Hans-Jörg Rheinberger, Hanns Zischler:
“Monogramma”

in: Eric Hounshell, Ruth Amstutz (eds.):

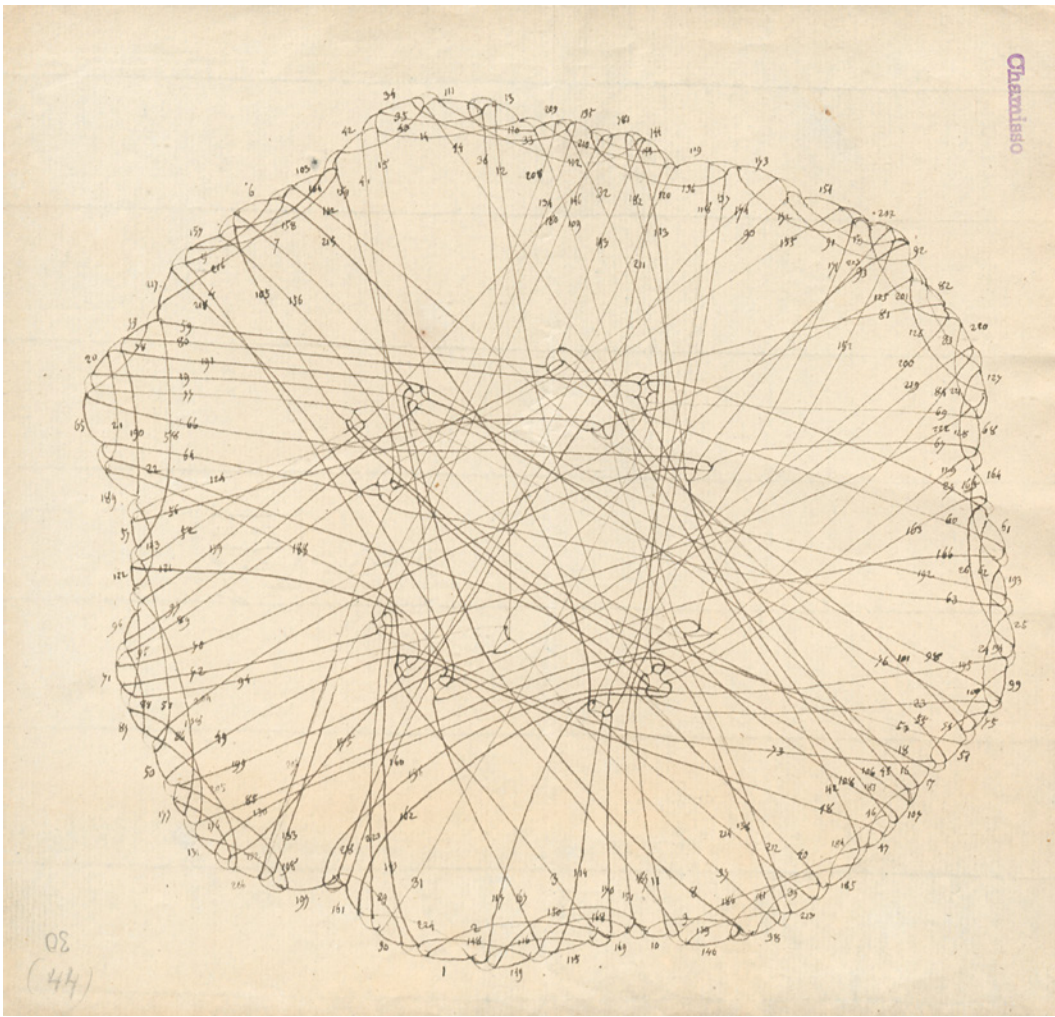
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SHADOW OF THE TREE

intercomverlag

Hans-Jörg Rheinberger, Hanns Zischler

MONOGRAMMA Enigma



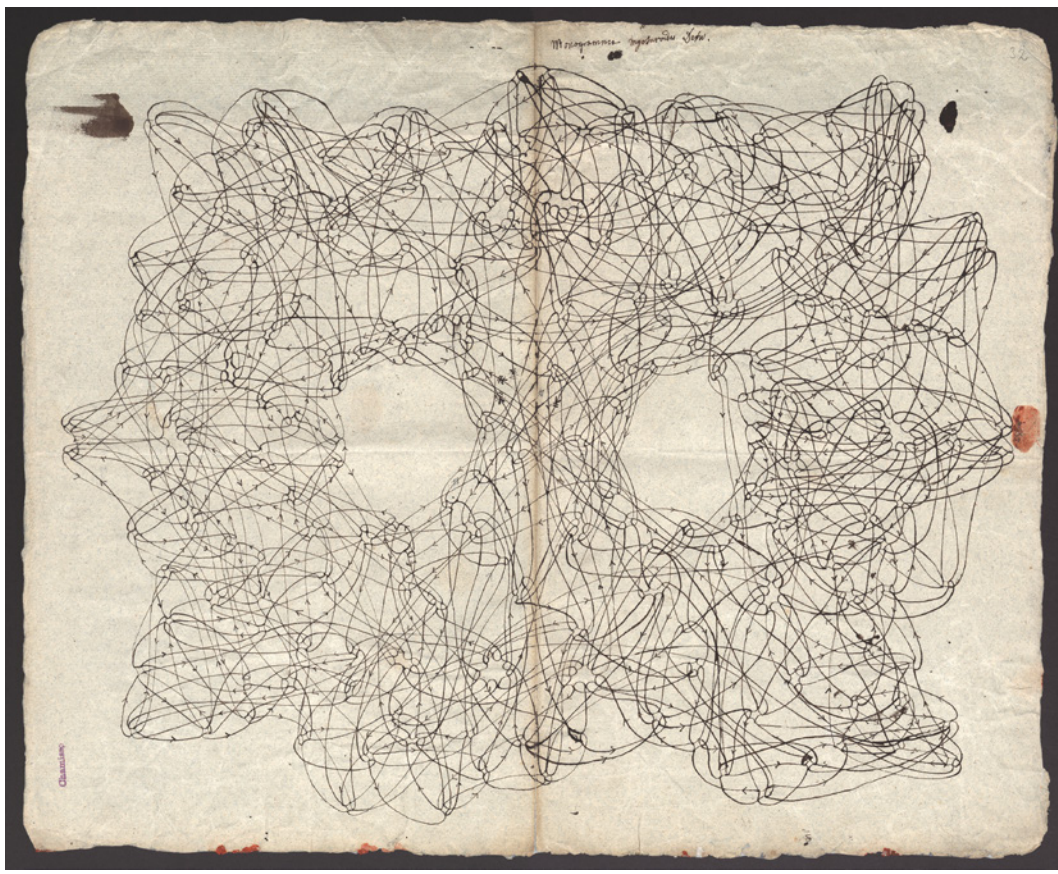
Adelbert von Chamisso, *Zahlen- und Linienschema* (n.d.), Berlin: Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin, Nachl. Adelbert von Chamisso, K. 3, Nr. 24, Bl. 30. Online: http://resolver.staatsbibliothek-berlin.de/SBB0000C53000000000.

This diagram found in the papers of Adelbert von Chamisso without explanation by its author has long vexed scholars. Is it a taxonomic system, or perhaps a Romantic reimagination of his voyage?

The Staatsbibliothek in Berlin houses a good part of the posthumous papers of poet and naturalist Adelbert von Chamisso. Born in 1781 near Châlons-en-Champagne, his parents settled as emigrants in Berlin in 1796, where he frequented the Collège Français de Berlin and then served in the Prussian Army from 1798 to 1807. As a "titular savant," he participated in the Russian Rurik-Expedition around the World between 1815 and 1818 under Captain Otto von Kotzebue. Back from the voyage, Chamisso was named Second Custodian at the Royal Herbarium in Berlin-Schöneberg, where he remained until his death in 1838.
One of us (H.Z.) had stumbled upon a number of enigmatic diagrams while delving into the papers of Chamisso in the late 2000s. Back then we were unable to achieve a satisfying

interpretation. A decade later, a workshop of the IKKM (Internationales Kolleg für Kulturtechnikforschung und Medienphilosophie) at the University of Weimar was again devoted to these diagrams. Together with a number of other interested colleagues, we once again pored over these mysterious diagrams. This time, too, we were not able to reach a conclusion. Recently, we came across a book-length report on Chamisso's travel around the world.[1] To our surprise it displays one of these drawings, accompanied by the following remarks: "The suspicion immediately suggests itself that the aims of such structure painting *(Strukturmalerei)* were simply concentration exercises, associative musings, or free digressive cogitations. It is, however, also conceivable that they served to describe, understand, and visualize anatomical or morphological structures in organisms for one's own comprehension."[2] The figure shown here is one of these diagrams. It contains altogether 224 numbered connection lines (actually a multiple of the prime number seven, relevant or not). Four relational nodes marking the four quadrants are identifiable, the whole diagram looking not unlike actual graphs of networks describing the relations between chemical molecules, citation clusters, or travel connections.

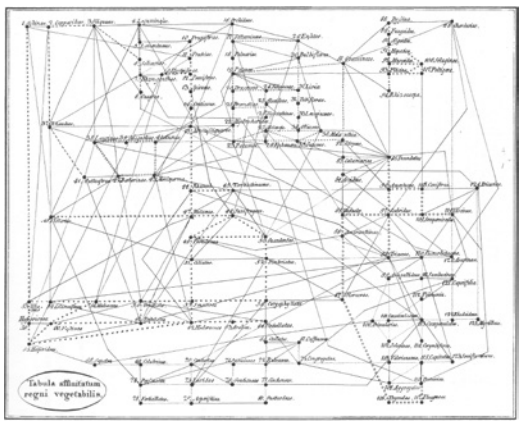
MONOGRAMMA Two Theories



Adelbert von Chamisso, *Linienschema* (n.d.), Berlin: Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin, Nachl. Adelbert von Chamisso, K. 3, Nr. 24, Bl. 32. Online: http://resolver.staatsbibliothek-berlin.de/SBB0000C53500000000.

The inscription at the top reads "Monogramma myosuroides Desv."

A possible interpretation of Chamisso's diagram is that it represents something like a taxonomic system. On the second drawing shown here, one reads the note: "Monogramma myosuroides Desv." Nicaise Auguste Desvaux (1784–1856), whose botanical author abbreviation is "Desv.," was a French contemporary of Chamisso and a specialist of grasses. Literary scholar Yvonne Maaß has interpreted this note as standing for *(Steno)Grammitis myosuroides* Schkuhr,[3] a small fern species of the *Grammitis* genus, of the family of *Polypodiaceae* occurring in the Caribbean. The paper on which it is written would originally have served as an envelope for plant specimens. However, since it has the dimensions of ca. 40x50cm, it is unlikely to have served as an envelope for a fern shorter than a finger.
Monogramma, however, is another genus of ferns that contains slightly fewer than a dozen species. These ferns are geographically distributed between Madagaskar, Sri Lanka, and Malaysia. In contrast to the Caribbean, this area was part of Chamisso's world trip. But a species carrying the composite name of *Monogramma myosuroides* does not appear to exist in the botanical literature.
It is possible that the note and the drawing are not correlated but rather the result of an accidental juxtaposition. However, the inscription can also be interpreted in a different way (favored by H.R.). A monogram is traditionally seen as an artistic interlacement of initials. And "myosuroides" stands for the epithet "mouse-tail-like" in the botanical terminology. Quite a number of grasses carry this specification. "Monogramma" would then mean something like a condensed diagram of a number of related species, a sketch inserting itself in an ongoing effort of botanists and zoologists to visualize "natural systems" in the first part of the nineteenth century, before the tree diagram became prominent as a phylogenetic interpretation of organismic relationships.[4]



August Johann Georg Carl Batsch, *Tabula affinitatum regni vegetabilis*, Weimar: Landes-Industrie-Comptoir (1802), foldout page.

August Batsch was among those who attempted to visualize "natural systems" in the early nineteenth century, before the tree diagram became a common way to represent organismic relationships.

Perhaps it should be mentioned that Chamisso, while working for almost twenty years with Diederich von Schlechtendahl (1794-1866) at the Botanical Museum in Berlin-Schöneberg, was trying to conceal these drawings from his younger superior's eyes at all costs – and never to reveal, to anyone, the supposedly hidden "meaning" of those monograms.
The very personal opinion of H.Z. today – after various presumptions – is that Chamisso, in his Romantic fervor of digression, was eerily dreaming *and drawing* himself back into the austere days of the circumnavigation. The envelope containing whatever plants that may have been was an ideal surface for the fantasizing seafarer. Good quality, ink-absorbent

paper was a rare material at the time. We cannot but admire the mastery of his terribly elegant, continuous stroke where the energy of the scientific explorer converges with the *désinvolture* of the Romantic poet. They are another symptom of the creative cleavage from which this German Frenchman suffered all his life.
What speaks for the latter view is that the graph shown here appears to constitute a continuous, uninterrupted line intersecting again and again on its trajectory. Both interpretations, however, fail to do justice to the obvious symmetry of these drawings. The last word about this riddle is thus not yet spoken.

Notes

1 Yvonne Maaß: *Leuchtkäfer & Orgelkoralle: Chamissos Reise um die Welt mit der Romanzoffischen Entdeckungs-Expedition (1815-1818) im Wechselspiel von Naturkunde und Literatur*, Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann (2016).
2 Yvonne Maaß: *Leuchtkäfer & Orgelkoralle: Chamissos Reise um die Welt mit der Romanzoffischen Entdeckungs-Expedition (1815-1818) im Wechselspiel von Naturkunde und Literatur*, Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann (2016), p. 78. Translation by the authors.
3 Christian Schkuhr (1741-1811) was a German botanist.
4 Among others, see Julia Voß: *Darwin's Pictures: Views of Evolutionary Theory, 1837-1874*, translated by Lori Latz, New Haven: Yale University Press (2010); Theodore W. Pietsch: *Trees of Life: A Visual History of Evolution*, Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press (2012).

Further Readings

Adelbert von Chamisso: *Tagebücher der Weltreise 1815-1818: Edition der handschriftlichen Bücher aus dem Nachlass,* Monika Sproll, Walter Erhart, Matthias Glaubrecht (eds.), Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht (2023).

Matthias Glaubrecht: *Dichter, Naturkundler, Welterforscher: Adelbert von Chamisso und die Suche nach der Nordostpassage,* Berlin: Galvani (2023).

Yvonne Maaß: *Leuchtkäfer & Orgelkoralle: Chamissos Reise um die Welt mit der Romanzoffischen Entdeckungs-Expedition (1815-1818) im Wechselspiel von Naturkunde und Literatur*, Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann (2016).

Theodore W. Pietsch: *Trees of Life: A Visual History of Evolution*, Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press (2012).

Julia Voß: *Darwin's Pictures: Views of Evolutionary Theory, 1837–1874,* translated by Lori Latz, New Haven: Yale University Press (2010).

Hanns Zischler: "Spuren, beginnlos: über einige abstrakte Skizzen und Zeichnungen aus dem Nachlass Adelbert von Chamissos", in: Jutta Müller-Tamm (ed.): *Labor der Phantasie: Texte zu Literatur- und Wissensgeschichte*, Berlin: Alpheus Verlag (2015).