Demonic History

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Chapter Two

Demons of Morphology

Aber das Erdenleben ist doch ein Prozeß der Umgeburt (Umgestaltung). Wer ist schuld daran, daß man sich in einen Teufel umwandelt? [But if life on earth is undoubtedly a process of transformation through rebirth, whose fault is it if someone transforms himself into a devil?]

—Stavrogin in Dostoyevsky’s Demons, from an extra dialogue published in the 1918 German Piper edition

Given the size and importance of Goethe’s natural scientific writings, my analysis of his theory of morphology will be relatively brief. Impossible to definitively categorize, Goethe’s work as a natural scientist and his thinking about nature can be read as philosophical reflections—whether in the direction of ontology, Kantian critique, or an aesthetic theory—or as a strange milestone in the history of science, somewhere between Linnaeus and Darwin, or as a figural-symbolic system that informs Goethe’s literary work, or perhaps even as a literary work in its own right. Though these considerations inform my approach, I will not explore them in detail. Despite their complexity, Goethe’s morphological writings are crucial for the demonic, and not only because his most schematic conception of it, the Orphic “Urworte,” was first published in the Morphology. Twentieth-century readings of the demonic tended to freely mix the demonic with morphology. With these later developments in mind, the present chapter seeks in a preliminary way to establish connections and differences between morphology and the demonic. This is first of all a question of how Goethe’s “Urworte” may be read in the context of their first 1820 publication in the Morphology. Though Gundolf exploited it in his Goethe biography, the connection to natural science may be at odds with strictly autobiographical or anthropological readings of the demonic.

In comparison to the “Urworte” commentary in their second 1820 publication in On Art and Antiquity, the context of morphology focuses on even more primal and general forms. In a manuscript from the mid-1790s, Goethe...
defined morphology in opposition to the specialized disciplines of “natural history, natural science, anatomy, chemistry, animal physiology, and psychology” as the master-term of the life sciences. Morphology is the “observation of the organic whole through the consideration of all of the separate aspects and their connection through the power of the mind” (HA 13:123; FA 364). According to Dorothea Kuhn, the editor of the Frankfurt edition of the morphology, Goethe was the first to use the term “morphology” in the context of the natural sciences. He first conceived it, according to Kuhn, as “a doctrine of forms [Gestaltenlehre] ... meant to comprise all phenomena of natural history, the organic as well as the inorganic” (FA 1015). This idea of form focuses on phenomena as they appear. A fragment titled “Morphology,” perhaps also from the 1790s, states that morphology “rests on the conviction that everything that is must also show and indicate itself” (FA 349).

One motivation of this conception, especially in its later and more developed form, was Goethe’s concern that the sciences were becoming too analytical and specialized. His 1829 “Analysis and Synthesis” emphasizes that analyses are only possible on the basis of preexisting syntheses (HA 13:51). Against science’s expansion into an increasing number of partial disciplines, morphology is the science of the whole. From this perspective, analytic interventions can only be meaningful in light of their possible derivation from a presupposed totality and continuity of being—a “harmonia mundi” as Kuhn calls it (FA 1013). Morphology in this sense is not a branch of the sciences but science itself as the science of science—transcendental meta-science—based on the ontological assumption of the primacy of the whole.2

How does the morphological scientific method work in practice? Somewhat contrary to what the name “morphology” might suggest, it is not a formalism (in the sense of a taxonomic approach), but rather a “trans-formalism”:

Form [die Gestalt] is something that moves, develops, passes away [ist ein bewegliches, ein werdendes, ein vergehendes]. The theory of forms is a theory of transformation. [Gestaltenlehre ist Verwandlungslehre.] The theory of metamorphosis is the key to all of Nature’s signs. [Die Lehre der Metamorphose ist der Schlüssel zu allen Zeichen der Natur]. (FA 349)

This subordination of form to time and transformation breaks with the taxonomic thought of the eighteenth century. Metamorphosis, for example, more readily includes problems of function as a reason or motive of transformation.1 Morphology does not view natural forms in static isolation, nor does it seek to tabulate systems of identity and difference between different forms. Instead it traces the identity and transformation of forms in time.

The implications of this focus on transformation are clearest in Goethe’s botanical writings. A note he made in Italy, for example, summarizes ideas that he later developed more systematically: “Hypothesis. Everything is
leaf. and through this simplicity the greatest multiplicity becomes possible
[Hypothese. Alles ist Blat. und durch diese Einfachheit wird die größte Man-
nigfaltigkeit möglich]” (HA 13:582). The point of this hypothesis is that the
various parts of a plant are not parts of a whole but transformations of a sin-
gle underlying unit. Goethe calls this unit “leaf.” Form here is not defined as
a (Platonic) conceptual unity—as a “tree”—but as the metamorphic continu-
ity of the smallest (visually) identifiable unit. Goethe sees the leaf as the basis
of the visible transformations that define the plant over time throughout its
life cycle. The leaf, isolated in this way, may be, as Goethe realized, only an
arbitrary and nominal unit within a chain or cycle of transformations, but it
can still figure as an allegory or metonymy for morphology’s idea of the con-
tinuity of forms. Form, rather than a static shape or Gestalt, is conceived as a
cycle of cycles, a developing variation capable, at the limit, of encompassing
all living beings.

From the earliest inklings and fragmentary texts of the 1780s to the
published writings on morphology, metamorphosis is the main idea of
morphology. In “History of His Botanical Studies” (“Der Verfasser teilt die
Geschichte seiner botanischen Studien mit”), first published in 1818 in the
Morphology and revised at the end of the 1820s, Goethe reflects on Italy and
the primal plant (Urpflanze):

I pursued all forms [Gestalten] as they presented themselves to
me in their variations and thus achieved complete illumination at
the final stop of my journey, in Sicily, regarding the original iden-
tity [ursprüngliche Identität, emphasis Goethe’s] of all parts of the
plant—and then I sought to pursue and perceive this insight every-
where. (HA 13:164; FA 748).

Implicit in the idea of metamorphosis is the possibility of deriving all (botani-
cal) forms from an ideal primal form, an Ur-type at the base of all visible
forms. Rather than drawing analytic distinctions, metamorphosis makes
them fluid to such a degree that conceptual and terminological differentia-
tions begin to appear arbitrary.

This idea is expressed in paragraph 120 of Goethe’s “On the Metamor-
phosis of Plants” (“Zur Metamorphose der Pflanzen”), which was published
first in 1790 and republished in 1818 in the first volume of the Morphology.
“The leaf” (das Blatt) may appear to be the basic unit of transformation,
but Goethe emphasizes how metonymically inapt it is to name the whole
continuum after it:

It goes without saying that we would need to have a general term [ein
allgemeines Wort] with which to refer to this organ that is metamor-
phosed into such varied forms [dieses in so verschiedene Gestalten
metamorphosierte Organ], in order to compare all of the appearances
Goethe’s use of two different words for “stamen” illustrates the general point that human language is unable to definitively name the “parts” of naturally occurring wholes. The “basic unit” is always nominal in that it refers neither to “building blocks” that compose organic beings, nor to an abstract whole. It only symbolizes a continuum of forms, a cycle of cycles that allows a continuous “part” to transform itself within itself.

Goethe’s idea of the Urpflanze has become entirely emblematic of this idea, and his uncertainty as to its empirical or rather ideal status parallels the contradictions developed in the five “Urworte.” The “primal plant” may have been conceived in ways that caused it to resemble a Platonic form or Kantian a priori, but in the Italian Journey, before these more philosophical articulations, Goethe seemed to expect that it might exist in reality. On June 9, 1787, he wrote to Charlotte von Stein: “The Urpflanze will be the most amazing creature [das wunderlichste Geschöpf] in the world, for which Nature herself shall envy me. With this model [Modell] and its key [Schlüssel] one then would be able to invent additional plants into infinity [ins Unendliche]” (HA 13:579). One could discount such a remark, which is clearly non-scientific and apparently expresses its author’s enthusiasm for his topic—but with respect to the demonic, the affective investment may be more significant than objective scientific validity. The superimposition of a morphological schema with a genetic derivation makes it seem that the original ancestor might actually exist, which would exhibit all of the traits of its offspring. And through this original “model”—real or imaginary—it should be possible through an act of imagination to prospectively design infinite—real or imaginary—plants. The process can work in either direction, but in the letter the perception of an Urpflanze is primarily an act of intuition: the Urpflanze is above all the possession of a subject—a possession that is the envy of Nature herself. Because the Urpflanze is supposed to be based on real forms, its real existence seems like a possibility, either as an ancient origin (an Urpflanze) or as a speculative end (in the infinity of subjective “inventions” to which the Urpflanze is the “model” and “key”).

The Urpflanze thus resembles the “old Adam” of the “Urworte.” It is the primogenitor, Urvater, and Dämon of the botanical world; it is also the Urmutter Tyche, encompassing every possible combination of the original material. It is the primal imprint from which both extant forms and possible forms are derived. As an Urphänomen, it is the variable “key” that permits the development, metamorphosis, derivation, and interrelation of forms. Like the Orphic Dämon and the originary “Urworte,” the Urpflanze is defined by the tension between infinite potentiality and determinate inheritance,
between lawless metamorphosis and a natural “law” that dictates development. This morphological development may also clarify some apparently contradictory aspects of the idea of “characteristic form” (geprägte Form die lebend sich entwickelt) in the “Urworte”. At the limit, these words define the Dämon’s relation to its own development, which is to say: form’s relation to metamorphosis—its relation to Tyche.

This question of developmental form and its correlation to organic metamorphosis is the main focus of morphology. In a late essay, “Principes de Philosophie Zoologique” (1830–32), Goethe uses the idea of developmental transformation to unify the synthetic and analytic approaches of Étienne Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire and Georges Cuvier. As part of a terminological critique, Goethe introduces words that he considers fundamentally unsuited to the natural sciences. The term “composition,” with constructivist implications and transparently analytic conception, is the object of sharp criticism. The idea of composition is a misnomer, Goethe argues, in the arts as well as in the sciences:

Composition is yet another infelicitous word that is mechanically related to the preceding mechanical term [materials]. The French introduced just such a word into our theories when they began to think and write about the arts. According to them, the painter composes his paintings, and especially the musician is nothing but a composer; and yet, if either wishes to earn the true name of the artist, then they should not compose their works [so setzen sie ihre Werke nicht zusammen], but instead develop a kind of an indwelling image [sie entwickeln irgend ein inwohnendes Bild], a higher resonance [einen höhern Anklang] in accord with the principles of nature and art [natur- und kunstgemäß].

Just as in art, the idea of composition has a debasing effect whenever it is used to speak of nature. Prefabricated organs do not assemble and compose themselves. They develop themselves from and through each other to produce a necessary existence that reaches toward the whole [zu einem notwendigen ins Ganze greifenden Dasein]. In this context it may be possible to speak of function, form, color, measure, matter, weight and of other determinations, however they may be called—because everything is admissible to observation and research. But through it all, the living organism makes its way undisturbed [das Lebendige geht ungestört seinen Gang], propagates and reproduces itself [pflanzt sich weiter], hovering and fluctuating [schwebt, schwankt] until it at last achieves its final form [Vollendung]. (HA 13:245–46; FA 838)

The living organism goes its own way. This is a translation of the Dämon paradigm from the “Urworte”: everything that lives—which truly deserves the name of life or art—makes its way as if according to its own internal
program, undisturbed by outside influences and interventions. It moves and advances in a kind of perpetual motion that removes it from the sphere of static composites and human analytic perceptions. In the context of the opposition between analysis and synthesis, between mechanical and organic forms, development (Entwicklung) is Goethe’s preferred terminology for living forms (das Lebendige), which include not only organic nature, art, and literature, but also biographical life. In light of this morphological premise, “characteristic form” (geprägte Form die lebend sich entwickelt) is the formula of life as such, the key to the metamorphic destiny of everything lifelike, and everything that develops.

Without denying the problematic organological basis of this ideal of universal development, Goethe’s morphological conception of geprägte Form envisions only a limited determinism and a very flexible idea of nature. The sheer existence of forms is an ontological given, but they do not automatically constitute a destiny or predetermination. The form of forms can only be known in their metamorphoses, and, since metamorphosis can only happen over time, morphology can only be a retrospective science. The past history of accomplished metamorphoses may be taken as possibly predictive of a “fate” (as Spengler would say), but morphology’s idea of metamorphosis includes a plurality of metamorphoses, each of which may be unforeseeable in itself, and each of which, based on possible interactions and under the ongoing influence of changing external conditions, may be exposed to unpredictable shifts in both function and form. This guarantees that, as long as metamorphosis is the master-category of morphology, no development can ever be decisively finished, closed off, or entirely predictable. The organological basis of morphology is thus not a problem insofar as it is purely descriptive: it allows nature to be whatever nature does. More troubling issues arise, however, if descriptive morphology becomes normative morphology. The latter would propose a future telos on the horizon of past transformations. Such an implicit teleology is represented in Goethe’s word “Vollendung” (perfection, culmination). Even provisional or “empirical” teleologies can easily be interpreted as symbols that can then replicate themselves in implicit or explicit analogies. Thus the mere perception of teleologies in the organic life cycle easily acquires normative or idealizing significance.

In this way, morphology’s forms are able to provide and even impose their models on art and life. The analogical extension of purely descriptive morphology allows it to approach natural and human history as one continuous “development.” Spengler’s later conception especially, which envisions a cyclical “blossoming and fading” of all life, reveals the twofold risk of morphological symbolic modeling: it either reduces human history and the history of human creations to natural determinism, or it sees natural and human history, including art history, as a single process of culmination. In the latter case, which leans toward historical optimism, a series of familiar ideological fallacies, up to and including eugenics, comes into play; it is a
question of the degree to which humans can or should try to supplement the supposed ends of morphological nature. The former case of historical pessimism functions similarly, except that instead of using morphological reason to further nature’s ends, it is invoked to justify measures intended to prevent, mitigate, or rationalize an impending end.

Morphology’s conception of nature is inescapably Janus-faced, ambivalent in its dependence on the human perspective, which focuses either on inevitable mortality or infinite fecundity. In the writings on morphology and in the “Urworte,” the underlying problem of morphology emerges as a specific polarity, a relation of the individual and the universal in which the former is finite and determinate, with strict (“demonic”) limits that are offset by the boundless universal (“tychic”) flow of time and infinity. In comparison to the “Urworte,” morphology thus arguably places greater emphasis on Tyche and on the Dämon-Tyche couplet. Their relation is shown to be infinitely modifiable, projectable into other polar oppositions such as individual/totality, individual/society, part/whole, synthesis/analysis. In the context of morphology, the “Urworte” paradigm is capable of encompassing the forms of nature and history. It is also more than just a conceptual apparatus: it is apparently motivated to perceive a world that is animated and alive with development. Behind all vocabularies of life, the “Urworte” represent a medium through which all terminological systems can be translated back to an original, “natural” unity.

The “Urworte” raise the meta-science of morphology to the level of a universal system, which Goethe also expressed in the “pulsing” symbol of systole and diastole. This generalized image of morphology extends the “demonic” conflict between the discrete Dämon and its world (Tyche) into a metaphor of universal dualism. From this elevated perspective, no single terminological grid—analysis/synthesis, Dämon/Tyche/Eros/Ananke/Elpis, systole/diastole—can be the referent of such a meta-metaphorical polarity. According to the rules of morphology, this polarity can have no ontological or linguistic ground that would not be a false metonymy (such as “everything is leaf”). The falseness of the metonymy means that no language can refer to “form-in-development”; it can only be represented by metaphors, which are arbitrary and improper in the sense that the relation in question can always be expressed otherwise. Such a metaphorical-analogical continuum, unlike a conceptual or definitional base, allows forms of continuity to be perceived, which are constantly implicit in empirical forms. But this continuity itself can only be nominally expressed. Even the “Orphic” terminology is arbitrary in the same way as the word “leaf”: it can only refer to a single moment of the continual metamorphosis of a form that is normally—just as arbitrarily—called a “tree” (or “life” in the case of the “Urworte”).

The extended consequence of morphology’s emphasis on transition and transformation over identity and identifiability is the complete deconstruction of the conceptual edifice of science (to the extent that it is dependent on
nomenclature) and of language in general (to the extent that a morphologically conceived universe permits metaphors but not referents). “Systole and diastole” is an emphatic name for something that can also be called “analysis and synthesis,” but which is only knowable in its constant figuration in life, art, and nature. Constantly reconfigured, but literally unspeakable, the demonic duality reflects underlying unity. If it did not, it would be not only unspeakable but unthinkable: metamorphosis, unchecked by a unifying sense of form, would be only chaos and entropy. Confronted by an inconceivable referent—“the inconceivable” (das Unfassliche), as Goethe calls it in Poetry and Truth (HA 10:175)—the only alternative to conceiving nothing is to impose a temporary stopgap, a word that names the unnameable. Goethe discusses form in this sense as the precondition of knowledge and reference in an 1823 essay, which is aptly called “Probleme”:

The idea of metamorphosis is a very noble but at the same time very dangerous gift from above [eine höchst gefährliche Gabe von oben]. It leads into formlessness [ins Formlose] and destroys knowledge by dissolving it. It is like the vis centrifuga and would lose itself in infinity [ins Unendliche], if an opposing drive were not granted to it. I am thinking of the drive toward specification [Spezifikationstrieb], the tough tendency to persist [das zähe Beharrlichkeitsvermögen] that is possessed by everything that has once come into reality. It is a vis centripeta, which at its deepest level [in ihrem tiefsten Grunde] cannot be touched by anything external [welcher keine Äußerlichkeit etwas anhaben kann]. (HA 13:35; FA 582–83)

Forms are never static, but the forms of their metamorphoses also cannot be completely random. The form of forms, however, the condition of the possibility of knowledge, can only be known through the forms of their metamorphosis. In the terms of the “Urworte,” the Dämon here is the anchor of form, defining the boundary of Being and Nothingness. The demon is the identity and durability—Spezifikationstrieb and Beharrlichkeitsvermögen—of developmental form, the centripetal force that prevents metamorphic Tyche from entirely dissolving everything.

Within the horizons of morphology’s diachronic conception of form, the form of metamorphosis is itself subject to the metamorphoses produced by metaphorical shifts, which make forms into much broader developmental models. The Dämon-Tyche opposition, like all of the others, is only an arbitrary “key” or nominal reduction within a field of possible metamorphoses and metaphorical extensions. Because morphology is implicitly a science of conceptual metamorphosis—of the conceptual acrobatics necessary to name and describe metamorphoses—it is a meta-metaphorology that finds “the same” basic forms metaphorized everywhere. But it remains aware of its own reliance on metaphor, which means that the “forms” thus “identified” only
actually exist in a differential state. Underlying and overarching unities can only be provisionally posited, and their serial “forms”—synthetic/analytic, systolic/diastolic, centrifugal/centripetal, tropic/entropic, Dämon/Tyche— are based on a network of fragile analogies.

The transposition of “Urworte” into alternate terms exposes the insufficiency of all of these terms. The polarities posited in these words do not refer, except perhaps subliminally—below the level of what they actually mean—and this means, in effect, that they risk becoming mere words, arbitrary signs that fail to name a deeper system of relations (and do not even try to do so). “Urworte” thus emerge as mere signs, extending, propagating, and unifying the supposedly “primal” opposition of and between all forms. The nature of this nature itself can never be uniquely specified, however, because the oppositional pairs only parallel the Dämon-Tyche relation without ever being identical with it. Such is the “danger” of metamorphosis, which corresponds to the negational structure of the demonic from Poetry and Truth: short of conceptual or referential precision, negation and circumlocution are all that remain—but these means are only suggestive of an underlying mystery.

In all cases, this suggestion is the source of fascination. Morphology’s suggestiveness lies in its insinuation of overarching unities that apparently prevail in the analogue interlacing of countless transformational paradigms. In an essay from 1831, for example, “On the Spiral Tendency of Vegetation” (“Zur Spiraltendenz der Vegetation”), the development of plants is theorized in an opposition between “spiral” and “vertical” tendencies or drives. These forces are clearly legible as a further illustration of the relation of Tyche and Dämon:

In the growth of vegetation, the vertically ascending system effec-
tuates the continually existent aspect [das Bestehende], which is simultaneously that which tends toward solidity and persistence [das Solideszierende, Verharrende]; it refers to the fibers in short-lived plants and to the majority of the wood in long-lived plants.

The spiral system is the constantly expanding, reproducing, and nourishing part, and as such it is short-lived, which accordingly isolates it from the vertical system. If it extends its effects too exces-
sively, it very quickly becomes weakened and subject to blight. When attached to a vertical system, both grow together to produce a lasting unity [eine dauernde Einheit], either as wood or some other solid.

Neither of the two systems can be conceived on its own. They are always and eternally [immer und ewig] together, but when they are in perfect balance [im völligen Gleichgewicht], they produce the most perfect vegetable growth [das Vollkommenste der Vegetation]. (HA 13:133; FA 787)

In another passage, Goethe describes the spiral tendency (diachronically) as the “basic law of life” (Grundgesetz des Lebens, HA 13:134; FA 788),
whereas the more timeless vertical system is “powerful but simple” (*mächtig aber einfach*, HA 13:135; FA 795). The superimposition of the *Dämon-Tyche* and these two “tendencies” or “systems” innate to plant life may produce reciprocal illumination. The two interdependent but inherently conflictual “tendencies” formalize life as a dualism, not in a Manichean sense, but rather in the interest of establishing relational limit-parameters of development.

Having observed such an opposition of forces, Goethe pursues even broader analogical conclusions by expanding the two “tendencies” into much more general polarities. He tends, therefore, to read the tendencies of plants as a symbol for the general tendency of tendencies. This exemplifies the morphological temptation to see parallelism everywhere. This is not just my own interpretive tendency—because I hope to have shown that Goethe himself thinks this way. It may be difficult, though, to tell what is mine and what is Goethe’s, because morphology’s perception of ubiquitous analogous forms makes it unclear when to stop. But without denying the optics of my own reading—which views morphology through the “Urworte”—I would observe that morphology, as Goethe himself reads it, produces an open system of analogies and potentially also symbols. This infinite analogical expanse—which becomes truly persuasive if one believes that there is *something* at the base of it—seeks to compensate for morphology’s epistemic deficiency.

At the end of his notes on the “spiral tendency,” Goethe interprets the tendencies in a way that might seem anthropomorphic, except that the -*morphic* here, rigorously understood, excludes prefixes. The two plant tendencies are construed as masculine and feminine principles, which drastically ties them to the gendered binary of *Dämon* and *Tyche*:

The vertically as well as the spirally striving system [*das vertikal-so wie das spiralstrebende System*] are connected in the living plant in the most intimate way imaginable. If we see the former proving itself to be decidedly masculine and the latter to be decidedly feminine, then we can imagine all vegetation [*die ganze Vegetation*], starting from its very roots [*von der Wurzel auf*], to be secretly androgynously interconnected. Upon which basis, therefore, in the course of the transformations of growth [*in Verfolg der Wandlungen des Wachstums*], both systems differentiate themselves into open opposition [*sich im offenbaren Gegeseinat auseinander sondern*] and decisively separate themselves from each other [*entschieden gegen einander überstellen*], in order to reunite themselves again in a higher sense [*um sich in einem höhern Sinne wieder zu vereinigen*]. (HA 13:148; FA 805)

One may be amazed or horrified at Goethe’s ability to discover a consistent symbolic system writ large in nature. This passage leaves little doubt that Goethe’s thinking about synthesis implies the possibility of moving
analogically from particular to general in a way that elevates every empirical
detail and every experimental outcome to a symbol of the general relation
of things. The well-known analogy of human chemistry and actual chemical
reactions in the *Elective Affinities* depends on this kind of thinking, which is
condensed to a formula at the end of *Faust II*: “Everything transitory is only
a parable” (*Alles Vergängliche ist nur ein Gleichnis*). Everything transitory—
that is: everything is only an analogy, a metaphor that transcends finite limits
and converts into the universal and general. Everything “empirical”—limited
and temporal—constantly transcends itself symbolically as non-empirical
meaning. The primary and *only* function of the “real” world—the one that
changes and passes away—is the symbolization of the transcendent. Science
in this conception can never do more than create new allegories of universal
relations, supplementary models of the way of the world.

Despite the obvious grandeur of Goethe’s symbolic syntheses, points
of concern noted in chapter 1 may be again registered here. For morphol-
ogy, that which is specifically individual, singular, and “transitory,” though
granted a kind of indirect immortality by virtue of its symbolic potential,
can only realize itself by relinquishing its singularity, by its ability to be rep-
resentative with respect to a more primal (or “higher”) totality. As in the
*Dämon* commentary, morphology reduces unconditional uniqueness to a
definite set of representative and transferable characteristics, which at best
produce highly inclusive formulae. Such a master concept cannot provide a
single general rule or a norm for all life, nor does it appear to offer adequate
support for the individual autonomy (as formulated in the *Dämon* stanza).
Given these options, morphology’s saving grace lies in its normative weak-
ness: the lack of a truly binding or dogmatic form in the “Urworte” allows
individualized recognitions and interpretations to develop within the matrix
of transforming meanings provided by the grand design of the “Urworte.” In
comparison with morphology’s more dualistic and synthetic model, however,
the five-part “quintessence” of the “Urworte” looks like a more sophisticated
formalization, insofar as its universal symbol contains more internal differ-
entiation and is—one would have thought—less prone to misunderstanding.
Through the lens of the “Urworte,” morphology fluctuates between anthro-
ponomorphism (and anthropocentrism) and “morphocentrism.” The latter sees
animating tendencies, drives, and “forms” coursing through animate and
inanimate nature.

Either way, morphology ends up as more religion than science or as
a religion of science. The “Urworte” at least do not hide this aspect, but
overtly address it. Occasionally this is also the case with morphology. The
biographical origins of morpho-ontology and its worldviews are casually
discussed in the essay “The Fate of the Manuscript” (“Schicksal der Hand-
schrift”), in which Goethe reflects upon the genesis of his “Metamorphosis
of Plants.” This autobiographical sketch was first published in 1817 in the
first volume of the *Morphology*. The text’s very first sentence emphasizes
the decisive importance of Italy for Goethe’s plant morphology: “Sent back from form-filled Italy to formless Germany [Aus Italien dem formreichen in das gestaltlose Deutschland zurückgewiesen], I was forced to exchange a bright sky for a gloomy one” (HA 13:102; FA 414). Reflecting the difference between Italy and Germany in their wealth vs. poverty of forms, Goethe explains that his perceptions of Italy were the result of a simultaneous study of Italian nature and Greek art. The latter was especially germinal for his idea of form:

Little by little, I was able to get an overview of the whole [das Ganze zu überschauen], so as to prepare myself a pure artistic enjoyment free of all prejudice. Further, I believed I had noted how nature works through laws to produce a living image [ein lebendiges Bild] that is the model [Muster] of everything artistic [alles künstlichen]. The third thing [das dritte] that occupied me was the customs of the people [die Sitten der Völker], in order to learn from them how the convergence of necessity and arbitrariness [Notwendigkeit und Willkür], impulse and will, motion and resistance, leads to something else [ein Drittes] that is neither art nor nature but both at once, necessary and accidental [notwendig und zufällig], intentional and blind. I am speaking of human society [die menschliche Gesellschaft]. (HA 13:102; FA 415)

Vocabulary associated with the “Urworte” is coupled with familiar (if somewhat displaced) dualities, which give rise to third terms. Here, however, unlike the other examples from the morphology, the movement is not synthetic in its tendency toward symbolic “elevation.” Two “third terms” are mentioned (das dritte, ein Drittes), but in the first case, Goethe implies that human culture and custom, rather than being a synthesis of art and nature, are neither art nor nature—or ambiguously both at once. Such an understanding gives human culture an exceptional and excluded status with respect to the universal symbols of morphology. Whenever human artificiality and artifice are not representative of a true second nature that can be perceived (or imagined) as a transparent analogue of Nature, they fit poorly within the general forms of morphology. The Greeks alone fulfilled the ideal—but human culture usually gets lost in Tyche and Ananke.

Within the excluded sphere of “culture,” a series of oppositions describe conflicted and potentially dualistic forms similar to both the “Urworte” and morphology. As in the “Urworte,” the conflict is mediated (but much less systematically) by a synthetic moment, a “third” that is “neither art nor nature,” but both together, which Goethe calls “human society.” Corresponding to the Ananke portions of the “Urworte,” human society exhibits all of the characteristics of Dämon and Tyche—and perhaps also of Eros: “necessary and contingent,” “intentional and blind.” Despite the fact that it may first appear as a synthetic progression, this vision of human society
produces a monster: in the difference between diverse “customs” (Sitten) and an idealized analogy of nature and art, “society” is only an exponentially greater version of culture. It is contingency incarnate, pure non-being, excluded from the morphological analogia entis. Thus, in this limited philosophy of history that introduces the Morphology, human culture and society are mostly excluded from the representative syntheses of nature and art. Morphology traces an analogical stream out of nature into life and art, producing a standard with which the variable norms of human existence cannot compete. Ad hoc, non-morphological forms of human existence correspond to the possibility of inauthenticity that first arises in the Tyche stanza of the “Urworte.” Both not only confirm the likelihood of human errancy, but conceive it as essential. Humanity has a special status with respect to morphologically derived norms: only humans are capable of forsaking their proper and innate self, their Dämon. The “Urworte” make this point from the perspective of the individual, whereas morphology posits it for human society. Far from any idealism, the “tychic” quality of human culture leaves it cut off from any meaningful idea of progress (dialectical or otherwise). Like the Ananke stanza, this passage of the morphology indicates that it is absolutely normal for societies to exist in a state of endemic delusion and loss of self.

The “synthetic” track of nature and the “tychic” variability of society thus seem to be mutually exclusive—but a final synthesis of the two remains conceivable. This synthesis would raise morphology to the level of a mythology. Such an ultimate synthesis manifests itself, according to Goethe’s description in the extended reflection on religion at the end of book 8 of Poetry and Truth (probably written in 1811 or 1812), as a “pulsation” of being and non-being, self and non-self, identity and non-identity.

Unlike the 1817 remarks on society, book 8 depicts Goethe’s religious ideas in their earliest development (at the end of the 1760s). Goethe attributes his later religious ideas (what I am calling “morpho-theology”) to the study of “Arnold’s history of the Church and of heresy.” This reading led him to sympathize with many heretical ideas: “The spirit of contradiction and the enjoyment of paradox exists in all of us” (Der Geist des Widerspruchs und die Lust zum Paradoxen steckt in uns allen) (HA 9:350; MA 16:376). Gottfried Arnold’s Pietism (see MA 16:985) may perhaps be traced in a sentence in which Goethe writes that he “had often heard that every man must have his own religion in the end” (HA 9:350; MA 16:376). According to the autobiography, this idea inspired him to design his own religion based on his reading in the history of heresy: “And thus I built for myself a world that was certainly rather strange in appearance [die seltsam genug aussah]” (HA 9:350; MA 16:379). Such qualifications, as well as the use of the past tense, allow Goethe to distance himself from this early construction—and his early “heresy.” But by the time he reaches the end of the chapter, he is making general pronouncements in the present tense, one of which indicates the possible
breadth of the sources of his idea of the demonic: “The history of all religions and philosophies teaches us that the great truths that are indispensable to man have been passed down by diverse nations and in diverse times and in various ways, indeed in strange fables and images dictated by the limitations of each” (HA 9:353; MA 16:381).

The demonic in book 20 of *Poetry and Truth* is similarly introduced in the context of religion. It is said to have emerged from “the interstices” (*die Zwischenräume*, HA 10:175) of religious knowledge and individual experience. The demonic is also characterized as a religious self-design, conceived “after the example of the ancients and others who thought something similar” (HA 10:175–76). Reading book 8 and book 20 together, Goethe’s mature conception may include pre- and non-Christian layers in addition to the “heretical” tradition—but this does not mean that he forgot the “Neoplatonism,” “Hermeticism,” “Mysticism,” and “Cabbalism” that inspired him in his youth (HA 10:350; MA 16:376–79).

The homemade religion that Goethe presents at the end of book 8 looks very much like what book 20 calls the demonic—combined with elements of morphology. The story begins: “I liked to imagine [vorstellen] for myself a divinity that produces itself out of eternity [von Ewigkeit her]” (HA 9:351; MA 16:379). In morphology, nature constantly transcends itself in the symbolic surplus value of metamorphosis. In book 8 as well, the cosmic principle is self-production through self-transcendence. The “synthetic” trinity here is an extension and multiplication of an originary self-producing divinity:

But because production cannot be conceived without multiplicity, this divinity immediately had to appear to itself as a second figure [*ein Zweites*], which we recognize under the name of the Son. These two then also had to continue the act of production [*den Akt des Hervorbringens*] and appeared to themselves in turn in the third [*im Dritten*], which was now just as existent, living and eternal as the whole that preceded it [*als das Ganze war*]. (HA 9:351; MA 16:379)

Continual production of difference within identity, the act and the drive of production as (apparently) asexual reproduction, leads from a third to a fourth: to Lucifer, who is a figure of resistance, of the interruption of harmonious self-production. He, “who already cultivated a contradiction within him [*schon in sich einen Widerspruch hegte*],” is the representative of everything “that does not appear [*scheinen*] to us to agree with the idea and the intents of divinity [*mit dem Sinne und den Absichten der Gottheit*]” (HA 9:351). This division into different competencies is pragmatic theodicy, which imagines a separate office for whatever does not fit “our” expectations about divinity. For readers familiar with the paragraphs about the demonic in book 20, as well as for readers of *Faust*, the verb *scheinen* (“to appear” or “seems”) stands out: like the demonic, which book 20 presents in terms of
“seeming,” and like Mephisto, Lucifer only appears (from “our” perspective) to be a force of negation, an obstacle to continual self-production. Lucifer is the moment of non-being that apparently inhabits all being. He blocks the way back to the origin and primal phenomena; his shadow inhabits everything material, and the Creation is thus a dark (or at least darkened) creation, because of its obstructed relation to transcendence. Lucifer means that the world is not a transparent communion with self-producing transcendence, but instead—in the terms of morphology—the former only symbolizes the latter. Lucifer is the difference that cannot be eliminated from the analogy. He does not entirely erase the connection to originary Being, but he makes Being’s merely analogical continuity into an interrupted filiation, which only shows signs of derivation from an original unity.

Next Goethe develops a polar (morphological) opposition between Konzentration (= Lucifer, the power of materialization, determination, and singularization) and Expansion (= continuity, time, metamorphosis, freedom, God). This polarity results in a static impasse, favoring static and lifeless “concentration,” had the Elohim—like Eros in the “Urworte”—not intervened:

They [the Elohim, the divinity in plural] granted to the infinite Being the ability to extend itself, to move itself toward them. The proper pulse of life [der eigentliche Puls des Lebens] was reestablished, and Lucifer himself could not escape from this intervention [Einwirkung]. This is the epoch when everything emerged that we know as light, and everything began, which we tend to refer to in the word Creation [Schöpfung]. (HA 9:352; MA 16:382)

The ability to constantly find (or invent) the same forms of relation—the same stories and narratives—shifts morphology from science (as empirical-analogical modeling) to religion and mythmaking. Based on a morphological infrastructure reflecting his idea of existence, Goethe retells the story of Creation with emphasis on the need for a Being that can restore the connection to divinity. But being continually finds itself under Lucifer’s power, trapped in the contradictory state of being “at once absolute and limited” (zugleich unbedingt und beschränkt, HA 9:352; MA 16:382). Lucifer’s problem, which man inherits, is—to use Blumenberg’s word—“self-assertion” (Selbstbehauptung), self-separation and the forgetting of the Creator. Man, who was supposed to restore and maintain the connection to divinity, ends up excluded from it like Lucifer: “Separation from the Benefactor is the real ingratitude, and thus Lucifer’s fall was for a second time eminent, even though the Creation itself is nothing but—and never was anything but—a falling away from and a returning to that which originated it [zum Ursprünglichen]” (HA 9:352–53; MA 16:380–81). A mythic fall and salvation history is re-internalized, distributed—perhaps secularized, perhaps remythologized—within the human condition:
It is easy to see how redemption is here not decided from eternity [von Ewigkeit her], but rather is conceived as eternally necessary. . . . This recognition alone suffices: that we find ourselves in a condition [daß wir uns in einem Zustande befinden], which, though it may appear to draw us downward and to press upon us, nevertheless gives us the opportunity—and indeed makes it our duty—to raise ourselves up and to fulfill the intents of the divinity [die Absichten der Gottheit], by which we are compelled [genötigt], from one side, to selfify ourselves [uns zu verselbstigen], while, from the other, we do not neglect [nicht versäumen] to de-selfify ourselves [uns zu entselbstigen] in regular pulses [in regelmäßigen Pulsen]. (HA 9:353; MA 16:381)

The Luciferian drive to concentration, specification, and individuation is identical with the self’s inherent drive to become a self. This arrangement, which separates each self from other selves and turns them against cosmos and Creator, was instituted in the Creation. But on the other side, in language reminiscent of the Elpis-stanza of the “Urworte,” the chapter ends with an image of release from constraint, of a continual redemption from the concentrations and specifications of Dämon and Ananke. Especially the figure of rhythmic pulsation—as opposed to a redemption that happens once and for all—corresponds to the wing beat of Hope. Ananke is the “imprisonment by the present,” whereas Elpis is a winged being that rises above the present and “leaves the eons behind it” (UO 17). In the end, the saving demons are forces of “de-determination,” Tyche and Elpis, which constantly transcend limits and relativize everything that appears absolute.

On the basis of the end of book 8, it is possible to imagine “human society” as Goethe presents it at the beginning of his Morphology in 1817 as “tychic” in a more positive sense. Human society, culture, and history may be negative, amorphous, and excluded with respect to nature and morphological symbolism, but this is precisely in keeping with man’s Luciferian and contra-divine tendency to self-specify. Humanity tends to reach false (or at least relative) generalizations and to believe and institute them in ways that cause human social constructions to fall short of the absolute. Man typically exists at a distance from the divine norm that morphology can faintly perceive in its symbolic reading of nature. In Poetry and Truth, however, Goethe does not reach his conclusions by directly contrasting human society and nature but by attempting to retell the story of Creation in a way that would adequately explain the situation of man in the world. He wants to reread and reinterpret material excavated from the history of religion (especially its heretical strands) in order to imagine how we came to “the state in which we find ourselves” (der Zustand, in dem wir uns befinden, HA 9:353; MA 16:381).

This story is clearly not meant as the basis for a real religion but is presented as a theoretical construction of a possible religion, which, at the limit,
may have been Goethe’s own. The Creation story at the end of book 8 may have been Goethe’s religion, at least at a certain moment in his youth, and perhaps also later in a different way, at the moment when he wrote it down in his autobiography. Though this “religion” is universal in its intents and could conceivably be believed, it lacks institutional and ritual foundation. And its content, like that of “morphology”—which may be only another name for “Goethe’s religion”—is relatively undogmatic. It makes no emphatic truth- or faith-claims to further its propagation. What Goethe presents in books 8 and 20 is at best a private religion, designed on the premise that “everyone may have their own religion in the end” (HA 9:350). The reader is not enjoined to believe the story except as a literary creation and perhaps as a parable of the subjectivity of mythmaking and religion-founding. Goethe presents this “religion” as something he once thought and does not directly state whether he stills believes something similar. If anything, the point of telling the story of the genesis of his religious ideas may be to incite others to conceive and interpret religious ideas more freely. Like the “Urworte,” which suppose an active collaboration on the part of the reader, book 8’s reworking of religious ideas remains marked by “demonic” (individual) particularity. This demonic trace limits and at the same time preserves the universality of Goethe’s meta-myth. It ensures that this claim to universality is itself morphologically specific—intrinsically perspectival and temporal—and follows the specific conditions of reading articulated in the “Urworte.”

The universal science-religion of morphology produces an infinity of private religions, in which each individual retells inherited myths in the terms of his or her own singularity and universality. This is a generous reading, which allows Goethe to find his way out of the mirror-maze of morphology. He was at least partially able to retrace the patterns of his own private myth-making, to draw them out of their latency and, at least at the highest levels of self-reflection, to resist the persuasiveness of his own insights through the recognition of his own finitude and particularity as the one who uniquely and subjectively perceived and disseminated a particular symbolic network. “Enlightenment” here is no longer a strict alternative to “myth.” The former can consist only in the constant self-reflective articulation of one’s own symbolic order. This “work on myth” at least has a chance of preventing the everyday unconscious and often violent self-assertion of such symbols in uncritical mythologies of the self. As a work of self-analysis, the textual weaving of symbolic fabrics may be only marginally more disillusioned than the expression of such symbols in the media of psychology, motivation, or desire. Such unreflected conceptions require conscious symbolic deciphering. And the lack of self-woven systems promotes the adoption of the finished systems of others: the failure to design one’s own religion means dogmatically ascribing someone else’s. Book 8 is thus implicitly critical of religion in its public, prescriptive, and collective dimensions. Submission to the collective—Ananke—is the typical human condition because, without massive efforts
of autobiographical analysis, private understandings are never extensively mediated in their relation to public surrogates.

It may seem somewhat shocking to assimilate Goethe's scientific thought to problems of religion and autobiography to the degree that I am proposing, but the only other option would be to take morphology seriously as a scientific, artistic, or critical method. Though I would not automatically disparage the attempt to rehabilitate morphology, I observe that morphological paradigms can easily become reductively schematic and overgeneralized. Morphology in this sense is already too widespread. In this regard, I am arguing against taking morphology too seriously: it should be taken in the same way as the Creation-story sketched at the end of book 8 of Poetry and Truth and in the same way as Goethe’s Orphic “Urworte,” the point of which is to create a medium for reflecting on the unknown, a system that can be infinitely reread, retranslated, and transformed. This is precisely what the best readers of Goethe often did, even if they did so more in the context of their own theories than in that of Goethe’s. As Lukács saw it in his Theory of the Novel, the true tradition of morphology lies not in science but in literature. The novel is, for Lukács, more scientific than science, due to its ability to coordinate every “truth” with a specific place, time, and perspective. This means, at the limit, that the tradition—at least a certain tradition—of the novel represents the methodologically most advanced edge of the “human sciences.” The novel can think experimentally about the “morphological” significance of scientific and other developments without being tempted to believe unconditionally in insights that always depend on artificial and transitory formalizations.

Walter Benjamin’s idea of “demonic ambiguity” (dämonische Zweideutigkeit) similarly warns of the limitations of morphology as a true science of forms. It can never get past its perspectival-temporal (“subjective”) aspect. In Goethe, it does not even attempt to do so: I can find no claim to strict objectivity. In these terms, it can never produce a truly universal synthesis able to transcend the limits of language. In other words, it remains subjective. For Benjamin, morphology becomes “demonic” in the moment when it becomes convinced that such a synthesis really exists—somewhere beyond the limits of representability. The presupposition of the priority of the whole over its (supposedly) infinitely analogous parts does not permit any sub-spheres (such as nature/culture) to be even minimally differentiated. At this limit, morphology’s endless systole and diastole make it impossible to draw distinctions. Morphology thus may be taken either as a merely “literary” symbolic mode or as a latently normative hypothesis. The later reception broke this alternative into a spectrum of possibilities that (roughly) followed one or the other of these two courses. The more convincing results, however, as I will show, tended to be based on an at least implicit retention of the “literary” understanding of morphology.
Finally, to avoid confusion: what I am calling “literary” or a “medium of reflection” does not simply mean “aesthetic.” The problem of the aesthetic is addressed in chapters 5 and 6, but what I mean by “medium of reflection” in the present context implies the possibility of something like a discursive formatting. Contrary to what one might expect of morphology, the visual is only important here insofar as “images” (in nature, art, or language) stand in relation to thoughts. To illustrate the point, I would invoke the “Urworte,” which begin with a certain Ur-phenomenon—four Greek words representing divinities of supposedly Egyptian origin—that are progressively transcribed into increasingly wider contexts. The difference lies in development over time. Whether in the arabesques of the “spiral tendency” or the linear striving of the “vertical system,” the specificity of a given image-form or word-image is neither purely conceptual nor purely visual. The “proof” of an Urphänomen does not lie in its truth or supposed universal validity but in its potential seri-ality, its ongoing shifts and unforeseeable reconfigurations.