was long considered outrageous. The ‘Pillars of Hercules’ – the strait of Gibraltar that separates the Mediterranean from the Atlantic – was the epitome of the border of the world in which humans could be advised to occupy. The unknown was lurking beyond this border, and whoever was not afraid, was guilty of recklessness. Even the Old Testament story of Leviathan, the sea creature that only God was able to check, refers to the threshold that one crossed once the vicinity of everything beyond the manageable Mediterranean.

The young Georg Forster need not have known anything of all that in order to felt the exceptional nature of the moment upon leaving the harbor at Plymouth on July 13, 1772. If nothing else, the seventeen-year-old leaves his mother and siblings behind without certain prospects of

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<sup>1</sup> Hans Blumenberg, *Shipwreck with Spectator: Paradigm of a Metaphor for Existence*. Trans. Steven Rendall. Cambridge, MIT Press, 1996, p. 6-7.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Braudel, Fernand, Duby, Georges, Aymard, Maurice, *Die Welt des Mittelmeeres. Zur Geschichte und Geographie kultureller Lebensformen*, Frankfurt am Main, 1990.

meeting again: “I turned a parting look on the fertile hills of England, and gave way to the natural emotions of affection which that prospect awakened”<sup>3</sup> – his eyes welled up. The Eddystone lighthouse, built on rocks in the middle of the sea, is the last witness of the old world that he was able to have seen before it disappeared behind the horizon. It was a journey into the unknown. Not only was his own return everything but sure, even the reunion with those left behind seemed unsure. “Those who left behind relatives or parents,” Forster would write towards the end of the journey, “were apprehensive that they had lost some of the number during their absence; and it was more than probable, that this interval of time would have dissolved many valuable connections, diminished the number of our friends, and robbed us of the comforts which we used to find in their society.”<sup>4</sup> Yet when they reach the open sea, he pushes aside these fears from the beginning of the journey. According to his travelogue, the “exhilaration of the beautiful morning and the novelty of our journey through the still-smooth sea” soon gained the upper hand and dispersed “the gloominess of former ideas.”<sup>5</sup> Which other feelings might also be confessed upon embarking into the unknown when the task is discovering the world and in exchange, setting aside one’s own sensitivities?

The sea did not stay calm for long, with heavy swells arising and Forster, who had previously only sailed the Baltic and North Seas, felt wretched, becoming seasick. “The Seasickness has something dread-full in it; it made me indifferent to everything in the world.”<sup>6</sup> He was ultimately able to become accustomed to the waves. However, at no point did he lose the awareness for the dangerousness of the Cook expedition. A catastrophe already almost occurred in Plymouth harbor. The fully loaded *Resolution* had broken away and was drifting towards rocks and threatened to smash against them. At the last minute the sailors were able to hoist the sails and avert the catastrophe. “We shall, in the course of this history, find frequent instances of impending destruction, where all human help would have been ineffectual, if our better fortune had not prevailed under the superior direction of HIM, without whose knowledge not a single hair falls from our heads.”<sup>7</sup> While in retrospect the circumnavigation may have been under the “guidance of *Divine Providence*”<sup>8</sup> – for the time being it became uncomfortably clear to Forster to what extent that kind of enterprise was reliant of “a higher power”<sup>9</sup> and does not lie solely in human hands.

Forster’s descriptions of the storms their ship had withstand during the three years read like the depiction of a battle. As if the sea wanted to punish the intruders for trespassing, playing with

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<sup>3</sup> Forster, *A Voyage Round the World*, AA I, 21.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 640.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>6</sup> Forster, *Tagebücher: Reise von London nach Paris 1777*, AA XII, 7.

<sup>7</sup> Forster, *A Voyage Round the World*, AA I, 20.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

them like a cat plays with mice: “The ocean about us had a furious aspect, and seemed incensed at the presumption of a few intruding mortals,”<sup>10</sup> Forster writes about a storm in January 1774. “At nine o’clock a huge mountainous wave struck the ship on the beam, and filled the decks with a deluge of water. It poured through the sky-light over our heads, and extinguished the candle, leaving us for a moment in doubt, whether we were not entirely overwhelmed and sinking into the abyss.”<sup>11</sup> As a ball on the waves, the *Resolution* frequently only narrowly avoids being shipwrecked.

Forster describes a storm off New Zealand in October 1773 as if the sea had decided to dispose of the explorers. In a lengthy passage, Forster describes the drama at sea by breathlessly presenting the reader the following in shimmering sentences: “Though we were situated under the lee of a high and mountainous coast, yet the waves rose to a vast height, ran prodigiously long, and were dispersed into vapour as they broke by the violence of the storm. The whole surface of the sea was by this means rendered hazy, and as the sun shone out in a cloudless sky, the white foam was perfectly dazzling. The fury of the wind still increased so as to tear to pieces the only sail which we had hitherto dared to shew, and we rolled about at the mercy of the waves, frequently shipping great quantities of water, which fell with prodigious force on the decks, and broke all that stood in the way. The continual strain slackened all the rigging and ropes in the ship, and loosened everything, in so much that it gradually gave way and presented our eyes a general scene of confusion. In one of the deepest rolls the arm-chest on the quarter-deck was torn out of its place and overset, leaning against the rails to leeward. A young gentleman, Mr. Hood, who happened to be just then to leeward of it, providentially escaped by bending down when he saw the chest falling, so as to remain unhurt in the angle which it formed with the rail. The confusion of the elements did not scare every bird away from us: from time to time a black shearwater hovered over the ruffled surface of the sea, and artfully withstood the force of the tempest, by keeping under the lee of the high tops of the waves. The aspect of the ocean was at once magnificent and terrific: now on the summit of a broad and heavy billow, we overlooked an unmeasurable expanse of sea, furrowed into numberless deep channels; now on a sudden the wave broke under us, and we plunged into a deep and dreary valley, whist a fresh mountain rose to windward with a foaming crest, and threatened to overwhelm us. The night coming on was not without new horrors, especially for those who had not been bred up to a seafaring life.”<sup>12</sup>

The danger increased when the *Adventure* slipped out of sight. For reasons of safety, Cook had started with two ships, and now the crew of the *Resolution* had to realize that “our parting with the *Adventure*, was almost universally regretted among our crew, and none of them ever looked

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 311.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 281-282.

around the ocean without expressing some concern of seeing our ship alone on the vast and unexplored expanse.”<sup>13</sup> The longed-for triumph of returning home makes us forget how unlikely a return was. Setting off to circumnavigate the globe with a modified coal freighter was no small matter. Left to its own devices, the risk of becoming unable to maneuver after ship damage increased. After departing from New Zealand in November 1774, they discovered a leak, “but it gave us very little uneasiness, as the water in the pump-well increased only five inches in eight hours,”<sup>14</sup> Forster writes reassuringly in retrospect. One time a storm was so strong that Cook has a copper chain fastened to the tip of the mast and over the ship’s railing when “a terrible flash of lightning appeared exactly over the ship, and the flame was seen to run down along the whole length of the chain. A tremendous thunder-clap instantaneously followed, which shook the whole ship, to the no small surprise of both the Europeans and the Tahitians on board.”<sup>15</sup>

At times the waves were so high that the ship keeled over nearly to 40 degrees.<sup>16</sup> Once they were pushed towards an island whose coast was “of a great height, rocky, black, and almost perpendicular.”<sup>17</sup> Due to a lack of wind there, they were subject to the play of the waves: “hoisting out our boats would scarcely have availed us anything. The ship’s head, her stern, or her broad-side, were by turns directed towards the shore, on which we heard the surf breaking with a much more dreadful sound than it had ever had before, when unconnected with the ideas of immediate danger; at last we fortunately drifted clear of the point at a short distance.”<sup>18</sup>

What would only in the 20<sup>th</sup> century become known as an “existential liminal experience” was a repeated experience on the three-year voyage around the world. The Achilles heel of the expedition was – aside from the health of the crew – the ship. The return depended on the integrity of the vehicle. There was a shock when one evening the fire alarm was sounded: “Towards ten o’clock, we were most dreadfully alarmed by a fire in the ship. Confusion and horror appeared in all our faces, at the bare mention of it; and it was some time before proper measures were taken to stop its progress: for in these moments of danger, few are able to collect their faculties, and to act with cool deliberation. The mind which unexpected and imminent danger cannot ruffle for a time, in one of the scarcest phenomena in human nature; no wonder then, that it was not to be met with among the small number of persons to whom the ship was entrusted. To be on board of a ship on fire, is perhaps one of the most trying situations that can be imagined; a storm itself, on a dangerous coast, is less dreadful, as it does not so entirely preclude all hopes of escaping with life.

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 81.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 606.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 376.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 607.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 475.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.



Providentially, the fire of this day was very trifling, and extinguished in a few moments. Our fears suggested that it was in the sail-room; but we soon found, that a piece of Taheitee cloth, carelessly laid near the lamp in the steward's room, had taken fire, and raised a quantity of smoke, which gave the alarm."<sup>19</sup>

The elemental force of the powers appeared to have been released when they observed four water cyclones in May 1773, those closest to the ship barely three miles away. A few hundred yards from the ship, the sea underwent a "violent agitation,"<sup>20</sup> as Forster reported: "The water, in a space of fifty or sixty fathoms" – about ninety to one hundred yards – "moved towards the centre, and there rising into vapour, by the force of the whirling motion, ascended in a spiral form towards the clouds. Some hailstones fell on board about this time, and the clouds looked exceedingly black and towering above us."<sup>21</sup> They could observe how "the water hurled upwards with the greatest violence in a spiral."<sup>22</sup> When the last water cyclone collapsed, they saw a lightning bolt, but heard no thunder. "Our situation all this time was very dangerous and alarming," even making the "oldest mariners uneasy and at a loss how to behave."<sup>23</sup>

Such experiences left traces on Forster. It is not an exaggeration to assert that the sea brought him to his psychological stress limits. For him the sea became the epitome of death and destruction. He survived.

Despite all the dangers, at least they are spared by sea monsters. Among the most impressive experiences from the strange world of animals is the sight of around thirty wales, one of which came up to within two hundred feet of the ship. Regardless of its size, Forster marvels that they "sometimes fairly leaped into the air, and dropped down again with a heavy fall, which made the water foam around them."<sup>24</sup>

There is a late echo of these borderline experiences. In April, 1790, Forster undertakes a tour with Alexander von Humboldt, laying eyes on the sea at Dunkirk for the first time in twelve years. He writes his wife that "The sight awakens countless images!"<sup>25</sup> Observing the open sea shakes him and unleashes premonitions of death. Forster, world-wise, is afraid of the untamed element, as if caught with full force by the experience of having sailed around the borders of life as a young man. "I will not be able to describe to you what took place in me,"<sup>26</sup> he continues in the twentieth chapter of his

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 478.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 122.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 622.

<sup>25</sup> Forster, Letter to Therese Forster from 14. April 1790, AA XVI, 80.

<sup>26</sup> Forster, *Ansichten vom Niederrhein, von Brabant, Flandern, Holland, England*

*Views of the Lower Rheine*, only to report to his wife and readers. "Completely giving in to the impression this sight made on me, I involuntarily sank into myself, and the image of those three years I spent on the ocean and that determined my entire fate, stood before my soul. The immeasurableness of the sea grips the observer in a darker and deeper manner than the starry skies. There on the still, unmoving stage the eternally glowing lights. In contrast, here nothing is fundamentally separated; a large unity, and the waves merely finite phenomena."<sup>27</sup> The waves "arise and build up, they froth and disappear; the immeasurable swallows them again. Nowhere is nature more terrible than here in the unmoving strictness of its laws; nowhere does one feel more clearly that only the wave is held up against the entire human race, the individual is only the wave that moves from the non-being from a point of separate being into non-being by the entirety into an unmoving unity."<sup>28</sup> Nature toys with humans, if only for a short moment. This might be the insight that Forster was overcome by, aware of death in that moment, standing at the shore of the sea: Nature gives everything and it takes everything away. It is sacred and terrible, enlivening and destructive. We cannot approach its power. He writes to his wife about his resolution that he would "not go back to the ship until I have nothing to lose."<sup>29</sup>

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*und Frankreich, im April, Mai und Junius 1790*, AA IX, 236.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Forster, Letter to Therese Forster from 14. April 1790, AA XVI, 80.

### *The French Liberty in Mainz*

In April 1788, when Forster assumed his position as librarian in Mainz, in this Electorate there was no political ferment to be found. There were certainly a handful of professors who saw themselves tied to the critical spirit of the Enlightenment, so Mainz was no provincial hamlet, but its political structures were not any different from the rest of aristocratic society. Germany was not a united nation, but rather a patchwork of small states with confessional and cultural differences, missing a unifying central power, even if the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation remained in existence until 1806.

In Mainz, Forster notes with surprise how rigidly the court etiquette was maintained. “If one is even presented to the Elector, then one goes wearing tail-coats.”<sup>1</sup> The class structure is still meticulously separated, and hierarchy of the nobility is unshaken. Following his arrival in Mainz, Forster prepares his wife to the familial isolation to be expected in light of the simple housing, “because even if we were to be invited to the genteel, they would not return our visit.”<sup>2</sup> His humble income provided by the modest position as librarian does not allow him to advance to higher circles. “Occasionally a stranger, and a couple friends, this is my company and my refreshment.”<sup>3</sup> Life unfolds in private, as Forster writes Schiller, “for no one understands us outside of our circle.”<sup>4</sup>

Despite all his intellectual enlightenment, Forster was required to move in a world that was still dictated by authority. A small detail illustrates the gulf between the Elector and his servants. In a missive to the Elector concerning the accoutrements of the library, on September 9, 1792, Forster petitions “that your royal grace would be moved to graciously grant the University of the Electorate permission that in eternal memorial of the unlimited benefaction poured out and endowed upon from its second founder, its restorer, the father of the fatherland, and the protector and benefactor of the sciences and arts to erect a marble bust of *His Gracious Elector* in the library room on a beautiful pedestal with an epigraph of thanks.”<sup>5</sup>

In contrast, on September 17, 1826, in the context of a festive ceremony, Goethe had the alleged skull of Schiller, who had died in 1805, brought to the Anna Amalie Library in Weimar and locked

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<sup>1</sup> Forster, *Letter to Therese Forster from April 11, 1788*, AA XV, 142.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> Forster, *Letter to Johann Gottlieb Herder from December 10, 1791*, AA XVI, 392.

<sup>4</sup> Forster, *Letter to Friedrich Schiller*, AA XVI, 212.

<sup>5</sup> Forster, *Unterthänigstes Pro Memoria (September 9, 1792)*, AA XVII, 181. Cf. Mathy, Helmut, “Die letzten Aktivitäten Georg Forsters als Mainzer Universitätsbibliothekar,” in: *Gutenberg-Jahrbuch* 1979, 319–324.

inside the pedestal of Schiller's bust by Johann Heinrich von Dannecker.<sup>6</sup> Although it was agreed upon by Carl August – whose “command and approval”<sup>7</sup> was acquired in advance –it came about without much ado. The difference of the comparable scene illustrates the changing times: while Forster, still in pre-revolutionary Mainz, aspired for tactical reasons to have a symbolic enthronement of the Elector in the library as an institutional representation of the intellectual world, Goethe aplomb is witnessed to by bringing the unrivalled representative of free thought in Germany as a relic to the place of knowledge and enlightenment. While Goethe requests the “continuation of a felicitic benevolence” at the conclusion of his reporting letter to the Grand Duke, Forster ends his supplication with the words: “I hereby remain in deepest veneration *Eternal Electoral Grace*, most humble University Librarian Georg Forster.”<sup>8</sup> The difference can be summed up in a word: Forster was still a subject whose political will was extinguished in light of the outshining fullness of the Elector's power. Goethe, in contrast, acted as an equal, even if he is willing to keep to the rules of convention.

While the poet in Weimar might have light-heartedly submitted to this game of representation, Forster had greater difficulties. After all, there is record of his father's cheeky answer to the question posed by chamberlain, if he had been impressed by the audience with King Frederick the Great at Sanssouci Palace, replying that he was accustomed to the like: he had met five wild kings and in Europe two completely tamed.<sup>9</sup> This anecdote reminds us of the advanced perspective the two world travelers possessed: they had encountered kings on the other end of the world, different societies and moral codes, breathed in the air of the wide world, making the stuffy ceremonies at European courts seem unbearable. “Here everything is empty and flat, and on top of it skewed; the natural consequence of the anathema of an intellectual constitution,”<sup>10</sup> Forster complains about the situation in Mainz.

His journey with Humboldt down the Rhine had only achieved a temporary change of pace. At any rate, it was financial failure. Forster had hoped to find a publisher willing to give adequate remuneration for the plant descriptions he had made during his voyage around the world. This hope

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<sup>6</sup> Regarding Goethe's treatment of Schiller's skull and the difficulties of finally determining the identity of the skull, cf. Albrecht Schöne, *Schillers Schädel*, München, 2002.

<sup>7</sup> Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Letter to the Grand Duke Carl August from September 27, 1826 [Konzept]*, WA Abt. IV, Vol. 41, 177.

<sup>8</sup> Forster, *Unterthänigstes Pro Memoria (September 9, 1792)*, AA XVII, 181.

<sup>9</sup> In keeping with: Ludwig Uhlig, *Georg Forster. Lebensabenteuer eines gelehrten Weltbürgers (1754–1794)*, loc. cit., 124.

<sup>10</sup> Forster, *Letter to Christian Wilhelm von Dohm from April 5, 1791*, AA XVI, 267.

“failed completely.”<sup>11</sup> Forster would turn to King Frederick William II of Prussia as a “most humble” servant in February 1792 to only “beseech mild support”<sup>12</sup> for his plant descriptions – unsuccessfully.

Having resumed his daily work in Mainz, the old annoyances return in the months of 1791. “It is,” reports Forster, “as if everything has crumbled for me, nothing grows for me, the more I work, the more I hope to win, the worse it slips through my hands, and now I stand here with empty hands, unable to work as I have to date, yet not capable of managing my household without continuing the efforts made thus far.”<sup>13</sup> At the same time, he is very productive: in addition to writing down the *Views of the Lower Rhine*, Forster translated an Indian play, *Sakontala or the Decisive Ring*, whose English translation he had encountered on his journey, wrote important essays *On Historic Plausibility* or *On Scholarly Guild Coercion*, and twenty reviews in that year alone, and he wrote a research-heavy *History of the English Literature*, only to name a few examples. Yet he laments: “my strength is exhausted, my body no longer capable of any effort, my intellect flagged [...]”<sup>14</sup> Not much prevented Forster from deteriorating into becoming a mere local celebrity, locked between dusty bookshelves and worn down by the barely manageable writing commitments to his publishers. He said he “had simply taken on too much, and not accounted for illness and the time that it takes to write some reviews.”<sup>15</sup> His life and thoughts could have become lost in the everyday duties but there was still no sign of the invigorating unrest he was able to observe in other places during his travels down the Rhine. In August 1791 he writes Jacobi that he was “bathing in the Rhine and wasting my life away.”<sup>16</sup>

Only a few short months later, everything has changed. The domestic and foreign political tensions had increased since the first anniversary of the great revolution in France on July 14, 1790. Although the counter-revolutionary powers of Prussia and Austria were still hesitating to defend the old power relations by means of mobilizing troops against France, several Jacobin representatives of the National Assembly in Paris as well as King Louis XVI had already called for war by the end of 1791. In light of the dismal state of the French troops, the king might have hoped France’s defeat could also bring an end to the revolutionary activities and save his monarchy in the long term. He declared war on Austria and its ally Prussia on April 20, 1792.

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<sup>11</sup> Forster, *Letter to Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi from November 6, 1791*, AA XVI, 367.

<sup>12</sup> Forster, *Letter to Fredrick William II of Prussia*, AA XVII, 41–42.

<sup>13</sup> Forster, *Letter to Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi from November 6, 1791*, AA XVI, 366.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Forster, *Letter to Christian Wilhelm von Dohm from April 5, 1791*, AA XVI, 267.

<sup>16</sup> Forster, *Letter to Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi from August 9, 1791*, AA XVI, 328 f.

Although the revolutionaries connected the concept of an *expansion revolutionnaire* with the shift in French foreign policy after the end of 1791, the Jacobin supporters of war were hoping to shore up and spread Republicanism. The volunteers among the French soldiers were called *apôtres de la liberté* – defenders if not even apostles of freedom. This led to movement in the border regions. The French were quickly at the Rhine. “It’s teeming with French here between Mainz and Coblenz,”<sup>17</sup> Forster reported in April 1792. “The entire Rheingau is stuffed full; all the inns are full and consequently has made any revelry impossible there for the people of Mainz. That would be bearable but they make everything more expensive for us; everything costs double the usual price...”<sup>18</sup> The consequences of French expansionism were increasingly palpable. “Our situation here is starting to become critical,”<sup>19</sup> wrote Forster on April 17. Just a few days later he noted the will to resist the French, looking up from his desk as it were, which was also beginning to grow in Mainz: “there is no thought of literature here. They will soon make swords out of ploughshares; for there is a daily increasingly audible and defiant language against France.”<sup>20</sup> By the end of the month the time had come: “the war has broken out here.”<sup>21</sup> Although Mainz was reportedly secure and there was nothing to fear because the war would not play out in that region, as Forster prepared himself for what was to come, “things that cannot be changed must wash over one like a storm, frost and snow, rain and stormy weather.”<sup>22</sup> French troops captured Mainz on October 21 under the leadership of General Adam-Philippe de Custine.

There were hardly any fights for the city, just small gun battles and a short, inconsequential bombardment. In light of the superior forces of the French, on October 20, the Mainz war council resolved to surrender unconditionally.<sup>23</sup> Many denizens of Mainz had left the city days before, like the Elector, “who slipped away in silence around nine o’clock at night and had the familial crest scratched off his carriage.”<sup>24</sup> This turned the tide. “We have been in French hands since yesterday,” Forster writes his new publisher Christian Friedrich Voß on the day of occupation at “six o’clock in the morning,”<sup>25</sup> as he himself noted. That same day he follows this with an additional letter in which he struggles to evaluate what the capture by the French meant: “Mainz will now become an important political center,

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<sup>17</sup> Forster, *Letter to Christian Gottlob Heyne from April 10, 1792*, AA XVII, 93.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Forster, *Letter to Christian Friedrich Voß from April 17, 1792*, AA XVII, 100.

<sup>20</sup> Forster, *Letter to Christian Gottlob Heyne from April 21, 1792*, AA XVII, 102.

<sup>21</sup> Forster, *Letter to Christian Gottlob Heyne from April 28, 1792*, AA XVII, 106.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> For historic details and the overview regarding the history of the Republic of Mainz, it is essential to consult: Franz Dumont, *Die Mainzer Republik von 1792/1793*, Alzey 1993; regarding the capture of Mainz, cf. Ibid, 58 ff.

<sup>24</sup> Forster, *Letter to Christian Gottlob Heyne from October 5, 1792*, AA XVII, 191.

<sup>25</sup> Forster, *Letter to Christian Friedrich Voß from October 21, 1792*, AA XVII, 207.

for the French operations toward Germany will proceed from here.”<sup>26</sup> Forster unexpectedly finds himself in the center of political events. A victim of a life humming along just ten days ago, he then understands himself as the witness of a “decisive world age.”<sup>27</sup> He would convince his fellow citizens that action is demanded by “Germany, which senses every one of our steps, and the world we will establish.”<sup>28</sup>

If he had been a mere observer of the revolutionary upheavals up to that point, he now had the opportunity to lend a hand to history himself. Only a few months before he had revealed himself to be reserved: he did not have the plan of “wanting to preach a *coup* that I not only do not wish for myself, but rather consider a great tragedy in Germany so that I do everything possible to turn it back.”<sup>29</sup> Although he admits he is “more for than *against* the Jacobins, as much as they are railed against,”<sup>30</sup> he is convinced that Germany is “far from being prepared to change its constitution.”<sup>31</sup> However, now Mainz was occupied by the French. By the beginning of November they conquer the region of the left bank of the Rhine between Landau and Bingen, the occupied area on the right side limited by an imaginary line from Frankfurt, Friedberg, Weilburg, Limburg, Nastätten to Lorch.<sup>32</sup> For Forster, a moment of world history opens up in which what the rest of Germany is not yet prepared for could be acted out. Forster can now confess he was “never an enemy of freedom”<sup>33</sup> and that it is impossible to “fight against freedom.”<sup>34</sup> Times have changed and in the French troops Forster finds the equality that had already enthused him on Tahiti: “officers and privates are as brothers, one heart and soul, and eat at the same table at the inns.”<sup>35</sup> The empty ceremonies of the ruling powers do not dissolve. The nobility fearfully cling to their dwindling privileges, as Forster notes trenchantly: “noble and cowardly are beginning to become synonymous...”<sup>36</sup> It is time to act. Forster recognizes that “the crisis is approaching and people will have to choose sides.”<sup>37</sup> He became a revolutionary.

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 209.

<sup>27</sup> Forster, *Letter to Christian Friedrich Voß from November 21, 1792*, AA XVII, 250.

<sup>28</sup> Forster, *Anrede an die Gesellschaft der Freunde der Freiheit und Gleichheit am Neujahrstage 1793*, AA X/1, 61.

<sup>29</sup> Forster, *Letter to Christian Gottlob Heyne from February 21, 1792*, AA XVII, 46.

<sup>30</sup> Forster, *Letter to Christian Gottlob Heyne from June 5, 1792*, AA XVII, 126.

<sup>31</sup> Forster, *Letter to Johannes von Müller from September 10, 1792*, AA XVII, 175.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. Franz Dumont, *Die Mainzer Republik von 1792/93*, loc. cit., 58 ff.

<sup>33</sup> Forster, *Letter to Christian Friedrich Voß from October 21, 1792*, AA XVII, 211.

<sup>34</sup> Forster, *Letter to Christian Friedrich Voß from October 27, 1792*, AA XVII, 225.

<sup>35</sup> Forster, *Letter to Christian Gottlob Heyne from October 22, 1792*, AA XVII, 213.

<sup>36</sup> Forster, *Letter to Christian Friedrich Voß from October 27, 1792*, AA XVII, 226.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 224.