

Reframing Souths

Ecological Perspectives on the South in Literature,
Film, and New Media

Edited by Carmen Concilio and
Alberto Baracco



Milano University Press

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Chapter 4

Arboreal Imagery of the South in German Literature: On the Example of J.W. von Goethe

Giulia A. Disanto

University of Salento, Italy.

giulia.disanto@unisalento.it

ORCID: 0000-0001-9671-996

DOI: <https://doi.org/org/10.54103/milanoup.213.c407>

Abstract

Even if Goethe's work comes from a time before the emergence of a widespread sense of environmental awareness, for a plurality of reasons, his work represents a cornerstone for the German ecocritical debate. In particular, this essay investigates how Goethe's perception of the arboreal meridian nature and understanding of atmospheric light in southern Europe has marked his conception of nature. Furthermore, Goethe's participation in the scientific debate of a key moment in Europe's cultural history, namely, that period when the specialization of the sciences occurred, is a very interesting issue today because it makes us rethink what "modernity" really is in relation to the environment and what the role of literature can be in the climate change debate.

Keywords

ecocriticism; myth of nature; aesthetics and phenomenology of nature; sensory experience vs. systematization; meridian thought.

Ecocriticism and the Myth of Nature

The Abbey of St. Boniface in Munich boasts a series of frescoes dating back to the late 1830s that were created by the German painter Heinrich Maria Hess. One of them depicts St. Boniface, also known as the Apostle of the Germans, who, in 723, in order to convert the Germanic peoples to Christianity and make them abandon their pantheistic belief in the elements of nature, cut down the sacred oak tree near Geismar in Hesse, proving that no god lived in it¹. An animal sacrifice can also be seen in the foreground of the image, and above, all the horror in the eyes of the Germanic population in the face of such devastation is quite evident. St. Boniface succeeded in converting the Germans, but the German people's bond with what is regarded as "Bruder Baum", brother tree, a precious interlocutor to confide in amidst the silent solitude of the woods, had remained very strong for centuries to come².

Hess's fresco appears emblematic because the almost symmetrical division of the image through the central verticality of the tree clearly represents human beings' reign over nature as an expression of power domination between two contrasting cultures. In this case, we have the Christians on the left, the Germans on the right, a south and a north with balances that, over time, have been overturned and have utterly assumed different symbolic meanings. Tacitus in *De origine et situ Germanorum* (AD 98) already spoke of impenetrable forests, sacred to the Germanic peoples, and, in the centuries that followed, trees and forests continued to form a pillar of the so-called national identity and of the German artistic and literary imagination, of which it would be difficult here to offer even a brief summary thereof³.

The theme of nature that is evident in German-language literature has been widely studied over the years. Even thinking only of the genre of nature poetry («Naturdichtung»), it is difficult to find such an articulate development of this genre and its theorization in other European literatures⁴. Since the 1970s, moreover, when the environmental movement was gaining ground, the high level of environmental awareness among German citizens and the question of respecting nature in an area that had, in any case, been extensively modified over the

1 There are numerous artistic versions of this motif; a reproduction of the fresco in Munich can be seen online at Akg-Images (n.d.).

2 In this regard, see Silvia Ulrich (2020) and Carmen Concilio and Daniela Fargione (2021). See also Michael Braun und Amelia Valtolina (2021).

3 On the cultural-historical and identity developments around the Germanic forest myth, starting from Tacitus' own reading, through Kleist and the Grimms to Anselm Kiefer and Joseph Beuys, see the important study, which also has ecological intentions, by Schama (1996: 75-134).

4 The terms «Naturpoesie» and «Naturdichtung» are already attested in the second half of the eighteenth century, as indicated in Häntzschel (2000: 691-693).

course of centuries, both in terms of deforestation and the forced channeling of watercourses⁵, began to find their way onto the political agenda.

It is surprising that the ecocritical discourse has developed in Germany much more slowly than in America, since at least the 1990s for example. If America is the country of “wilderness” and its idealization, nature is no less important for the overall makeup of German national identity. But it is precisely that very element which, over time, manifests itself as a type of limitation due to a mythologization of nature as a typically Germanic element used within the scope of twentieth-century nationalistic thinking, thereby being somewhat distorted⁶. Under this perspective of “Germanisation”, the National Socialists not only framed the myth of nature but also reinterpreted literary history, having approached even the works of authors such as Goethe himself in an ideological manner.

The question of the mythologization of nature is only one element to be considered in the debate on what an ecocritical discourse is and how it can be defined today in accordance with the tradition of German literary studies. The question concerning if it is possible to speak of “nature writing” for German-language literature is equally complex (Dürbeck and Kanz 2020a). We are now undoubtedly in a period of great discussion and definition of methodologies regarding the relationship between literature and ecology, above all, due to the urgency of climate issues and the speculations and assumptions that ensue from their debate. Contemporary German-language literature is also clearly reacting to these questions because writers are no less distressed by the environmental uncertainty than literary scholars, even if they do not easily yield to the labelling thereof that they can identify with⁷. However, the discourse

5 For a cultural history of human-induced environmental changes in Germany see David Blackburn (2006).

6 This is the opinion of Axel Goodbody (2007: VIII-X): «The high level of environmental awareness among German citizens is a legitimate source of national pride, and German governments of differing political persuasions have taken a lead in international initiatives to clean up the oceans, reduce industrial pollution, make nuclear energy safer and combat global warming. A continuity of concern for nature and the environment in German culture would seem traceable back to the Romantics and is possibly rooted in earlier national self-understanding as a nature-loving people, whose relative poverty and political disunity could be taken as manifestations of a virtuous simplicity, elevating them above the arid intellectualism of French civilisation and rapacious British mercantilism. However, this image of Germany as a model in facing the ecological challenges of the future is a mere half-truth, which ignores crucial aspects of the country's twentieth-century history. Although Germany's path towards modernity is not necessarily universally representative, the Third Reich constitutes an extreme example of that logic of mastery over nature which has underpinned the Enlightenment project. [...] the shadow of the Nazi past, in which the ‘myth’ of nature played such a problematic part, means that preoccupation with nature has until very recently been viewed with suspicion in the humanities and arts faculties of German, Austrian and Swiss universities». See also Ursula K. Heise (2017: 3).

7 There is also a great deal of attention in publishing for nature writing topics, an excellent example being the «Naturkunde» series from the Berlin publisher Matthes & Seitz, edited by

is quite different for authors and literary works chronologically preceding the emergence of a widespread sense of environmental awareness⁸, for which a heuristic approach is essential. In both cases, it is necessary to investigate the peculiarities of the German ecocritical discourse and insert them into the tradition of thought from which it somehow derives. In its apparent contradiction, a quotation from the last book by Friedericke Mayröcker — the Austrian poetess linked to the avant-garde of the second half of the twentieth century who died a few years ago — is quite exemplary. In *da ich morgens und moosgrün. Ans Fenster trete*, written in a very particular mixed form of prose and poetry typical of the writer, Mayröcker mentioned at one point: «Modewort “nature writing”» (Mayröcker 2020: 57, 97). «Nature Writing» would be a «trendy word» in the German-speaking cultural scene, yet her books themselves are a singular example of reflecting upon art and nature, and even merely the role of the adjective «moosgrün» that she places in the middle of the title — as if «moss green» indicated a state of mind or, better still, a way of being in the world — would merit deeper reflection. The question of “nature writing” is then also compelling within the scope of German literature (Dürbeck and Kanz 2020b), but it is difficult to accept the English definition because taking up the terms of a debate means taking up its main features again, and the writing of nature in the German context differs greatly in tradition from the Anglo-American context.

The German tradition of critical reflection on nature has had its own specific lines of development over the course of time; the main German literary, philosophical, and cultural approaches to the ecological question can be primarily traced back to certain lines of thought of the twentieth century: phenomenology, from the reprise of Martin Heidegger’s thought to the nature aesthetics of Gernot Böhme and Martin Seel; critical theory (Walter Benjamin, Theodor W. Adorno, and the Frankfurt School); social theory inspired by the ethics of responsibility and humanism (Erich Fromm, Hans Jonas, Klaus Michael Mayer-Habich) (Goodbody 2014: 547). Important contributions came from both German Americanism and Germanic scholars abroad, including studies on the history of the environment (Grimm and Hermand 1981), the anthropological approach to textual analysis (Iser 1993) and the results of cultural ecology (Zapf 2002).

the writer Judith Schallansky.

8 If ecology as a discipline that studies the relationship of the organism with the outside world, to paraphrase one of Ernst Haeckel’s definitions (Haeckel coined the name of the discipline in German), was founded in the second half of the nineteenth century, the epochal turning point of ecology in the sense of environmental awareness only occurred in the 1970s (Bühler 2016: 17-18).

The Aesthetic Experience of Nature's System

Among the classics of German literature, one of the authors where an attempt is being made today to re-examine his works from an ecocritical perspective happens to be the “prince” of German poets, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. With works ranging from the poem *Maifest* to *Werther* all the way to *Wilhelm Meister* and to *Faust*, just to name a few of the works most frequently addressed by critics⁹, Goethe's work is full of significant thematizations of the relationship between humans and nature and opens itself up to the most diverse readings in times, such as those of today or the 1970s, in which orientation models are sought pertaining to issues (such as ecocriticism) that undoubtedly have an urgent and topical ethical value. However, it is essential to maintain a heuristic approach to the ecocritical investigations of an author such as Goethe who, although he tried throughout his life to understand nature as a system, did so in a very different way than would be done today and not along the lines of permanent damage to the ecosystem.

The same adoration that Ernst Haeckel, the founder of ecology, had for Goethe — in fact, he regarded the writer as a forerunner of evolutionary theory — had the effect of polarizing how Goethe's scientific writings were perceived in later years: while some regarded him as a forerunner of Darwinism, others read his scientific writings as mere speculation (Wenzel 2012: 261-263).

Nevertheless, for a plurality of reasons, Goethe is a cornerstone for the German ecocritical debate:

If any single German writer comes close to the importance which Henry David Thoreau possesses in American culture as principal founder of the national “environmental imagination” (Lawrence Buell), it is Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. (Goodbody 2007: 47)

In my opinion, it is really important to emphasize how relevant the image of meridian nature was to the «environmental imagination» (Buell 1995) that Goethe avidly promoted.

With respect to the vast literature on the relationship between Goethe and nature or the growing number of studies on proto-ecologism in Goethe's work and thought, this essay aims to underscore three key aspects:

1. Reflection on arboreal nature becomes often relevant in German literature when confronted with the “otherness” of its counterpart, foreign nature, which comprises a landscape that differs from its origin via directly experiencing distant places by travelling or making journeys; and this is an element that characterizes Goethe's works. Namely, he advanced his botanical studies during his

⁹ Amongst the best results, I refer to Heinrich Detering (2020).

journey to Italy, writing his most important studies on plants but also a theory of colors (*Farbenlehre*). This theory is mainly based on the comparison and is strongly influenced by the perception of atmospheric light in southern Europe. The importance of the journey as a precondition for the maturation of nature awareness remained a constant in German-language literature throughout the following centuries. Goethe's aesthetic reflection also has the effect of a symbolic polarization between north and south, which is also useful to analyze in the context of the debate on current geopolitical and environmental balances in relation to the Global South.

2. Goethe's scientific reflection is not deemed separate from his aesthetic reflection; on the contrary, it arises from the very same element. For Goethe, the search for a law and a constant in the *sistema naturae* coincides with an investigation of shape and form and is therefore a search entailing both cognitive as well as aesthetic intentions, thereby confiding in visual perception in particular. This applies just as much to the study of the type, shape and form of plants as it does to the study of light. It was perhaps obvious that he arrived at different results than Newton in the field of optics because he did not start with optical instruments as a means to observation and examination nor the assumptions made within the field of physics but from an aesthetic and pictorial focus. Goethe perceived the Italian environment by posing aesthetic questions pertaining to artistically rendering shape, form and light by virtue of his *Doppelbegabung* (a kind of "dual talent") as a writer and painter. It is for this reason that the most interesting studies on the relationship between Goethe and a proto-ecological view of nature seem to me to derive from the aesthetic and phenomenological approach (Böhme 1998, 2000).

3. Goethe's participation in the scientific debate of the time is very significant today because this happened at a key moment in Europe's cultural history, namely that period in the middle of the late eighteenth century when the specialization of the sciences occurred, i.e., the separation of the philosophical-literary discourse on nature from the properly scientific one (in fact, that ramification of the «two cultures» of which Charles Percy Snow much more recently hoped for a reunification; Snow 1998). Some elements of Goethe's thought on the topic of nature, which is not systematic in itself but changed and developed over the course of years, are undoubtedly of interest to the debate at hand. From the perspective of a current reappraisal of what retrospectively turned out to be truly "modern" (Latour 1991) in the history of Western thought and from the viewpoint of reexamining what, by contrast, represented a step backward in the path of civilization with respect to environmental issues, the period of European scientific debate in the years in which Goethe became interested in science is a case study of enormous relevance.

The German poet was a profound connoisseur of the natural sciences. Around 1780, having been immersed in the natural environment of the countryside around the town of Weimar, he began to deal with mineralogy, geology, and botany. These were years in which he sought greater tranquility than in his Sturmerian beginnings, and his view of nature also changed. Goethe distances himself from the idea of a creative and destructive nature as expressed in the sceneries of *Werther*, from the same reception of Rousseau's concept of nature received by the *Sturm und Drang* poets for its potential for cultural and social criticism.

Having arrived in Weimar, where he personally tended his garden *Am Stern*, Goethe began to study botany systematically; the writer recalls those years in *Der Verfasser teilt die Geschichte seiner botanischen Studien mit* (Goethe [1831]; FA, I, 24: 732-752; *The Author Relates the History of His Botanical Studies*; Goethe 1952: 149-164): on the one hand, his meetings in Jena with the botanist and academic August Johann Georg Karl Batsch (1761-1802), and on the other, his acquaintance with Friedrich Gottlieb Dietrich (1765-1850), a descendant of a family of farmers who, for decades, had been supplying the area around Jena with plants, including locations ranging from universities all the way to pharmacies. Goethe valued Dietrich's botanical knowledge so much that the latter accompanied him on his trip to Karlsbad in June 1785. As was the case in those years, the theoretical study of the natural sciences was flanked by the growing importance of empirical verification, and the interchange between academics and dilettantes was not viewed negatively. On the contrary, it was felt that efforts should be made to greatly expand the knowledge of new plant species and to maximize the activity of classification, especially in the botanical field. Direct experience was fundamental, and travelers, in particular, were considered "apostles" of the expansion of this knowledge. Travelling was deemed a moment to test knowledge and expand the scope of botanical cataloguing. As early as 1759 Carl Linnaeus (1707-1778) had drawn up an *Instructio peregrinatoris* with useful instructions for this type of research designed for naturalist travelers, as did Johann Friedrich Blumenbach (1752-1840), Jean Baptiste de Monet de Lamarck (1744-1829), and George Léopold Cuvier (1769-1832) (Lepénies 1978: 55). In this sense, Goethe valued his "dilettantism" to a great extent.

Even before he left for his trip to Italy in 1786, Goethe became interested in the germination of plants¹⁰. However, it is only in the direct sensory experience of the meridian arboreal landscape and its lights that the writer began to pursue a more accomplished level of theorization; the hypothesis of being able to find an original form in which a model for the development of all plant species can be found resurfaces and is strengthened within him.

10 The writer owned an herbarium with about 800 plants as early as 1780 (Wenzel 2012: 19).

In the *Italian Journey* on September 27, 1786 in Padua, he wrote:

The Botanical Garden is much more cheerful. Many plants can stay in the ground all through the winter if they are planted near the walls. But towards the end of October the place is roofed over and kept heated during the short winter months. To wander about among a vegetation which is new to one is pleasant and instructive. It is the same with familiar plants as with other familiar objects: in the end we cease to think about them at all. But what is seeing without thinking? Here where I am confronted with a great variety of plants, my hypothesis that it might be possible to derive all plant forms from one original plant becomes clearer to me and more exciting. Only when we have accepted this idea will it be possible to determine genera and species exactly. So far this has, I believe, been done in a very arbitrary way. (Goethe [1816-1817] 1982: 54-55)

In Padua, he first recognized *Chamaerops humilis*, the only spontaneous palm that grows on continental European soil (Barbera 2021: 83), then in Palermo, he immersed himself in the aesthetic experience of an extremely varied vegetation that spread freely outside of pots and greenhouses; Goethe emphasized how Sicily comprises a rich and abundant territory even in the inland areas, characterized as an oxymoron by «deserted fertility» where the treeless hills become granaries (Caltanissetta, April 28, 1987; Goethe [1816-1817] 1982: 267).

With its wealth of botanical varieties, Sicily became, in Goethe's eyes, a sort of point of origin of European arboreal history that Goethe perceived as a man of the eye and of letters; in fact, his thoughts were immediately directed towards the garden of Alcinous sung by Homer, as he had written on April 7, 1787, and he feels like translating that passage. Goethe dwelt in this passage on the lights and «the haze» of the atmosphere, which was reminiscent of the admired landscapes painted by Claude Lorraine.

I spent some happy, peaceful hours alone in the Public Gardens close to the harbour. It is the most wonderful spot on earth. Though laid out formally and not very old, it seems enchanted and transports one back into the antique world. Green borders surround exotic plants, espaliers of lemon trees form gracefully arched walks, high hedges of oleander, covered with thousands of red blossoms which resemble carnations, fascinate the eye.

Strange trees, probably from warmer climes, for they are still without leaves, spread out their peculiar ramifications. [...] The green of the plants is of a different shade, either more yellow or more blue, than the green we are used to. What gives this scenery its greatest charm, however, is the haze uniformly diffused over everything, which has a peculiar effect. [...] The enchanting look which distant objects like ships and promontories take on in this haze is most instructive for a painter who has to learn to distinguish distances and even measure them exactly, as I discovered when I walked to the top of a hill. I no longer saw Nature, but pictures; it was as if some very skilful painter had applied glaze to secure a proper gradation of tone. (Goethe [1816-1817] 1982: 228-229)

Furthermore, plant diversity is read in a cultural key, through balances of dominance between “environmental imaginaries” and Goethe starts from the decoding of north-south differences as a cultural and aesthetic contrast. And indeed, in *Schicksal der Handschrift* (History of the Manuscript; Goethe 1952: 167-169), published in his journal «Zur Morphologie» (On Morphology), he explicitly distinguishes between «Italy, rich in forms» and «formless Germany» (167), a Germany without *Gestalt*. In the contrast between the landscape of *Mitteleuropa* and the Mediterranean, in the difference of light and climate, Goethe started off, as did his contemporaries, from a symbolization of cultural difference¹¹.

Goethe arrived in Italy with Linnaeus’ *Genera Plantarum* (IV ed., Halle 1752) in his pocket. He arrived primarily by observing the landscape as the poet and painting artist he had been. His is a phenomenological approach that moves from concrete observation of the current state of vegetation and the meridian landscape, which as atavistic and plural seemed to offer the human eye an understanding of the laws that have always governed nature:

The highest wisdom would be to comprehend that everything factual is already theory. The blue of the sky reveals to us the primary law of chromatics. Do not look for anything behind the phenomena; they themselves are the lesson. (Goethe 1989: 308)

The unifying moment in the scientific and aesthetic study of plant and human nature consists for Goethe in the problem of shape and form. The poet coined the concept of «Morphologie», first evoked as a diaristic note in September 1796 (Wenzel 2012: 6). With this concept he understands both the development of the individual living being and the recurrence of certain analogies in which a principle of development, common to all living beings, could be discerned.

11 Lukas Bauer wrote: «The Grand Tour describes a practice of travel from the early seventeenth century up until the beginning of the nineteenth century, and reaches its climax in the late seventeen hundreds. These travellers originated primarily from Britain, France and Germany, and up until 1800 were drawn almost exclusively from the aristocracy. The Grand Tour had a fixed itinerary lasting to three years and identified Rome as its principal destination. The journey was undertaken primarily for the purposes of education, through the exposure to the legacy of classical antiquity and the Renaissance, as well as for political reasons such as strengthening diplomatic ties. While Italian culture, art and history were idealized by the Grand Tourist, contemporary Italians were frequently derided as being backward and inferior to the economically advanced societies of the North. [...] By representing Italy as the centre of their individual traditions, northern Europeans dispossessed Italians of their own cultural heritage in order to claim it for themselves. These modes of collecting and appropriating Italian culture and history are analogous to the excavations carried out by Europeans in their overseas colonies where artefacts for the purposes of study were similarly collected and acquired in a way that had no regard for the sovereignty and entitlement of the native population» (Bauer 2015: 36-38).

As mentioned above, Goethe takes up and actively participates in the scientific debate on natural history (in the sense of «Naturgeschichte») in the second half of the eighteenth century, and this is a key point in understanding the onset of modernity and the scientification of culture in this period, as well as Goethe's attempt to make a concrete contribution to the discussion. According to Lepenies, a process of *Verzeitlichung* (temporalization) of the concept of nature took place in the decades between the publication of the first and last volumes of Georges-Louis Leclerc de Buffon's *Histoire naturelle*, i.e., between 1749 (Goethe's date of birth) and 1789 (the date of the French revolution, a year after Buffon's death). Up to that point, the term «Naturgeschichte» only improperly refers to a historical temporalization, but rather has to do with the description and logical systematization of knowledge about nature, which is referred to, for example, by means of nomenclature and *ars mnemotecnica*, not necessarily through perspectives that today we would call diachronic (for which the German uses the term «Historie»). However, in those decades, knowledge about species expanded exponentially, and it was difficult to continue to pursue a systematic order. Knowledge about nature specialized, and in the very early years of the nineteenth century, the concept of «biology» appeared with Karl Friedrich Burdach (1776-1847), Theodor Georg August Roose (1771-1803), Jean-Baptiste de Monet de Lamarck (1744-1829), and Gottfried Reinhold Treviranus (1776-1837) (Lepenies 1978: 29). Thus, the concept of temporization, the need to read nature in its chronological, temporal, evolutionary development, also came to the fore. Among others, Friedrich Schelling, whose thought Goethe took on board, also began to propose a properly historical («historisch») reading of «Naturgeschichte» (Lepenies 1978: 39; Matussek 1998). Goethe's thought on nature and its forms should be placed in this context because it is a demonstration of how the discourse on the sciences oscillates between an approach of systematization and a harmonious vision of the disciplines dealing with nature, typical of the past, shared for example by Aristotle and Lucretius, and a modern approach, in which the order of historical development is preferred to other principles of a systematic order. Paradoxically, Goethe's modernity lies not so much in pandering to the new, but in seeking the systematic nature of an order of nature that is still Enlightenment in type, for it is these aspects of his morphological studies that are most interesting from the point of view of the current conception of nature in terms of interconnectedness.

In this sense, also the concept of *Urpfanze* should be understood, which does not indicate the temporally original, historically preceding plant in the phylogenetic sense, but the model. *Urpfanze* is an articulation of the concept of *Urphänomen*, the original phenomenon of a nature that, contrary to what Newton believed, was not to be observed and studied primarily in the laboratory, but still intuited in the sensory and perceptive experience of the visible in the reality of things in their environment.

The first systematization hypothesis Goethe formulates in contact with the Italian landscape is «Alles ist Blatt» (All is leaf; Goethe, FA I, 24: 84). The leaf is consubstantial to the whole (the plant) at all stages of its development. Moreover, the leaf is a polar phenomenon, containing within itself the dynamism of contraries, dilation and contraction, as well as the power of *Steigerung* (i.e., the capacity for the gradual ascent of the parts into the harmony of a higher whole) and lends itself to serve as the central element of a systematization, thereby being particularly useful for understanding and representing the universal. In the *Urpflanze* therefore converge both the short-lived hope of concretely finding a plant, a «Typus», that was the model for all others, and the more lasting theorization that a recursiveness of principles valid for different species can be found in nature.

Seeing such a variety of new and renewed forms, my old fancy suddenly came back to mind: Among this multitude might I not discover the Primal Plant? There certainly must be one. Otherwise, how could I recognize that this or that form *was* a plant if all were not built upon the same basic model?

I tried to discover how all these divergent forms differed from one another, and I always found that they were more alike than unlike. But when I applied my botanical nomenclature, I got along all right to begin with, but then I stuck, which annoyed me without stimulating me. Gone were my fine poetic resolutions – the garden of Alcinous had vanished and a garden of the natural world had appeared in its stead. Why are we moderns so distracted, why do we let ourselves be challenged by problems which we can neither face nor solve! (Goethe [1816-1817] 1982: 251-252)

Over time, Goethe abandoned the concept of *Urpflanze* precisely because it suggested the existence of a fixed type, while the idea that the ordering principle of nature is that of becoming, of metamorphosis, became increasingly evident to him. The Italian plant variety showed him, after initial enthusiasms guided by an intellectual curiosity with few equals, that shape and form do not exist without transformation.

The elaboration of a morphology understood as a method is one of the most interesting elements of Goethean reflection, which, however, as shown by him limiting himself to studying dicotyledons, is largely a dualist conception that does not fail to regard nature as an expression of a divine or even atheistic mysticism. His approach is not entirely systemic in the sense of some twentieth-century analyses; I think of the Gaia hypothesis as elaborated by scientists James Lovelock and Lynn Margulis (Lovelock and Margulis 1974). Goethe's attempt to grasp the regulating principle of the system of nature does not have to do with the idea of dynamic equilibrium of physical forces in a sense of consequentiality between a human behavior and an environmental change. Rather, he

understands the human being as part of that nature which the Enlightenment had already attempted to rationalize as a machine or a clock, a refined device that was in the hands of God nevertheless. What remains valid from the beginning on in Goethe's thoughts on nature is the cognitive power of the poetic act, the fact that a cognitive moment of ethical value can arise from the perception of nature in its beauty and diversity. Ultimately, this is perhaps the added value of literature, its contribution to the climate issue, and to the conjugation of cultural differences: «Nowhere would anyone grant that science and poetry can be united. They forgot that science arose from poetry, and did not see that when times change the two can meet again on a higher level as friends» (Goethe [1817] 1952: 171-172).

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