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# MORPHOLOGY AND LITERATURE

**ABSTRACT:** This essay offers a broad overview of the main critical questions concerning the concept of morphology in literary theory, beginning with the origins of morphology in classical thought. Then it explores the notion proposed by Goethe's writings, and its affinity with the German concept of *Bildung* (and its embodiment in the Bildungsroman genre). The second part of the essay briefly examines the role of morphology in the work of some key twentieth century thinkers, discussing Aby Warburg's approach to art history, André Jolles' theory of the 'simple forms', the anti-historicist elements in the thought of Walter Benjamin and Carlo Ginzburg's epistemological reflections (with their roots in Wittgenstein's thought). At the end, the essay takes into consideration the relation between morphology and Goethe's *Weltliteratur*.

**KEYWORDS:** Morphology, Literary theory, Goethe, *Bildung*, Bildungsroman, Ginzburg, Wittgenstein, Warburg, Jolles, Benjamin, *Weltliteratur*.

It would take the etymological wisdom of Leo Spitzer, as well as years of study in the most diverse research fields, to reconstruct the boundaries of that complex 'semantic family' of keywords pertaining to the morphological study of literature.<sup>1</sup> I shall therefore confine myself to a few words – *Bildung*, *comparison*, *correspondence*, *nature*, *topos* and *anachronism* – and some of the fundamental components of their historical stratification. Morphology is a matter of perspective, i.e. a particular point of view from which one can observe known cultural phenomena and their place in history. Upon a closer look, it is actually a double, simultaneous point of view, since nature could be viewed from the observatory of culture, and culture from the observatory of nature. The following remarks will focus in particular on two main topics: the crucial relationship between the concepts of 'morphology' and '*Bildung*', and the morphological thought of some twentieth century thinkers (such as Aby Warburg and Walter Benjamin).

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<sup>1</sup> The study of morphology in literature traces back its roots to the work of the Russian Formalists (Eikhenbaum, Shklovsky, Tynyanov, Jakobson, Propp) and to canonical studies such as Ernst R. Curtius' *Europäische Literatur und Lateinisches Mittelalter* (1948), Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957) or, more recently, Fowler 1982.

## 1. Morphology

Morphology, literally ‘the study of forms’, has historically been opposed to the study of an evolution that takes place over time (Curtius 2013), even though morphology itself has undergone its own historical transformations. Its roots lie in Greek antiquity, where the notion of ‘form’, and in particular that of ‘inner form’, was at the centre of philosophical research, as Jean-Pierre Vernant explains:

Trois traits – caractère profane et positif, notion d’un ordre de la nature abstraitement conçu et fondé sur des rapports de stricte égalité, vision géométrique d’un univers situé dans un espace homogène et symétrique – [...] définissent solidairement ce que la rationalité grecque, dans sa forme et dans son contenu, comporte de neuf par rapport au passé et d’original par comparaison avec les civilisations du Proche-Orient que les Grecs ont pu connaître. (Vernant 2007, 156)

Classical Greek thought has entirely developed around the notion of form, investigated both as a separate principle (the notion of idea in the dialogues of Plato’s maturity), and as an immanent structure of reality, tasked with justifying its conformation and purpose (particularly in living beings, as in Aristotle’s *Physics*).<sup>2</sup>

Among several turning points that have marked the evolution of the concept of morphology, the most widely known is certainly the one linked to Goethe and his studies on the forms of nature.<sup>3</sup> According to Goethe, nature was indeed not only the *physis* but also the essence of artistic forms, insofar as they both take part in the rational and regular mechanisms which govern the formation (*Bildung*) of natural objects. *Bildung* is not a fixed form of the being (that would be, in German, *Gestalt*), but something that considers the changing nature of nature, the “lebendigen Anschauen der Natur”.<sup>4</sup> In

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<sup>2</sup> On the concept of form in Plato and Aristotle see for example Fronterotta 2014, and Gasser 2015. Older but still useful contributions are Theodor W. Adorno’s lecture on “Form and Matter” (Adorno 2000) and Boodin 1943.

<sup>3</sup> Goethe’s writings represent one of the main sources for the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century genealogies of morphology and were collected in an influential edition by Wilhelm Troll (1926). A recent assessment of their influence is offered in Maatsch 2014.

<sup>4</sup> As is illustrated by the following passage, which serves as an introduction to *Zur Morphologie* (1807): “Der Deutsche hat für den Komplex des Daseins eines wirklichen Wesens das Wort Gestalt. Er abstrahiert bei diesem Ausdruck von dem Beweglichen, er nimmt an, daß ein Zusammengehöriges festgestellt, abgeschlossen und in seinem Charakter fixiert sei. Betrachten wir aber alle Gestalten, besonders die organischen, so enden wir, daß nirgend ein Bestehendes, nirgend ein Ruhendes, ein Abgeschlossenes vorkommt, sondern daß vielmehr alles in einer steten Bewegung schwanke. Daher unsere Sprache das Wort Bildung sowohl von dem Hervorgebrachten, als von dem Hervorgebrachtwerdenden gehörig genug zu brauchen pflegt. Wollen wir also eine Morphologie einleiten, so dürfen wir nicht von Gestalt sprechen; sondern, wenn wir das

contrast to its more widespread meaning, Goethe's *Bildung* is a concept that refers not only to the moral world, but also to the natural and artistic worlds. Goethe's understanding of *Bildung* does not involve only the individual and their 'ethical becoming' or moral development. According to him, this term instead refers to the formation of symbolic systems, such as the linguistic system in particular, that are distinctive of cultural geographies. After all, as Herder stated in his 1772 essay on the origin of language, words originate from nature, and their formation and transformation remain indebted to its rules.

As recalled by Curtius, Goethe in his last years dedicated himself to the study of the metaphorical expression in a comparative perspective; to be more precise, "[t]he idiosyncratic nature of poetic figurative language was forced upon Goethe's attention in his study of Oriental poetry" (Curtius 2013, 302). This critical stance, according to Curtius, is best exemplified by a quote from the *Noten und Abhandlungen* to the *West-östlicher Divan* (1819, 1827), taken from the section *Orientalischer Poesie Urelemente*:

[...] und beachtet [man] alles übrige Sichtbare: Berg und Wüste, Felsen und Ebene, Bäume, Kräuter, Blumen, Fluß und Meer und das vielgestirnte Firmament, so findet man, daß dem Orientalen bei allem alles einfällt, so daß er, übers Kreuz das Fernste zu verknüpfen gewohnt, durch die geringste Buchstaben- und Silbenbiegung Widersprechendes auseinander herzuleiten kein Bedenken trägt. Hier sieht man, daß die Sprache schon an und für sich produktiv ist, und zwar, insofern sie dem Gedanken entgegenkommt, rednerisch, insofern sie der Einbildungskraft zusagt, poetisch. (Goethe 1988, 222)<sup>5</sup>

Curtius conjectures that Goethe is here outlining "the program for an investigation of figurative language in poetry. It would have to extend to all literatures, ascertain their peculiarities, and present the facts in orderly fashion. Thus, it would have to be at once general and comparative" (Curtius 2013, 303). Indeed, the study of Oriental poetry is an integral part of Goethe's more general project of a *Weltliteratur*, which is first conceived as a system of universal literary comparison – whose constituents are not macro-themes, as believed in some contemporary departments of comparative literature, but metaphors, tropes and *topoi*, i.e. the basic and original units of poetic construction.<sup>6</sup> This linguistic game of infinite correspondences that Goethe recognizes in Oriental poetry derives indeed from a gnoseology

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Wort brauchen, uns allenfalls dabei nur die Idee, den Begriff oder ein in der Erfahrung nur für den Augenblick Festgehaltenes denken. Das Gebildete wird sogleich wieder umgebildet, und wir haben uns, wenn wir einigermaßen zum lebendigen Anschauen der Natur gelangen wollen, selbst so beweglich und bildsam zu erhalten, nach dem Beispiele mit dem sie uns vorgeht" (Goethe 1987, 382).

<sup>5</sup> On the *West-östlicher Divan* and its language see Lemmel 1987, and Schwieder 2001.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Koch 2002 and the classic volume by Strich 1957.

based on the comparison of the seemingly incomparable, which Goethe had developed through his studies on plant morphology and comparative anatomy.<sup>7</sup>

According to Schelling, the method of a ‘new philosophy’ must be based on such a gnoseology. In a lecture on the origin of language (*Vorbemerkungen zu der Frage über den Ursprung der Sprache*, presented to the Bayerische Akademie der Wissenschaften in München in 1850) he argued that the philosophy has the choice between self-annihilation or being that sort of “Webermeisterstück [...] von dem Goethe spricht, wo ein Tritt tausend Verbindungen schlägt”.<sup>8</sup>

Therefore philosophy, like literature, appears to be better conceived as *an opus magnum*, which betrays its affinities with the hermetic tradition and with alchemy’s pursuit of the universal transformation of matter. This genealogy should probably be further explored from the perspective of the later Goethe, but such an investigation goes beyond the scope of this paper.

## 2. Goethe’s *Bildung* and the *Bildungsroman*

It is worth returning to the meanings of the word *Bildung*, a word which is central not only in Goethe but also in the narrative tradition of the so-called *Bildungsroman*. The word originated in medieval theology and was particularly relevant in the mystical doctrines of Meister Eckhart (1260-1328), where it is employed in relation to the doctrine of the *imago dei* and the *Bildwerdung des Menschen*, i.e. the becoming image of mankind.<sup>9</sup>

On an etymological level, the verb *bilden* – ‘to give shape’ – does indeed relate to *Bild*, ‘image’: *Bildung* is therefore being formed in the image of God. Therefore, every product of *bilden* is a *nachbilden*, an imitation; *bilden* always implies both an inner and an iconic dimension. For his part, Herder regarded the *Bildung* as the *Menschwerdung des Menschen*. This effective phrasing, which reveals an affinity with Vico’s thought, implies a reversal of

<sup>7</sup> See for example *Die Metamorphose der Pflanzen* (1790) – not to be confused with the 1798 elegy with the same name – or *Dem Menschen wie den Tieren ist ein Zwischenknochen der Obern Kinnlade zuzuschreiben* (1786).

<sup>8</sup> “Wenn unsere Zeit in Bezug auf die Frage zurückhaltender geworden, oder wenigstens in die eigentliche Tiefe derselben noch nicht eingegangen ist, so darf man dies vielleicht als Folge des Umstandes betrachten, den wir als die erfreulichste Folge der neueren Philosophie ansehen, daß die großen Gegenstände fernerhin nicht mehr wie ehemals capitelweis, abgeschnitten vom allgemeinen Zusammenhang abgehandelt werden können – und die Philosophie entweder sich selbst aufgeben oder sich bestreben muß, in der That jenes Webermeisterstück zu seyn, von dem Goethe spricht, wo ein Tritt tausend Verbindungen schlägt” (Schelling 1989, 505-506). Cf. Hennigfeld 1984, and Whistler 2013.

<sup>9</sup> See Hellmeier 2016, and Gennari 2014. On the evolution of the concept of *Bildung* see Bilstein 2004, and Horlacher 2017.

the mystical perspective: the “conquest of mankind’s humanity” (Herder) can be understood as the secularized version of “becoming the image of God.”<sup>10</sup> Both paths – the ‘horizontal’ one of the mundane progression and the ‘transcendent’ one of the mystical ascension – lead to the conquest of a wholeness within which the dissonances of human nature are composed in harmony. On this journey towards the full acquisition of a moral identity, humans meet the image of the divine which they strive to imitate; divinity, though, remains unreachable, and even secularized moral perfection soon reveals itself to be a utopia.

This is illustrated by the German *Bildungsromane* of the second half of the eighteenth century:<sup>11</sup> after Wieland’s *Agathon* (1766), which was still animated by a sort of harmonizing tension, where mankind’s *physis* finds its fulfilment (*Vollendung*) in moral completeness, the crisis of the *Bildung* process became evident in works like Moritz’ *Anton Reiser* (1790) and reached its apex with the “broken teleology” (Sorg 1983) of Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meister* (1795-96). It is, of course, the outcome of an internal conflict within the hero himself – for he is almost always a *he* in these works – between what he is by nature and what he should be, and the process that fills this gap is precisely the *Bildung*. It is therefore interesting to note how this term is poised between religious doctrine and moral formation, and how already in Erasmus’ pedagogy it had come to signify the construction of a worldly identity (See Stupperich 2017, Heine 2016 and the comprehensive, albeit a bit dated Woodward 2013 [1904]). Further on, in the secularized Enlightenment thought, the *Bildung* went on to embody the construction of a political subject, i.e. the man or woman of the new *polis*, whose personal aspirations to happiness mirror, but in many cases oppose, those of the community.<sup>12</sup> Thus, when this concept reached the *Goethezeit*, it was already designating a layered meaning in which form and image are not static realities, but dynamic entities, subject to the rules of the evolution of human nature.

It is no coincidence that Wieland, within the first few pages of *Agathon*, promptly declares his debt to nature. Following Erasmus, the author argues

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<sup>10</sup> On Herder see Forster 2012.

<sup>11</sup> Even a minimal bibliography on the *Bildungsroman* – a critical term introduced by Karl Morgenstern in the early nineteenth century, and later popularised by Wilhelm Dilthey – would take pages; among several insightful contributions, see at least Bakhtin 1986; Moretti 1987; and the recent anthology edited by Graham (2019). On the specific German milieu see Jacobs and Krause 1989; Selbmann 1994; Mayer 1992; and Swales 2015.

<sup>12</sup> Franco Moretti considers the utopia of the perfect reconciliation between the individual *Streben* and the collective *ratio* as the distinctive feature of the *Bildungsroman*. In Moretti’s words: “The classical *Bildungsroman* – with its perfect, and perfectly meaningful conclusion – is still on this side of the great symbolic divide. Better yet, it acts like a hinge between the two worlds: here youth is already full, and maturity not yet drained” (Moretti 1987, 28).

that virtue and *Bildung* cannot be separated from nature, and thus says in his *Vorbericht*:

Die Wahrheit, welche von einem Werke, wie dasjenige [...], gefodert werden kann und soll, bestehet darin, daß alles mit dem Lauf der Welt übereinstimme, daß die Character nicht willkürlich, und bloß nach der Phantasie, oder den Absichten des Verfassers gebildet, sondern aus dem unerschöpflichen Vorrat der Natur selbst hergenommen. (Wieland 1981, 5)

Within Goethe's reflections on morphology another aspect which emerges relates to the concept of time and, more precisely, to the overcoming of the chronological dimension, i.e. the temporal succession. The reference here is to a little-known text, *Die Theilnahme Goethe's an Manzoni* (1827), in which he examines the grounds for the success of Alessandro Manzoni's *Adelchi* and concludes that the essence of the drama, and the reason of its success, is its anachronism. Indeed, the author closes his argument by stating peremptorily that "alle Poesie eigentlich in Anachronismen verkehre", since "[d]ie *Ilias* wie die *Odyssee*, die sämtlichen Tragiker und was uns von wahrer Poesie übrig geblieben ist, lebt und athmet nur in Anachronismen" (Goethe 1999, 806). Goethe sees anachronism as a gesture of appropriation, assimilation, integration of something into the present – a blatantly anti-historical gesture, if we look at it from the perspective of nineteenth-century Historicism, whose idea of history was characterized by philological accuracy and documentary precision. If, therefore, true poetry is anachronistic, it must free itself from its contingency, from its temporal constraints, thus becoming an ideal in which people of different eras can recognize themselves; accordingly, Goethe praises the artist's freedom to invent possible worlds without worrying about historical consistency.

### 3. Twentieth-century Morphological Thought

The heritage of Goethe's thought has informed several twentieth-century critical stances on the relationship between history and morphology. Among the most relevant ones, one may cite the approach by Aby Warburg and his followers to art history, the morphological reflections of Vladimir Propp and André Jolles and eventually the anti-historicistic elements in the thought of Walter Benjamin.<sup>13</sup> More recently, the morphological theme has also been

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<sup>13</sup> See Aby Warburg, *Florentinische Wirklichkeit und antikisierender Idealismus* (1901) and *Der Eintritt des antikisierenden Idealstils in die Malerei der Frührenaissance* (1914), in Warburg 2018; Vladimir Propp, *Morphology of the Tale* (1928), *Исторические корни*

central in the scientific investigations and in the epistemological research of scholars investigating the relationship between invariant forms and history or visual arts, such as Carlo Ginzburg, Salvatore Settis, Maria Luisa Catoni etc. (Settis 1999, Catoni-Ginzburg-Giuliani-Settis 2013).

### 3.1 Morphology and History

I shall confine myself here to a brief overview of the main topics of interest. Carlo Ginzburg has raised the problem of the relationship between morphology and history in his *Myths, Emblems and the Historical Method* (1990) – whose Italian subtitle (*Morfologia e storia*) explicitly names these two central elements. In the book, he explains how he became aware that his method “was much more morphological than historical” because he was “collecting myths and beliefs from different cultural contexts on the basis of formal affinities”. He realized that the relevant elements of his research were not related to a specific historical period or a specific place. Indeed, beyond the apparent differences, there were common forms which people living in different cultures shared in terms of narrations and beliefs. Ginzburg’s model was Propp, who was able to combine a morphological approach with an historical one. In other words, Propp’s investigation of the popular narrative heritage was based on a distinction between the “morphology of the folktale” and “the historical roots of fairy tales”. The heuristically fruitful method by Propp offered Ginzburg the model for an investigation proceeding in two phases: “In my plan, the work of classification should constitute a preliminary phase, meant to reconstruct a series of phenomena which I would like to analyse historically” (Ginzburg 2013, xii). Ginzburg mentions an interesting passage in Wittgenstein’s *Notes on Frazer’s Golden Bough* “where Wittgenstein juxtaposes two ways of presenting material, one synoptic and achronic, the other based on a hypothesis of a chronological development, emphasizing the superiority of the former” (*ibid.*). Wittgenstein, like Propp, is also referring to the morphological thinking of Goethe. The passage in which he explains it, is the following:

Die historische Erklärung, die Erklärung als eine Hypothese der Entwicklung ist nur eine Art der Zusammenfassung der Daten – ihrer Synopsis. Es ist ebensowohl möglich, die Daten in ihrer Beziehung zu einander zu sehen und in ein allgemeines Bild zusammenzufassen, ohne es in Form einer Hypothese über die zeitliche Entwicklung zu machen [...]. „Und so deutet das Chor auf ein geheimes Gesetz“ möchte man zu der Frazer’schen Tatsachensammlung sagen. Dieses Gesetz, diese Idee, kann ich nun durch eine Entwicklungshypothese darstellen oder auch, analog dem Schema einer Pflanze, durch das Schema einer religiösen Zeremonie, oder aber durch die Gruppierung des

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волшебной сказки (1946), and *Theory and History of Folklore*; Jolles 1930; and Walter Benjamin, *Über den Begriff der Geschichte*.

Tatsachenmaterials allein, in einer ‚*übersichtlichen*‘ Darstellung [...]. Diese übersichtliche Darstellung vermittelt das Verständnis, welches eben darin besteht, daß wir die „Zusammenhänge sehen“. Daher die Wichtigkeit des Findens von *Zwischengliedern*. (Wittgenstein 1967, 241)

The key point in this quote is the *übersichtliche Darstellung*, which makes evident the *secret law* of nature – a formula which Wittgenstein borrows from Goethe’s work *Die Metamorphose der Pflanzen* (1798).<sup>14</sup> In Goethe’s elegy the choir alludes to the mystery of unity within multiplicity in nature: in the infinite variety of natural forms one can indeed observe an original common pattern. Thus, evolution and transformation do not follow an external law of development, nor do they obey historical contingencies, but are rather already contained within things, just as the growth of a tree is already contained in its seed.<sup>15</sup>

### 3.2 From Warburg to Benjamin

As for Warburg, one can say that his research began with the rejection of the “Apollonian antiquity of the classicists” to turn to an “age steeped in Dionysian pathos” (Ginzburg 2013, 20). Furthermore, we have the testimony of Gertrud Bing, former student and later director of the Warburg Institute, who identified the main research interests of her mentor as follows

the role of the coining of images as a process of civilization and the changing relations between the images of art and of language. All the other elements in his inquiries which are now thought to be characteristic, his interest in iconography, his focus on the *Nachleben der Antike*, are much more means to an end than ends in themselves. (Bing 1965, 302)

These elements reflect Warburg’s long-lasting commitment to the study of the *kulturwissenschaftliche Bildgeschichte* (“the history of images as the object of the history of culture”) as a proxy for an ‘historical psychology of human expression’. This anthropological root of Warburg’s research, deeply influenced by Charles Darwin’s *The Expression of Emotions in Humans and Animals* (1872), is actually common to all morphological studies, although in different gradations. It is evident, for example, in Vladimir Propp, who studied the form of fairy tales, and in André Jolles, who studied elementary

<sup>14</sup> “Alle Gestalten sind ähnlich, und keine gleicht der andern, / Und so deutet das Chor auf ein geheimes Gesetz, / Auf ein heiliges Rätsel” (Goethe, *Poetische Werke*, vol. I, p. 206).

<sup>15</sup> On Wittgenstein, Frazer and the Goethian idea of morphology see Sbisà 1984. See in particular this remark: “The evolutionary hypothesis remains for Wittgenstein a ‘disguise of a formal connection’ of those intermediate rings that connect the different forms of anthropological fact” (98). See also on Wittgenstein and Goethe the remarkable essay by Schulte 1982.



literary expressions (sagas, myths, puzzles, fairy tales, legends) and saw them as forms of a culture to be understood as *Bildung*. The language is for Jolles a 'productive energy', and in the introduction to his *Simple Forms* (1930) he states:

Sprache schafft Gestalt, indem Sprache – wir benützen das Wort in der eigentlichen Bedeutung – dichtet [...] Da, wo Sprache dichtet, pflegen wir zu sagen, daß Literatur entsteht. Damit haben wir einen Übergang gefunden, den wir anfangs suchten. Und wir wissen, daß Sprache als um-ordnende Arbeit hier unmittelbar zur Literatur führt, auch wenn diese Literatur nicht von einem bestimmten Dichter stammt oder in einem bestimmten Kunstwerk festgelegt ist. Und dann sehen wir zugleich, wie durch die Sprache oder durch die Literatur etwas ergriffen, verändert und erneuert wird, was um ein kühnes Wort zu gebrauchen in der Natur gegeben war. (Jolles 1968, 17-18)

After this passage, a little further down in Jolles' text, one finds an interesting statement, which bears some resemblance to Benjamin's idea of an original foundation for language and forms: "Auslegend und einengend dringt [der Mensch] zu den Grundformen durch" (Jolles 1968, 22). What is proposed here is actually a genealogical hermeneutics in which the text is projected towards its remote origin, where the *Bildung* process began.

To Jolles' epistemic model I would like to juxtapose the one proposed by Walter Benjamin in a letter (dated December 9, 1923) to his friend Florens Christian Rang:

Die spezifische Geschichtlichkeit von Kunstwerken ist ebenfalls eine solche, welche sich nicht in „Kunstgeschichte“ sondern nur in Interpretation erschließt. Es treten nämlich in der Interpretation Zusammenhänge von Kunstwerken untereinander auf, welche zeitlos und dennoch nicht ohne historischen Belang sind. Dieselben Gewalten nämlich, welche in der Welt der Offenbarung (und das ist die Geschichte) explosiv und extensiv zeitlich werden, treten in der Welt der Verslossenheit (und das ist die der Natur und der Kunstwerke) intensiv hervor. (Benjamin 1978, 322)

By making these distinctions, Benjamin operates a reversal of the traditional assumptions regarding the construction of a work of art. According to him, any cultural artefact, such as a literary work, consists of elements that participate in a systematic unity that transcends not only the horizons of its time but also the organizational categories on which poetics are based – an example being the so-called *Literaturwissenschaft*, or "science of literature", which arose in the German academic world during the twentieth century. Such systematic unity is based on a network of unpredictable affinities in which figures, stories, voices, postures and stylistic traits resurface after centuries, sometimes after millennia, thus escaping any possible historical conditioning but rather apparently obeying to a combinatorial need, which only an hermeneutic focused on the value of detail could understand. Currently, the problem of forms, for example in

narrative, is increasingly investigated through paradigms which did not originate in literary theory, but rather come from the observation of nature and human behaviour. Accordingly, literature and the visual arts are often faced with other modes of expression, seen through their origins in human physiology and its evolution: literary anthropology and in particular the so-called “biopoetics” study these relationships.<sup>16</sup>

#### 4. Morphology as Multi-perspectivism

Several scientific approaches to the problem of forms and their representations originated from the typically ‘modern’ encounter between Enlightenment encyclopaedic thought and critical stances of early German Romanticism. The Jena Romanticism invented a poetic utopia that Schlegel called ‘novel’ or ‘romantic novel’: a dynamic literary artefact capable of aggregating and merging the most disparate formal elements of the poetic art. The result was a productive interaction of different forms of expression and their legitimation on an historical and aesthetical level: poetic modernity, at its beginnings, became characterized by the drive to overcome the rigid divisions between literary and artistic styles and genres.<sup>17</sup>

This idea of a syncretic poetical artefact has platonic roots: it has to do with the idea of the origin as Chaos. Nevertheless, chaos is strictly related with order and, for the Jena romantic school, chaos is a necessary condition to differentiate between the single elements, to measure them against one another, and to recompose a cosmos in systemic unity. When poetry will reveal its secrets and its governing laws will be discovered, then a multiplication of points of view from which to look at reality will finally be possible. Poetry will then be able to offer that multi-perspective gaze with which one could discover truth behind appearances.<sup>18</sup>

The multi-perspectivism of the romantic novel has not remained confined to the literary field but has instead provided the basis of legitimacy

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<sup>16</sup> Among the many studies on biopoetics see Carroll 1995 and 2012; and the overviews by Cooke 2001 and Cometa 2011.

<sup>17</sup> An effective expression of this goal is to be found in the fragments published by Schlegel in the *Athenaeum* (1798-1800), starting with the well-known fragment 116 (Schlegel 1980, 181-182). See also the fragment 434, where the romantic poetic utopia of law and dynamism is particularly evident.

<sup>18</sup> In this respect, it is no coincidence that the Jena romantics recognized Cervantes’ *Don Quijote* as the literary antecedent best suited to their new theoretical conception of the novel. Within this book, fiction, i.e. the imaginative delirium of Alonso Quijano, is observed from the side of reality (Sancho Panza’s perspective), and conversely reality is observed from the perspective of a chivalric poetic imagery. This multiplication of perspectives has broken down ‘mono-logical’ poetic constructions, based on unitary visions of the world and their corresponding rhetoric, and has legitimized the mobility of points of view.

for a plural, interdisciplinary approach to knowledge. Its potential for innovation has given rise to manifold critical experiments, through which different sciences have left consistent traces in the discourse of literary criticism.

Typical of this way of understanding culture is, furthermore, the cooperation of disciplines: historiography, for example, is now employing the tools of economics and sociology, in a critical fashion anticipated by the *Annales* school (Burke 2015). Other significant examples are the current use in literary studies of Darwin's theory of evolution or of cognitive sciences and neuroscience. As an example, a recent study by Michele Cometa offers a detailed review of current studies in the field of "biopoetics" (Cometa 2017 and 2018).

Another effect of this type of comparative epistemology is the overcoming of the axiological criterion which establishes what is 'high' and what is 'low'. Studying the form of the fairy tale, Propp discovered that these popular narratives are based on patterns and relationships between the characters which we also find in 'high literature', from Boccaccio's tales to Dostoevsky's novels. "Narrative functions" are thus the original forms of those literary expressions which Jolles would have called 'simple forms', and, from the point of view of modern genealogy of morphology, it is of significance that Propp should begin his *Morphology of the Folktale* (1928) by quoting a passage from Goethe's studies on morphology (1816-1817).<sup>19</sup>

Goethe's expectations that morphology would be accepted as a particular science have not yet been fulfilled. Indeed, it remains to this day a method that is difficult to define and even more difficult to apply. Nevertheless, he set in motion some rethinking, through morphological studies, of the arts' function and statute of autonomy: for example, that the poetic function, as well as the artistic one, are not actually limited to a purely aesthetic dimension. Conversely, the artistic object could be thought of as an artefact that responds to different needs and in which multiple skills are catalysed, in order to force us to radically rethink aesthetic categories. Such reflections are indicative of a more general trend towards a de-aestheticization of art, which had its precursors already in the Twenties – or rather a re-definition of what aesthetics is (see Bredekamp 2010; Danto 2014; Belting 1995 and Belting 1990). Among the earlier precursor of this trend is Walter Benjamin

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<sup>19</sup> "[Morphologie] muß sich als eine besondere Wissenschaft erst legitimieren, indem sie das, was bei andern gelegentlich und zufällig abgehandelt ist, zu ihrem Hauptgegenstande macht, indem sie das, was dort zerstreut ist, sammelt, und einen neuen Standort feststellt, woraus die natürlichen Dinge sich mit Leichtigkeit und Bequemlichkeit betrachten lassen [...]. [D]ie Phänomene, mit denen sie sich beschäftigt [sind] höchst bedeutend [...] und [...] die Operationen des Geistes, wodurch sie die Phänomene zusammenstellt, [sind] der menschlichen Natur angemessen und angenehm [...], so daß auch ein fehlgeschlagener Versuch darin selbst noch Nutzen und Anmut verbinden könnte" (Goethe 1981, 127).

and his idea of a work that evolves over time, in relationship with its users, and thus loses its 'aura' because of its technical reproducibility (Benjamin 2013).

## 5. A World Literature

As mentioned earlier, Goethe returned in his later years to the study of comparative morphology – begun in 1790 with the publication of the *Versuch die Metamorphose der Pflanzen zu erklären*. His resurfacing interest in morphological studies took place at the same time as the elaboration of the utopian design of a *Weltliteratur*, i.e. a global literature born out of the dialogue between different forms, techniques and metaphorical systems and producing poetic outcomes based on the encounters of cultures and on a transnational vision of the arts and of systems of values. Today in the light of post-colonial studies and an increasing questioning of traditional axiology, this comparison between different literary worlds and its syncretic outcomes gains a renewed topicality or perhaps, for the first time in history, a possibility of realization. In fact, scholars working on literary migrations have already been able to identify numerous examples of contaminations between different literatures: among the many examples, one can think of the case of Gëzim Hajdari, a living Albanian poet who writes epic poems in Italian but recounts the tradition of the Albanian mountain populations and their archaic codes governing the life of these communities (Molinarolo 2015). Such experiments are not unusual today and may signal an opening for a new kind of literature, oriented towards a sort of literary syncretism. I would argue that the universality foreseen by Goethe is not likely to be seen in the current context, where narrative literature is dominated by commercial logic and is administered by large publishing groups. Indeed, the drastic reduction of peculiarities, as a by-product of literary globalization, is increasingly common.

At the conclusion of this erratic path in the meanders of morphological thought, it should be stressed that morphology contains two features which philosophical thought has tried to explain since its remote pre-Socratic origins: the stasis of the form and the mobility of the living. If we now observe literary works in the light of these features, we see how the invariant elements can be traced back to the critical environment inspiring the works of Herder, Jakob Grimm, Goethe, and later Warburg and Jolles, and lastly the scholars of biopoetics. Epos and dramatic poetry are thus not only literary genres, originated from Greek models and built in literary tradition, but also, and perhaps above all, basic human inclinations. This assumption implies that there is a perfect correspondence between the cosmos and the Earth, between the *ratio* which governs nature and the *veritas* that, as

Augustine contended, lies *in interiore homine* (*De Vera Religione*, XXXIX, 72). Finally, we end up with the philosophical constellation of the pre-established harmony theorized by Leibniz, and which leads us to believe that the world, however asymmetrical, disarming and irrational, is built on a web of references and connections concealed to the naked eye, but accessible to an hermeneutics capable of understanding the universal value of the particular. How much this vision, however, is dependent on Greek-Christian optimism and its enchantment is a topic still open to discussion.

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