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Voyage into Substance reopens the whole complex question of how nature was perceived and penetrated during the Enlightenment_a time when artist-scientists trekked across Egyptian deserts, astronomer-mariners navigated the Polar seas, and meteorologist-aeronauts "sailed" through the atmosphere's "waves," all seeking to discover and record the non-human likeness of the phenomenal world.

By examining the popular, multi-national illustrated narratives and atlases of the period, the book relates the voyagers' attentive, firsthand mode of seeing and precise copying of the enduring and the ephemeral features of the environment (before the advent of photography) to the major philosophical, scientific, and aesthetic debates of the time. Arguing that these accounts disclose an anti-Picturesque tradition of representation, the book opens new doors to establish the persistence of a "plain," that is, a style of landscape depiction that culminates in 19th-century realism.