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EXPLORING THE VISIBLE. WORDS AND IMAGES IN GOETHE'S *NATURFREUNDSCHAFT*

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Abstract: The paper explores Goethe's unique approach to the question of expression and expressibility, presenting it as a key element to understand the relation between his literary and his scientific vocation. Section 1 sets Goethe's *Sprachkritik* in its context by briefly outlining some arguments on the limit of expression raised in his time (Herder, Lichtenberg, Hamann). Section 2 then shifts the focus to Goethe. It is argued that – akin to many of his contemporaries, but for partially different reasons – he neither fully distrusts nor completely relies on the power of words and images. Provided that expression refrains from deliberately moving away from or suffocating its objects, Goethe rather views the unavoidable simplification of the visual experience that it produces as a potential instrument of intensification of experience itself. Finally, section 3 takes into account the interplay between words and images as different expressive media. From Goethe's perspective, images are closer to singularity but poorer in conveying the temporal dimension, whereas words can provide images with a temporal dimension but need images to overcome their tension to universality. In the end, just like visual experience and expression as a whole, so can words and images be seen as linked in a polarity, both potentially collaborating into a singular (infinite) expressive effort.

Keywords: Goethe; expression; vision; words; images.

Among the most remarkable features of Goethe's intellectual journey is his well-known dual commitment to natural science, on the one hand, and to poetry and literature, on the other. These two occupations traditionally call for different applications of and relations to language: science is rooted in direct observation and experience – this is all the more true for Goethe – and thus tends to view language as a secondary, supportive, often even deceptive tool; literature and poetry – on the opposite side – rather view the "actual" world as something that can be put at a distance – sometimes even overcome – through words. Given that the German philosophical discourse of the eighteenth century was heavily putting into question the reliability of language and that many of Goethe's contemporaries exhibited some degree of scepticism towards expression, evaluating Goethe's trust in language and its capacity to convey meaning may not only illuminate the intricate balance between the competing demands of his dual vocation, but also highlight the heterodoxy of his thought within the context of his time. The following analysis

will focus on three key aspects: first, (1) providing context for the language debate relevant to Goethe's work, particularly examining authors who introduced early forms of *Sprachkritik* to the German discourse; second, (2) outlining Goethe's distinctive perspective on the role that language – and expression in general – have to play, both positively and negatively, in the observation of nature; and finally, (3) illustrating how, for Goethe, words[1] and images constitute a single infinite language that seeks to capture the ultimately ineffable dynamics of nature.

1. "SPRACHSKEPSIS" AND "SPRACHKRITIK". GOETHE AND HIS CONTEMPORARIES

The Romantic notion of poetry as a purely imaginative force, fantastically unbound from the constraints of reality – as in the works of von Kleist or Novalis – or prophetically projected beyond its historical horizon – as often in Hölderlin – is predominantly alien to Goethe's conception of his literary mission. Like Faust at the pinnacle of his odyssey, Goethe proudly wants to acknowledge that "existence is duty (*Dasein ist Pflicht*),"[2] and that the reality of the only one world in which he resides is to some extent inescapable.[3] Of course, this does not imply that his poetry does not aspire to soar above or engage in productive dissonance with reality, as his *Tasso* – and *Faust* itself – clearly testify; rather, that he endeavours to maintain his creativity concentrically anchored to it. Poetry or literature that deviates from this ideal risks falling into the "magic lantern (*Zauberlanterne*)" of Romanticism,[4] in the intoxication of the Orient or in the

[1] Here and throughout, when the term "word" is used, it is not intended in the narrow sense of "vocabulary unit," but rather – in accordance with Goethe's own common practice – in the broader sense of "linguistic articulation." To put it in the terms of the Brothers Grimm's dictionary, which lists this as the very first meaning of "Wort," word is to be taken as "a spoken (or written) expression, composed of a group of individual words which conveys a coherent intellectual meaning: the statement, the utterance, the speech, and the act of speaking; in Latin, *verbum*, *dictum*, *dictio*, *oratio*" (Jacob Grimm, Wilhelm Grimm, eds., *Deutsches Wörterbuch*, 33 vols. [Leipzig and Munich: Hirzel/Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1854–1972], vol. 30, col. 1467, *s.v.* "Wort").

[2] Goethe's references are taken from the Weimarer edition (*Goethes Werke*, ed. by G. von Loeper *et al.*, 4 sections, 133 vols. in 143 parts [Weimar: H. Böhlau, 1887–1919]), from now on indicated as WA, followed by section (I–IV) and volume (1–133) numbers. Here: *Faust II*, in WA I.15, 216. Unless otherwise noted, translations are mine.

[3] To these days, Wilhelm Dilthey's "Goethe and the Poetic Imagination" (1910; trans. C. Rodie in *Poetry and Experience*, ed. by R. A. Makkreel and F. Rodi [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995]: 235–302) arguably remains one of the most important pieces of literature on Goethe's poetic bond with experience.

[4] See Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Gespräche*, 10 vols., ed. by W. F. von Biedermann (Leipzig: Hesse & Becker, 1889–1896) (hereafter: GG), vol. 2, 217.

vagueness of mysticism[5] – three aesthetic paradigms that Goethe scorns precisely for their failure to confront "presence".[6]

If literature does not allow for any scepticism toward the world, it can still be asked whether, in turn, Goethe's *Weltfrommigkeit* might justify scepticism toward expression. Nature in its visible dimension may be too rich, dense, complicated – or conversely, too simple – to be (linguistically, or artistically) articulated. As known, full-blown *Sprachskepsis* – the belief that language should be *fundamentally* distrusted – is not prominent in Goethe's era. This idea, with early roots in the ancient Sophists and in Christian mysticism, resurfaces as a leading line of thought only later on, under somewhat different assumptions, in thinkers like Nietzsche, Hofmannsthal, and, above all, Fritz Mauthner. What we find in authors close to Goethe, such as Herder, Lichtenberg, and Hamann – and to some extent, as it will be argued, in Goethe himself – is a different (weaker) form of *Sprachkritik*. This critique is not an outright denial of the capacity of language (or expressive acts more broadly) to convey reality but rather a more nuanced examination of its limitations and fallibility. Expression is not altogether unreliable; rather, it is admitted that certain forms thereof may distort reality in ways that call for philosophical consideration.

Elucidating the intricate Kantian interweaving of meta-linguistic and epistemological questions in all these positions – namely, the degree to which the problem of these thinkers pertains to articulating "reality" vs the extent to which it concerns comprehending it – exceeds the scope of this inquiry. Similarly, beyond our scope is the even more complex problem of what, ontologically speaking, constitutes the reality that these thinkers aim to express. What we want to point out is the comprehensive perspective of the reality-expression dilemma that this philosophical atmosphere bequeaths to Goethe's reflection. From this shared *pars destruens* – an aspect already partially explored in studies on Goethe's

[5] On Goethe's criticism of both the Oriental intoxication – embodied by Jalāl Dīn Rūmī – and mysticism, see my Alberto Merzari, "Grenzen und Grenzenlosigkeit: West und Ost als Pole eines Formdiskurses in Goethes 'West-östlichem Divan,'" *Goethe-Jahrbuch*, no. 141 (2024), forthcoming.

[6] Goethe's preoccupation with presence and his criticism of the modern, Romantic ideal of *Sehnsucht* is well epitomised by his letter to Zelter dated October 19, 1829: "There is really something absurd about Presence. One imagines that's it, now: one sees oneself, one feels oneself. One goes no further. But one has no idea of the benefit one may derive from such moments. We wish to express ourselves on this as follows: The absent person is an ideal person, whereas the people who are present seem completely trivial to one another. It is utterly bizarre that, through the reality of Presence, the ideal is virtually suppressed. This is probably why their ideal appears to the moderns only as longing" (WA IV.46, 110). This aspect of Goethe's meditation has been richly commented by Pierre Hadot, see *Don't Forget to Live. Goethe and the Tradition of Spiritual Exercises*, trans. M. Chase (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2023), esp. 1–39. The translation of the letter to Zelter is taken from there (5).

Sprachauffassung[7] – something new will be examined, that is to say, the positive role that the expressive dimension assumes within his philosophical framework – a dimension that, conversely, remains notably overlooked or at least taken for granted within the current body of scholarship.

As a matter of fact, Lichtenberg, Herder, and Hamann – albeit with notable differences in their respective views – do not question the value of expression as such; rather, they caution against the danger that language may become rigid, conventionalised. Language is not inherently unreliable, so to say, but becomes so when it severs its vital link to things, fails to mold itself to reality, and devolves into a stagnant collection of signs that presumes to exhaust and codify reality in advance – or even to substitute it. Their joint struggle is thus against language as codification and in favor of a living, etymologically "poetic" (i.e., creative) language that opens up vision and amplifies it rather than replacing it. "Everyone," Herder writes, "should really invent his own language, understand the idea underlying each word as thoroughly as if he had discovered it himself."[8] Hamann expresses a similar sentiment around the same years, stating that in our relationship with language "[w]e must become children" and continuously strive to "resurrect the extinct language of nature from the dead."[9] Comparable stances, as we shall see, are not uncommon in Goethe. The continuity between him and these authors is further underscored by their shared interest in the Near East, whose spirit, as Herder puts it, possesses precisely in this sense a genuinely "poetic" character.[10]

A prime contrastive example of an un-poetic use of language is illustrated by Lichtenberg's criticism of Linnaeus, who would later become a negative model in Goethe's writings as well. According to Lichtenberg, the scientist's mistake lies in detaching languages from things and following self-referential analogical patterns – Linnaeus finds for instance no dissonance in speaking of "growth" in reference not only to animals and plants, but also to stones,[11] and in so doing lets language unjustly take precedence over vision. In alignment with Lichtenberg, but anticipating Goethe's own positions even more closely, Hamann advocates explicitly for a

[7] For just an overview of the research on this topic, see (in chronological order): Alan Corkhill, "Zum Sprachdenken Goethes in beziehungsgeschichtlicher Hinsicht," *Neophilologus* 75 (1991): 239–325; Andrea Bartl, *Im Anfang war der Zweifel. Zur Sprachskepsis in der deutschen Literatur um 1800* (Tübingen: Francke, 2005), esp. 101–183; Christian Mittermüller, *Sprachskepsis und Poetologie. Goethes Romane "Die Wahlverwandtschaften" und "Wilhelm Meisters Wanderjahre*," (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 2008); Uwe Pörksen, "Alles ist Blatt. Über Reichweite und Grenzen der naturwissenschaftlichen Sprache und Darstellungsmodelle Goethes," in *Zur Geschichte deutscher Wissenschaftssprachen: Aufsätze, Essays, Vorträge und die Abhandlung "Erkenntnis und Sprache in Goethes Naturwissenschaft,"* ed. by J. Schiewe (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2020): 335–354. Mittermüller's and Bartl's works contain also important insights on the *Sprachauffassung* of Goethe's contemporaries.

[8] Johann Gottfried Herder, *Journal meiner Reise im Jahre 1769*, ed. K. Mommsen (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1976): 140.

[9] Johann Georg Hamann, *Aesthetica in nuce*, in *Sämtliche Werke*, 6 vols., ed. J. Nadler, vol. 2 (Wien: Thomas-Morus-Presse, 1950), 195–217, here 209.

[10] See Johann Gottfried Herder, *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit*, 2 vols., ed. H. Stolpe, vol. 2 (Berlin: Aufbau, 1965), 431 ff.

[11] On this, see Mittermüller, *Sprachskepsis und Poetologie*, 46 ff.

subordination of language-mediated knowledge – what he calls along with Leibniz *cognitio symbolica* – to the *anschauende Erkenntnis*, that is, intuitive knowledge: the ultimate arbiter of truth and the adequacy of expression is a world that offers itself first and foremost as visible intuition.[12]

2. GOETHE'S ANA-LOGICAL THOUGHT AND SYMBOLIC LANGUAGE. EXPRESSION AND METAMORPHOSIS

This foundational principle – the ontological and thus referential priority of seeing over speaking, or more precisely, of reality *as seen* over reality *as spoken* – remains very clear and undisputed in Goethe and has been thoroughly examined elsewhere.[13] As it will be shown, however, this priority does not imply an *absolute* superiority of seeing, nor, more critically, the dispensability of language altogether. To clarify this, I will try to distil Goethe's comprehension of the phenomenon-language (or phenomenon-expression) polarity to two fundamental theses – one descriptive and the other normative. I shall begin with the descriptive one:

1. Language is a phenomenon distinct from the reality it seeks to express and, as such, possesses an autonomous logic that is independent of the logic of reality, which for Goethe is phenomenal reality. Specifically, language – and, more broadly, expression – are the form of a human (subjective) *logos* which is related to but irrevocably distinct from the (objective) *logos* of nature.[14]

Goethe conceives of language as a realm of abstraction, modelling, and, to some extent, subjectivisation of reality. The very act of speaking entails that the heterogeneous continuum[15] of nature is broken down, segmented, and viewed (only) from a specific perspective. Translating vision into words inevitably alters the semantic content of what is being conveyed and, therefore, results in a certain "loss of meaning" if viewed solely from the standpoint of the *traducendum* – that is, the seen "thing." Once articulated in language, the concrete "thing" is inevitably reduced to a "poorer" universal. It is still the "thing," but – as Goethe would describe it using a Kantian term – (only) according to a specific *Vorstellungsart*. This dynamic is effectively exemplified in §§120-121 of *The Metamorphosis of Plants*:

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[12] See Hamann, *Aesthetica in nuce*, 208 ff. See also, Bartl, *Im Anfang war der Zweifel*, 176–183.

[13] I explore this aspect in my "Goethe, Heidegger e la lingua poetica," *Paradosso*, no. 1 (2022): 193–207.

[14] This point is made almost literally in the *Theorie der Farbenlehre*: "All phenomena are inexpressible because language is itself also a phenomenon that exists only in relationship to other phenomena. But language cannot recreate – not exactly express – what it describes" (WA II.5, 298). A direct corollarium of this conception, as we will see, is that "a phenomenon can never be dismissed or eliminated by calculation or by words" (WA II.11, 98).

[15] I freely borrow this concept from Heinrich Rickert, see e.g. *Kulturwissenschaft und Naturwissenschaft* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1926), 32.

> [W]e can say that a stamen is a contracted petal or, with equal justification, that a petal is a stamen in a state of expansion; that a sepal is a contracted stem leaf with a certain degree of refinement, or that a stem leaf is a sepal expanded by an influx of cruder juices. We might likewise say of the stem that it is an expanded flower and fruit, just as we assumed that the flower and fruit are a contracted stem. (WA II.6, 92–93)[16]

As a matter of fact, Goethe's metamorphic vision of nature challenges a purely referential, one-to-one model of language, such as that traditionally inherited from Aristotle's *De Interpretatione*. A single phenomenon may be designated by multiple names, none of which fully and adequately encapsulate it. Furthermore, every metamorphosis involves "indiscernible alterations of form," perceived as "progressive states" that "cannot [even] be stamped with a name" (WA II.6, 355).[17] As Goethe himself admits in a conversation with Riemer in 1807, the world as portrayed by words thus necessarily entails a baseline level of anthropomorphization, which means an unavoidable degree of deviation from reality *per se*:

> All philosophies of nature remain mere anthropomorphism […] What human beings say about things does not exhaust their whole nature. They are not only what is said, but something more and different. And that is true, because we discover more and more relations of things to us every day, and we still sense something more about them. That means that things are infinite. We know that. In a word: man does not express the object completely. (GG II, 180–182)

At other points in his reflections, Goethe unequivocally associates language with a form of one-sidedness,[18] of error,[19] even positing that a hypothetical superior entity possessing comprehensive knowledge of nature could never find fulfilment in the ordinary language transmitted by tradition.[20] In this regard, an undeniable element of *Sprachkritik* can be traced within Goethe's thought, as scholars have noted, that makes direct observation always an unavoidable point of reference, that can never be "dismissed or eliminated by calculation or by words" (WA II.11, 98).

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[16] The translation is taken from *The Metamorphosis of Plants*, trans. D. Miller (Cambridge [MA]: MIT Press, 2009). When available, translations of other scientific essays is taken from *Scientific Studies*, trans. D. Miller (New York: Suhrkamp, 1988).

[17] In this sense, Goethe carries out one of the few attempts to think those *entre-formes* that, precisely for their escaping any linguistic crystallisation, have been left unthought by Western philosophical tradition (on this latter limit of Western philosophy, see François Jullien, *Les transformations silencieuses* [Paris: Grasset, 2009]). That Goethe's *Sprachkritik* is to be linked to the unfathomability of the single events of metamorphosis and not to the problem of intersubjective communication – as e.g. in the case of Herder, to a certain extent – is clearly expressed in a beautiful distichon: "What divides us is reality; / But what unites us are words" (WA I.14, 292).

[18] "A word must sever itself, isolate itself, in order to say or signify anything. Man, while he speaks, must, for the moment, become one-sided; there is no communication, no instruction, without severing" (WA I.28, 109).

[19] "The first word we utter we begin to err" (WA I.2, 279).

[20] See GG VIII, 96.

The question is whether this critique entirely undermines the utility of language – implying that language should ideally be replaced by direct vision as soon as possible – or whether, alongside this *caveat*, Goethe also attributes to language a positive role. More than a clue in this direction is provided by a passage from the text *Shakespeare und kein Ende*: "The eye may well be called the clearest sense through which the easiest transmission is possible. But the inner sense is even clearer, and to it, the highest and quickest transmission comes through the word: for the word is truly fruitful (*fruchtbringend*) when what we perceive through the eye, in and for itself alien to us, is made appear more profoundly effective (*tiefwirkend*) before us" (WA I.41/1, 53–54).

Predictably, the way in which language is used matters. Certain expressive practices can not only minimise the distortion inherent to communication, but even *enrich* perceptual content. We thus arrive at the second – normative – thesis of Goethe's reflection on the phenomenon-expression polarity:

(2) Language is used not only *appropriately* but also *fruitfully* when the logic of expression does not strive to *overcome* or *substitute*, but to *harmonise with* that of the phenomenon – when human *logos* seeks to penetrate and measure up to the *logos* of nature (*ana*-logy).

This normative view of language can be inferred not only from the way Goethe shapes his own texts but from how he explicitly distinguishes between good and bad linguistic practices. Notably, Goethe holds that language is used badly whenever it severs its connection with seeing, attempting to make expression a substitute for, rather than a reflection of, what it aims to convey. His criticism of both the mathematisation and the taxonomisation of nature must be understood in this light: rather than bestowing "dignity" to the objects of observation, modern scientists flatten them into a "small world" (WA II.5/1, 163–164) of preordained signs or categories.[21] Fully in line with Lichtenberg's views, Goethe for instances expresses his resistance to the static classification of organisms offered by Linnaeus, that disregards the dynamic, concrete connection between natural phenomena.[22]

[21] Ernst Cassirer notoriously elaborates at length on Goethe's rejection of these paradigms, see esp. "Goethe und die mathematische Physik. Eine erkenntnistheoretische Betrachtung," in *Idee und Gestalt* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1971): 33–80. See also John McCarthy, "Erscheinung, Erscheinen (Manifestation)," in *Goethe-Lexicon of Philosophical Concepts* 2 (2021): https://goethe-lexicon.pitt.edu/GL/article/view/31.

[22] "I had entrusted myself to him [i.e., Linnaeus] and his theory with complete confidence; nevertheless, I gradually felt that, on his path, something, if not confusing me, at least induced me to doubt. If I must now explain those circumstances, think of me as the *born poet* who tries to shape, on the object from time to time encountered, his own words and expressions, in order to somehow account for it. This poet would had to memorise a whole terminology, keep in mind a good number of words and attributes so that, at the sight of any plant form, he would be able to find a peculiar definition and thus classify his object. The procedure seemed to me a kind of mosaic, with one piece placed next to another, to finally compose from thousands of pieces the *semblance* of a picture; therefore, in a certain way, the thing repelled me" (italics mine; WA II.6, 115-116).

According to his normative ideal, Goethe even establishes a hierarchy among languages, favouring e.g. Greek over Latin. The Greek language, with its strong verbal component, is namely seen by Goethe as more flexible and closely aligned with perceptual experience than Latin, as indicated in the historical part of his *Theory of Colours*. While Latin carelessly tends to "petrify" experience, Greek language tries to delve into it and to keep it alive in the words as much as possible: "Greek is decidedly more ingenuous and much more skilled in presenting the natural, cheerful, spirited, and aesthetic visions of nature. The use of verbs, and especially of infinitives and participles, allows for any expression; in truth, nothing is fully determined, pinned down, or fixed by the word; it is only a suggestion to evoke the object in the imagination" (WA II.3, 171–172).

"Evoking the object in the imagination" – which means translating the phenomenon into something imaginable – is arguably indeed the highest result that language can achieve from a Goethean perspective. To this purpose, words need to minimise their inherent impulse to crystallise reality, and to be just as flexible (*beweglich*) and formative (*bildsam*) as nature itself – indeed, as already Herder and Hamann had theorised, they need to become once again "poetic." At the opposite end, in the spectrum of linguistic possibilities, stands what Goethe considers the greatest possible mistake: "killing the alive object through the word" (WA II.1, 304). Language "kills" whenever it ceases to be an evocation, and insists instead to sketch its own world, drawing imagination not *on* phenomena but *away from* them.

The asymptotic approachment[23] between nature and human *logos* allowed by a language *evoking objects* not only mitigates the inherent dangers of communication, but can even be productive in a higher sense. Certainly, nature remains for Goethe a Protean entity, infinitely elusive for human *logos*, and Goethe's most sceptical statements about language attest precisely to this. Yet, just as in the Homeric myth about the metamorphical God,[24] Proteus cannot tell anything to the heroes until he is immobilised in the boundaries of a form, so imposing words on things means not only falsifying the inherently ungraspable nature of change; it also provides the only perspective from which the heterogeneous continuum of phenomena can be observed as such.[25] As Goethe writes in an early work from 1775, "[e]very form, no matter how deeply felt, has something untrue about it; yet once and for all it is

[23] The identity between language and things is defined in terms of an "utopy" by Ansgar Mohnkern, who tries to read Goethe's *Sprachauffassung* through the lens of Walter Benjamin's philosophy. In the present work, we are trying to argue for a somewhat less tragic relation between these two dimensions in Goethe's understanding – after all, his preference for symbols over allegories, which will be notoriously reversed by Benjamin, apparently goes precisely in this direction; nevertheless, Mohnkern's study perfectly elucidates why a full-blown coincidence between language and things is ruled out by Goethe's morphology, see "Goethes Fortgepflanztes: Zur Unbegrifflichkeit der Morphologie," *Goethe Yearbook* 19 (2012): 185–210. See also Dennis Sepper, "Goethe and the Poetics of Science," *Janus Head* 8 (2005): 207–227.

[24] See Hom., *Od.*, 4.431–459.

[25] The heuristic function of form – which is central in the Homeric episode – appears to me crucial to Goethe's appropriation of the myth as well; this aspect, however, has been relatively neglected in the otherwise enlightening analysis by Benjamin Schluter, "Proteus (Proteus)," *Goethe-Lexicon of Philosophical Concepts* 4 (2024): https://goethe-lexicon.pitt.edu/GL/article/view/66.

the lens through which the sacred shafts of nature's expanse are gathered up in a fiery point to the heart of human beings" (WA I.37, 314).

While undoubtedly shaping reality according to our own (anthropomorphic) perspective, language *can* also enter into a polar resonance with it: provided that words do not deliberately take the path of violence, but try to adhere as much as possible to nature and to be pervaded by its same *Geist* – indeed, to be *naturgemäß*[26] –, the irreducible urge of language to shape and define can single out of the heterogeneous continuum of phenomena genuine laws and structures. Somehow paradoxically, by covering nature to some extent, language can clarify and magnify its endless complexity even more than a transparent mirror would do, training our eyes to see phenomenological patterns. This unique dynamic, which I tried to term elsewhere etymologically "ana-logy" (for the two *logoi* of nature and human being are called to inexhaustibly measure *upon* [*anà*] one another),[27] assigns language – and expression more broadly – a constructive role.

Goethe's scientific writings, often titled *Versuche*, illustrate this vividly.[28] These works are not attempts to reduce nature to clear explanations but efforts to articulate and unfold its implicit metamorphic intensity within language. In his *Hefte zur Morphologie* Goethe argues that in order to describe reality, the scientist must "assume and impress upon himself each phenomenon as if existing in itself" (WA II.6, 359–360). Of course, no phenomenon exists in isolation, but only this regulative principle – on which naming relies – allows nature's otherwise impenetrable mystery to be translated into a morpho-logical discourse. The partial falsification of language, in a way, is the only medium in which nature's continuum of forms can be morpho-*logically* articulated. To put it in more theoretical terms: if the ideal of a "*delicate* empiricism (zarte *Empirie*)" (WA II.11, 128; italics mine) sets clear limits on the possibilities of expression, it is also true that there is no "delicate *empiricism*" without the attempt to account for – that is, indeed, express – the nature towards which the scientist strives to be delicate. The tight interplay between the (visual, phenomenological) notion of *Urphänomen* and the (expressive, conceptual) notion of *Typus* shows this ana-logical interplay clearly: seeing the heart of the "primordial phenomenon" means and requires finding the right way to typify the phenomenological domain manifesting in it, that is, to portray it expressively.

Expression thus works as a bridge that produces the encounter and the endless tuning between the *logos* of the object – which presents itself as *meta*morphosis, as *discontinuous* continuity – and the *logos* of the subject, which intends to organise nature into typological descriptions and to view it as meta*morphosis*, discontinuous *continuity*. Goethe reflects on this attunement in particularly significant passages of his work such as the opening of his *Hefte*. There, he highlights the irrevocable

[26] On the methodological importance of this concept, see Dalia Nassar, *Romantic Empiricism. Nature, Art, and Ecology from Herder to Humboldt* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2022), §4.3.

[27] I explore this dynamic at length in Alberto Merzari, *Incroci del vedere: Heidegger e Goethe* (Padua: PhD Dissertation in Philosophy – University of Padua, 2024).

[28] See Nassar, *Romantic Empiricism*, §4.4.

duality between the human *logos* and the *Logos* of nature, which the human *logos* endlessly attempts to grasp.

> When in the exercise of his powers of observation man undertakes to confront the world of nature, he will at first experience a tremendous compulsion to bring what he finds there under his control. Before long, however, these objects will thrust themselves upon him with such force that he, in turn, must feel the obligation to acknowledge their power and pay homage to their effects. When this mutual interaction becomes evident he will discover a double infinite (*doppelt Unendliches*); among the objects he will find many different forms of existence and modes of change, a variety of relationships livingly interwoven; in himself, on the other hand, a potential for infinite growth through constant adaptation of his sensibilities and judgment to new ways of acquiring knowledge and responding-with-action. (WA II.6, 5)

The image of the "double infinite" invoked here powerfully captures that polar tension between language and phenomena – or between human *logos* and nature – that Goethe terms elsewhere "object-centered thinking (*gegenständliches Denken*)" (WA II.11, 60). Human *logos* shall render nature increasingly readable, articulating its meanings; at the same time, it shall never overlook nature's radical otherness and inexhaustibility. Even more clearly: the mimetic interplay between language and nature must be open and self-critical, and the scientist shall constantly do his/her best to overcome the forcings and limits of his/her *Vorstellungsart*; as Goethe puts it, "in observing nature," the human being shall constantly ask him/herself: "is it the object that speaks here, or is it you?" (WA II.11, 135).

In this way, a relation to language is made possible that eludes two opposite standstills: on one side, the mystical silence of *apophasis* which would confine the subject in an unarticulated contemplation of an unarticulated phenomenal stream. On the other one, the monologue of a purely logical, mathematical mindset that would reduce such a stream to human formulas, and thus sacrifice the sensory and qualitative thrust of experience. Goethe's language find its place between these extremes, embodying what could be called a language of "hints" or, more technically, of "symbols" – a language that seeks unity with phenomena without fully merging with them, that is both *one with* and *distinct from* what it signifies and that conceives of itself as an inexhaustible "revelation" of the "impenetrable."[29]

In a poem from his *West-Eastern Divan* significantly titled *Hint* (*Wink*), Goethe compares the word to a "fan" that, while veiling the wholeness of the object, selectively opens a view onto – indeed, reveals – its innermost core, thereby strengthening the bond between human being and nature:

[29] Symbols are – according to Goethe's well-known definition – "living-momentary revelation of the unfathomable (*lebendig-augenblickliche Offenbarung des Unerforschlichen*)" (WA I.42/2, 150–151). On this aspect, the relatively old study by Wolfgang Binder still deserves consideration, see Wolfang Binder, "Das 'offenbare Geheimnis.' Goethes Symbolverständnis," in *Welt der Symbole*, ed. G. Benedetti, U. Rauchfleisch (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1988): 146–163. See also Mohnkern, "Goethes Fortgepflanztes," 198-199.

Hint

[…] a word does not hold simply (*ein Wort [gilt] nicht einfach*) –
That would defy poetic odds.
The word's a fan! Between the rods –
A glancing pair of comely eyes:
With fans, a gauze we will devise,
That even if it shade her face
The maiden-beauty we may trace.
Her eye! – that is the loveliest:
It lightnings into mine! I'm blest. (WA I.6, 42)[30]

Language, as flexible as it may be, inevitably conceals nature: it cannot "simply" coincide with it ("ein Wort [gilt] nicht *ein-fach*"), as if they were two superimposable surfaces (*Fächer*). Yet, without that degree of concealment that language entails, our dialogue with nature would lack resonance – indeed, there would be no dia-logue at all. While mathematical physics – as well as traditional metaphysics, to a certain extent – overcomes phenomena by making them fully convertible into an overly transparent language, and while mystical thought abandons any search for rational orientation in favour of an indistinct unity with the universe, Goethe's analogical thought practices a kind of translation in language that never dissimulates itself and that continuously invites us to return, with increasing depth, to the infinite *Logos* of the "things themselves."[31]

3. TWO WAYS OF PETRIFYING. WORDS AND IMAGES

Provided that they do not deliberately distance themselves from things, retreating into a world of their own, but instead engage in a polar interplay with nature, words are thus considered by Goethe as a powerful enhancement of our gaze on phenomena. In part – constitutively – words in fact conceal the metamorphical flow of nature, but in part – and precisely by doing so – they "epitomise"[32] it, and thus collaborate in the phenomeno*logical* process of its emergence, making it readable for the human *logos*.

One question still needs to be assessed, namely whether images have any role to play within this ana-logical mirroring. As a matter of fact, it is essential to

[30] Translation is a slightly modified version of the one provided by *West-East Divan*, trans. M. Bidney (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2011).

[31] On Goethe's implicit alignment with later phenomenological perspectives, as well as on phenomenologists' explicit references to Goethe, see Eva-Maria Simms, "Goethe und die Phänomenologie. Weltanschauung, Methode und Naturphilosophie," in *Morphologie und Moderne. Goethes 'anschauliches Denken' in den Geistes- und Kulturwissenschaften seit 1800*, ed. J. Maatsch (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014): 177–194; Iris Hennigfeld, "Goethe's Phenomenological Way of Thinking and the *Urphänomen*," *Goethe Yearbook* 25 (2015): 143–167. Specifically on the relation between Heidegger's and Goethe's approaches to the "things themselves," see my *Incroci del vedere*, §2.

[32] See e.g. WA I.41/1, 67, where poets are defined as "epitomisers of nature."

acknowledge – and this is where the current analysis will conclude – that, firstly, Goethe often resorts to drawings in his examination of nature; secondly, he ascribes some kind of knowledge to the visual explorations conducted by prominent artists; and thirdly, for him, poetry and language in general possess an intrinsic connection to the realm of images. Upon deeper examination, it will be seen that the primary polarity connecting vision and expression is intricately associated with a secondary polarity that relates, within the realm of expression, words and images.

To begin with, Goethe refers to a "mutual influence," a "competition," a "balance," and a "correlation" between the expressive possibilities of verbal and pictorial domains.[33] He emphasises the importance of seeing poetry and the visual arts as "related (*verwandt*)" yet "separate (*getrennt*)" (WA I.48, 119) and notes that it is entirely appropriate to "express what cannot be depicted, and to depict what cannot be expressed," while warning against confusing one form with the other, as this can lead to the creation of "monstrosities" (WA I.42/2, 130). But what exactly does this separation involve, and why is there a mutual necessity despite it? Ontologically and semiotically, images are apparently closer to vision. By meticulously adhering to the "surface" (WA I.45, 254, 260) of phenomena, the painter or the draughtsman has not yet to (rationally) sort out all elements of his/her representation, allowing for implicit visual contents that words would have to logically disambiguate. His/her *Darstellung* enables a synchronic integrity of sensory appearance,[34] and is comparatively less bound then words to a certain *Vorstellungsart*. Precisely for this reason, drawings often serve as an intermediaries between direct observation and conceptual elaboration in Goethe's study of nature, as testified by his numerous sketches of plants.

Of course, images are not merely diminished versions of the visible nor just supports for linguistic thought. Like words, images have their own limits ("Nature organises a living being, while the artist organises a *lifeless* but meaningful one" [WA I.45, 254; italics mine]), which – again as in the case of words – are also a resource to enhance perception ("Nature organises a living being, while the artist organises a lifeless *but meaningful* one"). For instance, visual artists reveals aspects that nature leaves unexpressed – no less than "the truth of both the whole and particular" (GG VI, 96) in Rubens's paintings, or the intimate laws of appearance, in Leonardo's (see WA I.49/1, 204). This "second nature" (WA I.45, 261) of art – and, in a different way, the "second nature" of the natural scientist's drawings –

[33] See WA II.4, 288; WA I.49/1, 63; WA I.42/2, 130. Different aspects of this correlation have been explored in the essays collected in Barbara Naumann, Margrit Wyder, eds., *"Ein Unendliches in Bewegung." Künste und Wissenschaften im medialen Wechselspiel bei Goethe* (Bielefeld: Aisthesis, 2012) and in Javier Arnaldo, Hermann Mildenberger, eds., *Johann Wolfgang Goethe: Landschaftszeichnungen* (Frankfurt a.M.: Insel, 2009). In the latter collection, Petra Maisak's contribution in particular ("Zeichen an den Rändern der Sprache," 42–54) tries to sketch the history of the word-image relation in Goethe's *Denkweg*.

[34] This point is well made by Ernst Osterkamp, who underscores that Goethe regards words as incapable of reaching the "optical *Einmaligkeit*, simultaneity, and inner diversity" expressed by visual media, see Ernst Osterkamp, *Im Buchstabenbilde. Studien zum Verfahren Goethescher Bildbeschreibungen Gallerie* (Stuttgart: Metzler 1991), 1.

collaborates in revealing the *Logos* of nature just like words do – for instance, in highlighting the "most vivid effect" of phenomena, their "purest proportions," and, most importantly, in selecting "the necessary from the unnecessary" (WA I.45, 257, 310). If they accept their "übernatürlich" but not "außernatürlich" position (see WA I.47, 265), images too can intensify nature by translating it into the human *logos*. In this sense, poetry and the visual arts are indeed deeply related (*verwandt*).

What is most significant to our analysis, however, is that this translation occurs in words and images quite differently, each of them abstracting distinct aspects from the heterogeneous continuum of metamorphosis. The conclusion of Goethe's *Diderots Versuch über die Mahlerei* is unequivocal in this respect:

> Painting is far removed from the art of rhetoric. […] The orator hastens from object to object, from work of art to work of art, to think about them, grasp them, survey them, organise them, and express their qualities. The artist, on the other hand, lingers on the object; he unites with it in love, imparts to it the best of his spirit and heart, and recreates it. In the act of creation, time ceases to matter, for love performs the work. Which lover feels the passage of time in the presence of the beloved object? Which true artist is conscious of time while working? What troubles you, the orator, brings the artist happiness; where you feel the urge to hurry impatiently, he feels his greatest contentment. (WA I.45, 321)

Images and words are indeed separated by the fact that, for the former, "time ceases to matter," or, as Johannes Grave, puts it, images inherently possess a "petrifying quality."[35] We have noted something similar about the language of mathematics or taxonomical science. However, while words "petrify" in that they trap phenomena within abstract (subjective) frameworks, imposing universality upon the irreducibly singularity of the individuum[36] – this holds for conceptual language in particular, but ultimately applies even to the least petrifying language of all, that is, poetry – images "petrify" in that they lack the capacity to convey the idea of time – and thus of change. This is evident in Goethe's own struggle to portray his morphological types in visual forms; he never settles on a final, fixed image. In Grave's terms, "[n]ot the finished drawing, but the process of its creation is what he particularly emphasises" ("Beweglich und bildsam," 72). A drawing alone cannot capture the whole intensity of natural life, unless language helps us imagine the dynamic moment that it depicts. Goethe's deep interest in *ekphrasis*,[37]

[35] Johannes Grave, "'Beweglich und bildsam.' Morphologie als implizite Bildtheorie?," in *Morphologie und Moderne*: 57–74, here 71.

[36] As Goethe puts it, according to Riemer's witness, "Language cannot express the individual (what I call the individuality of the phenomenon), the specific. Our words for the species are, after all, only general" (Friedrich Riemer, *Mitteilungen über Goethe auf Grund der Ausgabe von 1841 und des handschriftlichen Nachlasses* [Leipzig: Insel, 1921], 248). See Mittermüller, *Sprachskepsis und Poetologie*, 52 ff.

[37] A focus on Goethe's practice of *ekphrasis* can be found in Ernst Osterkamp, *Im Buchstabenbilde. Studien zum Verfahren Goethescher Bildbeschreibungen Gallerie* (Stuttgart: Metzler 1991).

after all, stems exactly from this belief: only then does visual art achieve its highest expressive power, when words are there to integrate them. A very clear example of this is Goethe's writing on *The Last Supper*, which immerses us in the scene that Leonardo's painting freezes in its poignant moment. Goethe's description reactivates the dramatic intensity of the betrayal and impending death of Jesus. Without it, the painting would convey an action only in potential – and this is basically true of every image: images need words to gain (back) motion, and thus life.

More interesting and perhaps striking is that, admittedly, Goethe's discourse suggests that words in turn need images, for words can capture only a fraction of the visible world's irreducible complexity. From what point of view? In part we have already indicated it, referring to the inherently universalizing nature of verbal language. Much more than images, words miss the ineffable richness and density of singularity. But we can take an enlightening example. In 1815, Goethe came to know the English scientist Luke Howard's pioneering work, which presented a classification of clouds based on three main types: *cirrus*, *cumulus*, and *stratus*.[38] This conceptual and morphological breakthrough deeply captured his attention: in his 1817 trilogy of poems, titled *Gott und Welt*, Goethe honoured Howard, seeing in him someone who had unveiled the hidden patterns of nature, being able to find forms within a domain that *par excellance* had always seemed formless.

> To find himself in the infinite,
> One must distinguish, then unite;
> My song takes wing in thanks today,
> For the man who set clouds apart. (WA I.3, 97)

Nature's *Logos* is well approximated in Howard's concepts. Yet, Goethe warns against taking Howard the same way that Linnaeus had been taken, for language – however precise – always falls short of nature's fullness and density. A reconnection with the singularity of visible nature is always unavoidable to keep concepts alive, and such reconnection can be mediated only by poetry and, above all, by images.

> And when we have discerned,
> Then we must restore living qualities
> To what we have separated
> And find joy in a renewed life.
>
> Thus when the painter, the poet,
> well-versed in Howard's distinctions,
> early in the morning, late at night,
> observes the atmosphere with care,

[38] See Luke Howard, *On the Modifications of Clouds* (London: Taylor, 1803).

he grasps its character;
yet it is the airy realms that grant him
the shifting, the gentle,
so he may capture, feel, and shape it. (WA I.3, 102)

Only the poet and the painter can breathe nature in its concreteness. Goethe expands on this idea in a meteorological essay from the same period, clarifying even further the preliminary role of images in the vivification of conceptual language. He writes that even if he had enthusiastically adopted Howard's terminology, he still felt compelled to return to nature and sketch various cloud forms himself, remaining faithful to his own method: to observe natural phenomena in a certain sequence of development, carefully following in drawing each forward and backward transition. Only in this way, he argued, could he achieve a "living overview" (WA II.12, 12) that would generate a new set of concepts, one that would eventually meet nature more closely. As a matter of fact, correcting a theory, for Goethe, requires reconnecting it to vision – and procedurally it is drawing that often mediates this reconnection. This is why he spent time on sketching cloud formations over Weimar – not just any clouds, but those in a particular sky, under specific conditions;[39] a sky so unique it could never be contained in any linguistic taxonomy, however valuable. These drawings called for a new (poetic) language, which again would have given rise to concepts, which eventually would have demanded a return to vision.

This way, the circle of human logos in its approximation to nature completes. Just as words can bring an image back to life, an image can return us to that singularity from which words, in their conceptual form – and ultimately even in poetry – slowly drift away. Words can speak only of *a* sky; images bring us as close as possible to portraying *that* sky.

CONCLUSION

Vision, image, and word, each time anew. The human appropriation of the natural *logos* is for Goethe an infinite endeavor that not only cannot dispense with expressivity, but also demands a mode of expressivity capable of both imagining singularity in vivid representation and embracing universality through language – of both celebrating the unique density of the particular form in images and safeguarding its universality in words. Beyond any dichotomy of rationalism and irrationalism, scepticism and dialectics – or even before these oppositions –, the unity of word and image constitutes that pinnacle of the *ana-logical* reason that for

[39] Many of Goethe's drawings of clouds can be found in the online Fotothek of the Klassik Stiftung Weimar, see e.g. the drawing no. 10-2024-0097, which bears the following description "Weimar, November 29th, in the morning, in stormy weather" (https://www.klassik-stiftung.de/digital/fotothek/digitalisat/10-2024-0097/).

Goethe was "exact sensible imagination" (WA II.11, 75)[40]: the oscillation of form within the expanse of its infinite possibilities and the consolidation of those possibilities into the concreteness of form endlessly convert into each other. Vision unmasks each expressive attempt as ultimately inadequate; at the same time, it is expression that continually opens up vision and brings into light its being infinite. In this polar interplay, nature becomes increasingly familiar yet all the more mysterious whereas expression becomes increasingly adequate yet all the more inadequate. Goethe's polar thought seeks to amplify all these aspects simultaneously, accepting that path that Kant had described as an "adventure of reason" and – together with it – that sense of knowledge as finite understanding of the infinite nature that was both aligned with Kant and beyond him. As Goethe puts it poetically, in verses that Ernst Cassirer will turn into a sort of rational faith, "If into the infinite you wish to stride,/ Explore the finite from every side" (WA I.2, 216).[41]

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[40] On this concept, see Simms, "Goethe und die Phänomenologie," 185. See also Iris Hennigfeld, "Anschauung, Anschauen (Intuition)," *Goethe-Lexicon of Philosophical Concepts* 2 (2021): https://goethe-lexicon.pitt.edu/GL/article/view/49, esp. §7.

[41] See also Ernst Cassirer, Martin Heidegger, "Davoser Disputation zwischen Ernst Cassirer und Martin Heidegger," in Martin Heidegger, *Kant und das Problem der Metaphysik* (Frankfurt a.M.: Klostermann, 1991): 274–296, here 286.

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