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GOETHE, SCHELLING AND THE MELANCHOLY OF NATURE

Abstract

The relationship between nature and its symbolic and artistic expression is at the centre of Goethe's reflections during and after his travels in Italy and of Schelling's thoughts until the period of his philosophy of identity. Here, as is known, Schelling tries to accomplish the project of a new Renaissance, where we can witness an infinite system of correspondences between ideal and real. The symbolical continuity and integration between the two levels includes the presupposition that time and eternity are united. With his dialog *Clara or, On Nature's connection to the spirit world* the binding alliance between nature and spirit, on which the possibility of the symbol and then of a new modern mythology is grounded, collapses.

1. Goethe, nature, expression

When comparing the evolution of Goethe's and Schelling's thought in terms of proximity and distance, one can see a sort of initial linguistic similarity that then fades, starting from the dialogue *Clara, or, On Nature's Connection to the Spirit World*. The question might be posed as follows: is there in nature, in its intrinsic complexity, a degree of signification, the manifestation of a symbolic and expressive structure deriving from the continuity between nature itself and the spirit? It's not so much that the symbolic language "reveals" nature to man: it is not so. Nature rather exhibits its own subjective quality: it is a being able to provide an adequate self-explanation, *iuxta propria principia*, according to codes that man must decypher. The following step of Schelling's thought – expressed in *Clara* – marks a break in the original unity of the two, relegating nature to a melancholic condition showing that it has lost its symbolic character – or better, its ability of self-interpretation.

This dilemma harbours a theoretical alternative of wide scope that is still very relevant to us today: if nature is endowed with its own symbolic order, this symbolic order will express a morphological identity, an articulation of meanings

brought out through the concept of form. The linguistic identity of nature, from this point of view, rests in its forms; it is starting from them that one can think of a hermeneutics of nature, a project that – interpreting its languages – would protect its otherness. In the second case – that is, in the case of a nature forsaken by the spirit, left to its own melancholy – the opposite happens. Nature tends to become a pure matter of fact and, from this point of view, it becomes anthropic: its sole referent here becomes man, by whom it awaits to be conferred meaning.

What's at stake in the comparison between Goethe and Schelling, therefore, is properly the identity of nature – where the genitive is to be understood both subjectively and objectively. To better illustrate the topic of this contribution, suffice it to say what follows. One can understand nature in a non-anthropocentric key – as both Goethe and Schelling did – that accounts for its peculiar subjectivity, only if one provides a dual explanation of it: that is, that the parts and the whole are correlated and refer to one another. This is the principle of the Kantian *Wechselwirkung* that spreads through nature as a whole. As will be clearer when addressing Goethe, this produces an exaltation of the «infinite principle» meaning of nature on the background of which its theological meaning also appears. On the other hand, this approach is precisely what shows the current relevance of Goethe's perspective, also from a theoretical point of view, as a precursor of a holistic explanation of nature that spread again in the twentieth century, thanks to biologists and science theorists like Morin, Rhodes, and Breidbach.

As Olaf Breidbach has noted, the real heart of Goethe's perspective lies in the concept of metamorphosis that encompasses the history of nature founded on the *Gestalt*. Breidbach thus defines the *Gestalt* as a stable structure that is therefore recognizable in its metamorphoses.¹ In order for the parts to be integrated according to a form that can be always recognized in its transformations – and that, indeed, makes these transformations noticeable as such – one has to understand the *Gestalt* as the outcome of a compositional identity. This compositional identity, besides, is an open identity. Open identity, in this case, means an identity determined by an *n* number of components tending towards infinity.

This is the basis of a “potential” infinity of nature that becomes an actual infinity taking on its various morphological connotations and therefore becoming semantic – or better, interpreting the infinite that is in it. To mention a very famous passage by Goethe:

Every living being is not a single being, but a plurality; even when presented as an individual, it remains a set of living and autonomous beings that, equal according to the idea and by nature, appear empirically identical or similar, different or dissimilar. These beings are partly united since their origins, partly found and reunited later; they separate and then seek each other, generating an endless production in every way and in every direction.

¹ Breidbach 2008: 29. «I [define] a Gestalt as the invariants of a collection of patterns that can mutually be transformed into each other through a class of transformations encoded by, or conversely, determining that gestalt».

The more the creature is imperfect, the more these parts are equal or similar to each other, the more they resemble to the whole; the more perfect the creature is, the more these parts are mutually dissimilar.²

Hence a compositional unity of the organic being, which is constantly in becoming on a potential basis that should be understood as its structure, able to undergo infinite transformations.

An organic being is so multifaceted outside, so manifold and inexhaustible inside, that one cannot choose enough points of view to examine it, nor will one ever develop enough organs to break it down into parts without killing it. I will now try to apply to organic nature the idea that beauty is perfection with freedom.³

In this case the complexity doesn't produce opacity, and the living form is thus characterised – for Goethe – by the harmony between inside and outside. This harmony, indeed, can be defined beauty. This is the fundamental point. The inside surfaces according to a system of correspondences that Goethe defines as symbol, that is, as a communication structure of a particular type. In other words, the organism is a structure capable of expressing - on the surface and intuitively – its high complexity by suddenly overcoming many elements related to the difficulty of communication.

To use terms that are surely too paradigmatic, but helpful to clarify the matter, let's address conceptual communication, which unfolds *per externo* and not intensively. It would be appropriate here to introduce a comparison with Hegel, especially his *Phenomenology of Spirit* and his *Lectures on Aesthetics* to understand both the pages related to *Observation of the Organic*, within *Reason*, and the pages dedicated to «the symbolic art form» in the *Lectures*. One cannot fail to notice in this regard how Hegel insists, in both cases, on the essential non-correspondence between inside and outside so that, indeed, neither the organism nor the symbol can be understood as consequent units and therefore

²Goethe 1966: 56. «Jedes Lebendige ist kein Einzelnes, sondern eine Mehrheit; selbst insofern es uns als Individuum erscheint, bleibt es doch eine Versammlung von lebendigen selbstständigen Wesen, die der Idee, der Anlage nach gleich sind, in der Erscheinung aber gleich oder ähnlich, ungleich oder unähnlich werden können. Diese Wesen sind teils ursprünglich schon verbunden, teils finden und vereinigen sie sich. Sie entzweien sich und suchen sich wieder und bewirken so eine unendliche Produktion auf alle Weise und nach allen Seiten.

Je unvollkommener das Geschöpf ist, desto mehr sind diese Teile einander gleich oder ähnlich, und desto mehr gleichen sie dem Ganzen. Je vollkommener das Geschöpf wird, desto unähnlicher werden die Teile einander».

³Goethe 1966: 21. «Ein organisches Wesen ist so vielseitig an seinen Äußern, in seinem Innern so mannigfaltig und unerschöpflich, daß nicht genug Standpunkte wählen kann es zu beschauen, nicht genug Organe an sich selbst ausbilden kann, um es zu zergliedern, ohne es zu töten. Ich versuche die Idee: Schönheit sei Vollkommenheit mit Freiheit, auf organische Naturen anzuwenden».

as vehicles of an interior content that is expressed; the deep structure, the archetype, is unable to emerge to the surface.

Therefore, for Goethe, the aim is to show that the principle of form, on the level of nature but also on that of art, is consequent: it gives way to a complex organization and to an organism able to reduce the complexity. Summing up what I said earlier, the organism accomplishes the elaboration of the manifold that makes it a whole and, on this basis, makes it expressively transmissible.

In other words, “putting something into a form” makes its contents communicable while the latter, on the level of mere givenness, would remain inert, devoid of any semantic quality. So what lies ahead is a communication that is based not on the subject-copula-predicate articulation proper of rational discourse but on the surface / background relation. If one is able to observe it, nature itself removes its veil to show its forms filled with mysterious meaning. This is what makes art, nature and science essentially akin.

At this point, the problem is the connection between the complexity of the whole and the “nobility” of the single being. The latter “simplifies” the complexity – to recall a great admirer and disciple of Goethe: Nietzsche – by introjecting it. The individual being’s hierarchical position within the world of living beings is defined – according to Goethe – by the degree of complexity that the being itself comes to achieve and to realize as a complete individual, as *Gestalt*.

On this basis one can find a sort of symbolic grammar of nature, which undergoes infinite variations based on the structuring of the organic individual in constant becoming. The result, the final outcome of this process is a non-defective form, which in its production becomes image, which adequately reproduces the becoming structure of the natural being. The latter is constantly, so to speak, a provisional being. It makes a paradoxical self-reflexive movement, which becomes extrinsic by exposing itself, that is, by becoming objective according to the transient mode called image. The being that is revealed to itself under the aspect of the image is therefore the *Gestalt*. The latter “invents” its grammar, which is defined as symbolic. This grammar is made up of an infinite range of references involving the deep structure and, at the same time, the “surface” situation, the relation with the ground able to undergo infinite intersections with the *Gestalten* that make of it a sort of living grammar. Its semantic structures are the world itself.

2. Schelling and the variable of the Moderne

When, with regards to Schelling’s view as expressed at the time of the “philosophy of identity”, one says that it attempted to find a new Renaissance, one is outlining a framework that is very close to Goethe.⁴ Very close surely doesn’t

⁴ See Fuhrmans 1954, in particular chap. 1.

mean identical: the very reference to the idea of a “new Renaissance”, in fact, shows that Schelling’s view is connected and indebted to a historical period, which isn’t the case with Goethe. The latter indeed formulates a perspective that aims to owe nothing to the contingencies of time and history. However, in Goethe and in Schelling – in the latter case by emphasising the macrocosmos-microcosmos relationship – there is an attempt to semanticize nature in a holistic key, so that nature doesn’t need external factors to reach self-knowledge and express it with its being and forms. Every element also contributes to a positive relation with being (whose predicates include infinity and eternity). In this framework, one cannot forget how the philosophy of identity, and in particular Wurzburg’s lectures on the *Philosophy of Art* – within a system of infinite correspondences that wouldn’t exist otherwise – propose a substantial immobilization of time. The immobilization of time is what allows forms to take root.

Upon closer inspection, the theme of the *Ineinsbildung* in the *Philosophie der Kunst* only aims to provide the terms of what one could define the compression of the present in the ancient. This is no explicit criticism or exclusion of modernity, but a peculiar attempt to reduce its complexity. In other words, if the temporal articulation of modernity demands an *in extenso* organization of contents – an organization that could be defined historical-discursive – then Schelling with the *Ineinsbildung* tries to reduce and compress the complexity of his age within a zone of relative a-temporality. This is understood as the symbolic expression in which the manifold isn’t suppressed but articulated according to a modality that makes it somehow conceivable.

In implicit contrast to what has been defined a historical-discursive or conceptual articulation there is a morphological articulation. As regards the ontological negativity of time, Schelling is extremely clear in his *Philosophy of Art*:

We say that something *lasts* because its existence is fully *inadequate* to its essence, its particular is inadequate to its universal. Duration is nothing but a continuous position of its universal in *its* concreteness. By virtue of the limited character of the latter, the thing is not of the trio and, *de facto*, is not all of a sudden what it could be as for its essence or its universal. Now, once again this is unthinkable in the absolute, because in it the particular is absolutely equal to the universal; it is also what it *can be, really* and at once, without the intromission of time: therefore it is without time and eternal in itself.⁵

⁵ Schelling 1966: 20. «Wir sagen, daß ein Ding *dauert*, weil seine Existenz seinem Wesen, sein Besonderes seinem Allgemeinen *unangemessen* ist. Die Dauer ist nichts anderes als ein fort-gehendes Setzen seines Allgemeinen in *sein* Concretes. Vermöge der Beschränktheit des letzteren ist es nicht alles und in der That auf einmal, was es seinem Wesen oder seinem Allgemeinen seyn könnte. Dies ist nun im Absoluten wieder undenkbar: da das Besondere in ihm dem Allgemeinen absolut gleich, so ist es alles, was es seyn *kann*, auch *wirklich* und auf einmal ohne Dazwischentreten der Zeit, es ist also ohne *Zeit*, an sich ewig».

The series of ideas and the real one of gods thus contribute – in the *Philosophie der Kunst* – to creating an infinite kaleidoscope effect switching between concrete/abstract and finite/infinite, which will be reflected in Schelling's view of nature. Thus in Schelling – and especially in his philosophy of identity – it becomes possible to establish a system of correspondences between macrocosmos and microcosmos, between intelligible and sensible, which tends to create a sort of possible balance I'd define morphological. This balance is related to the paradoxical attempt to make time intelligible “under a different form” – one can see the historical mark here behind the metaphysical formulation.

In order not to be cryptic it's best to immediately clarify the meaning of the dimension of time, beyond its ontologically negative connotation that emerges in the above mentioned passage of the *Philosophie der Kunst*. One could say – with an emphatic effect maybe due to excessive conciseness – that what's at stake here is the possibility of conceiving eternity within the horizon of the *Moderne*. This is a very important topic – which I have already dealt with elsewhere⁶ – because it refers to the necessity to give some temporal stability to the horizon of the *Moderne* marked (as Koselleck well noted⁷) by temporal acceleration, and by an eschatological temporality that tends to make the finite inconsistent.

This is the meaning of the notion of symbol between Goethe and Schelling: the ability to concentrate eternity in an instant, to free time from the limit of absolute contingency, to confer an aura of stability to it. This aura is realized thanks to a sort of hyperbolic extension of time: in other words, the point is to translate it into eternity. The transformation of time into eternity happens on the level of the image: eternity is reflected in time, the original model in the ectype. To all intents and purposes, it is an aesthetic problem, which is solved by attributing a symbolic quality to what is contingent – mainly to nature.

Non coincidentally, Schelling comes to this experience after spending much time with the Romantics, and here he is forced to revise their positions, giving a negative connotation to any emphasis of the ineffable, trying to provide a framework in which particularity is constantly the reason for a peculiar articulation. This is the structure reflected in his writings on the *Naturphilosophie*. Here nature is defined as an «autopoietic system», to use the terminology chosen by Varela and Maturana.⁸

Is it possible to speak of a subjectification of nature here? It sure is, but only by accepting a “cautious” determination – so to speak – of the term “subjectivity”,

⁶ See Vercellone 2006: 149-162.

⁷ Koselleck 1989.

⁸ See Maturana-Varela 1980.

with no emphasis on the subject as opposed to the object. The subjectivity of nature is to be understood here not as antithetical to the given – that is, not in a framework in which it should be understood based on the subject/object opposition typical of modern philosophy since Descartes. When this happens, what follows is the crisis marked by *Clara oder über den Zusammenhang der Natur mit der Geisterwelt*.

The *integration* of subject and nature thus gives way to the “melancholy of nature”. The latter consists in nature’s emancipation from being, from eternity. To put it with the Romantics, it is its fall from the grace of myth, which makes it mere givenness available for a purely objectifying scientific investigation. Based on this, Schelling is able to proclaim the ideal character of nature itself. This is to be understood as a framework able to explicate itself based on itself. Thus the intelligible takes the form of the visible – it is the idea. «The essence of things that is dissolved in God, that is, the essence of the particular insofar as it is immediately being and therefore infinite self-positing, is called *idea* by the ancients»⁹. A little later Schelling adds: «Therefore the idea can also be considered the copula or the *natura naturans in all things*».¹⁰ The quality of things, *Dingen* and not *Sachen*, is from this point of view a sort of self-affection of Nature itself: «The quality of each thing is a feeling of nature in things».¹¹

In this regard, as I said above, it is not impossible to see in Schelling also an unwilling criticism of the Romantics he had been so close to – his criticism is not too different from Hegel’s. In this framework, when feeling turns into self-feeling on part of a subject devoid of a relation with the world, it reveals as a sort of pathological expression – an exalted and exalting coming to the fore of subjectivity as it can be derived (for instance) from some extreme moments of caricatural Fichteanism, if not from Romanticism proper.

Here it is almost obvious to refer to Klingemann’s *Nachtwachen von o Bonaventura*, where among other things there is a madman who believes he’s the creator of the world. The superfetation of the self is opposed (theoretically, but also in some aspects of Romanticism)¹² to the dispersion of nature in particularity, in the *Einzelheit* that Schelling regards with hidden reverence: «Things therefore have a fully immediate and eternal essence according to the

⁹ Schelling 1968a: 49. «Das in Gott aufgelöste Wesen der Dinge, d.h. das Wesen des Besonderen, sofern es unmittelbar Seyn und demnach unendliche Position von sich selbst ist, haben die Alten *Idea* genannt».

¹⁰ Schelling 1968a: 191. «Daher die Idee auch betrachtet werden kann als die Copula oder *natura naturans in jedem Ding*».

¹¹ Schelling 1968a: 208. «Die Qualität aller Dinge ist ein Empfinden der Natur in den Dingen».

¹² See Vercellone 1992: 3-30.

idea; the foundation of every single being, precisely insofar as it is single, lies in the eternal copula»¹³.

So, on the one hand there is nature as *imago dei*, insofar as it represents being in its fullness.¹⁴ It is *imago dei* insofar as it can exhibit the mark of eternity in time. But how is it possible to realize such an “operation”? Well, all of this happens because the linearity of time is overcome in the order of contemporaneity, that is, by the unavoidable whole/parts relationship that has one of its many examples in the organism. But translating the extensive articulation of time into the contemporary articulation means producing forms, or better, articulating complexity not extensively but intensively. This passage through form also represents the only possible way to articulate eternity in time. That is, it happens that, in time, the temporal succession can be overcome – without this penalizing its contents – only thanks to a morphological structure: «But the affirming or concept and the affirmed are therefore joined in an eternal and necessary manner, (XCIX), so that, prescindendo from the latter, the former might be as little real and effective as the latter if separated from the former».¹⁵

The negation of the integration of *Bejahende* and *Bejahte* produces the lack we call time, which reveals itself as such precisely as it differentiates itself from eternity. Insofar as time is, there is a break in eternity that it expresses and is underlined by the semantic insufficiency of what exists. Insofar as the origin of time is the hiatus between *Bejahende* and *Bejahte*, it reveals an insufficiency of being as for its ability of self-affirmation. This is what emerges from two *Aphorismen über die Naturphilosophie*, in particular number CVIII and CIX:

CVIII. The affirming taken by abstracting from the affirmed or in contradiction with it is the principle of time. If, however, it is not seen from the standpoint of contradiction but from that of unity or the copula inherent in contradiction (XXXI, XXXXII Note), then eternity is recognized in things.

CIX. The principle of time is manifested according to an abstract understanding as what is always the centre but never a circumference or a bond, because it overshadows the affirmed. But in real unity (in the absolute copula) the affirming is joined with the affirmed not in a temporal and provisional way, but according to an eternal modality independent from time.¹⁶

¹³ Schelling 1968a: 193. «Die Dinge haben daher eine ganz unmittelbar und der Idee nach ewige Wirklichkeit; der Grund jedes einzelnen Daseyns, und zwar als des einzelnen, liegt in der ewigen Copula».

¹⁴ Schelling 1968a: 205.

¹⁵ Schelling 1968a: 209. «Das Bejahende aber oder der Begriff und das Bejahte sind doch auf eine ewige und notwendige Weise beisammen (XCIX), so dass jenes in der Abstraktion von diesem ebenso wenig real und wirklich seyn könnte, als es dieses in der Trennung von jenem zu seyn vermag».

¹⁶ *Ibidem*.

3. *The melancholy of nature*

I can now move on to the conclusion of the present reflection, concerning the melancholy of nature. In the passage from Goethe to Schelling (but also, one could say, of the one into the other) what takes place can fully be considered a huge transformation. The semantic structure – autopoietic and therefore signifying – of nature remains the same. However, something changes with Schelling. And this something has to do with the index of time, or better the temporal index of modernity as the principle of particularity and disaggregation. To overcome this looming obstacle – as I have briefly tried to show above – Schelling tends to compensate modern complexity with the ancient principle of the form as an autonomously signifying system.

In this sense, ancient form takes charge of modern complexity and gives it a stable structure to save it from caducity. It's a structure called to briefly elevate it toward the singular eternity of the finite, which is not absolute a-temporality but the constancy of meaning in the flow of time. For example, it is the fragile temporary eternity by which in every new dog we recognize once again an individual bearing the mark of the archetype, made recognizable thanks to it.

Schelling's experience of the *Moderne* is revealed precisely in the failure of this apparently innocuous "morphological therapy": the *Moderne* risks failing in front of the proliferation of particularity it produces, which escapes formal structure, turns to disaggregation and therefore aims for the meanings of life. It is an absolutely precocious and brilliant diagnosis of the risks inherent in the coming modernity, which will be confirmed seventy years later by another disciple of Goethe: Friedrich Nietzsche. Indeed, the latter defined the *Moderne* as «the age of atoms, of atomistic chaos».¹⁷

From this point of view, the melancholy of nature is nothing but the realization of its "modernity" and therefore its inability to give itself meaning, due to the fact that it has turned into a pure given awaiting to be attributed signification from the outside. In other words, scientific objectification acknowledges that nature is devoid of its autonomous meaning, that it has lost the being that truly objectifies it. It is the first spark, in Schelling, of a «dialectic of the Enlightenment». Indeed, *Clara* begins by describing the outcome of this catastrophe which today we are still trying to put an end to:

Through its name the old metaphysics declared itself to be a science that followed in accordance with, and that to some extent also followed from, our knowledge of nature and improved and progressed from that; thus in a certain competent and sound way that is of service only to those who have a desire for knowledge, metaphysics took the knowledge that it boasted in addition to physics. Modern philosophy did away with

¹⁷ Nietzsche 1972: 363. «Die Periode der Atome, des atomistischen Chaos».

its immediate reference to nature, or didn't think to keep it, and proudly scorned any connection to physics. Continuing with its claims to the higher world, it was no longer metaphysics but hyperphysics.¹⁸

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¹⁸ Schelling 1968b: 431 (Eng. tr. Schelling 2002: 3). «Die alte Metaphysik erklärte sich durch ihren Namen als Wissenschaft die nach, also gewissermaßen auch aus der Erkenntnis der Natur folgte, eine gesteigerte Fortsetzung derselben war; sie nahm daher auch die Erkenntnis, deren sie sich außer der Physik rühmte, in einem gewissen tüchtigen, gediegenen Sinn, mit welchem allein dem Erkenntnislustigen gedient sein kann. Die neuere Philosophie hob ihren unmittelbaren Bezug mit der Natur auf, oder wußte ihn nicht zu behaupten, und verschmahte Stolz jeden Zusammenhang mit Physik; die Ansprüche auf eine höhere Welt fortsetzend, war sie nicht mehr Metaphysik sondern Hyperphysik».