

# *Archetype, Urphänomen and Polarity: Aesthetic Considerations on Nature, Art, and Life Between Goethe's Morphology and Taoism.*

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## ABSTRACT

In his scientific works, Goethe elaborates a morphology of nature based on a dynamic, organic and anti-essentialist conception of life and its forms. To clarify what Goethe means by “morphology” in both natural and artistic spheres, I mean to show the specificity of such fundamental notions as “archetype”, “original phenomenon”, “form” and “formation”. I will then explain how Goethe's morphology is closely linked to the notion of “polarity”, referring in particular to *Faust*. In the second part of the paper, I will develop a cross-cultural comparison between Goethe's morphology and Taoist thought. Then I will highlight some similarities and differences between the ‘classical’ Chinese landscape painting of Shitao and the and the Goethe-influenced painting of Carl Gustav Carus.

## KEYWORDS

Polarity, Morphology, Taoism, Painting, Metamorphosis.

## 1. *Gestaltung and Immanent Idea. Introductory Remarks*

Goethe's theoretical contributions, both scientific and aesthetic, are still highly topical and make for an endless source of reflections on the peculiar ontology of the forms of art and nature. Goethe's morphological gaze reveals a dynamic, genetic and organic dimension of becoming, in which art, knowledge and life converge.<sup>1</sup> Particularly in his botanical and zoological writings, such as *Metamorphosis of Plants* (1790) and *Metamorphosis of Animals* (1820), as well as in his *Theory of Colours* (1810), Goethe describes the intimate processuality of the natural world and its forms in fundamentally anti-essentialist terms. Goethian form (*Gestalt*), in relation to life, is understood as dynamic formation (*Bildung-Gestaltung*), an anti-static idea necessarily linked to transformation and change. For Goethe, investigating “life forms” therefore means to consid-

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Moiso F., *Goethe. La natura e le sue forme*, C. Diekamp (ed.), Mimesis, Milano 2002, p. 7.

er primarily the flexible activity of production. The term *Gestalt* cannot express abstraction that ignores what is mobile, reducing it to something established and rigid, which in fact does not exist in nature, since form itself appears to be permanently involved in the process of “remodulation” (*Umgestaltung*).

The German predicate *gestalten* is synonymous with the predicate *bilden* and *formieren*, which denote the activity of ‘giving form’, consonant with the Greek-based word *poiesis* and the Latin word *formatio*. This action of shaping appears to imply a relationship of derivation of form from a model that can also be found in the Greek word *mimesis* and Latin *imitatio*. For Goethe, this dynamic activity of formation obeys an archetypal law, namely a formal and general norm that rules nature. Therefore, the relationship between the original archetypal image (*Bild-Urbild-Vorbild*) and its phenomenal reproduction (*Abbild-Nachbild*) seems to correspond perfectly in Goethe’s work to the Platonic relationship between the ideal and the sensible world. Yet, for Goethe, there is no existing relationship of an ontological derivation of the phenomenon in the idea, rather a co-originality and a polar in-difference between the ideal and real, spirit and matter, transcendence and immanence, archetype and sensible form: “The ultimate goal would be: to grasp that everything in the realm of fact is already theory. The blue of the sky reveals to us the basic law of chromatics. Let us not seek for something behind the phenomena – they themselves are the theory.”<sup>2</sup>

The archetype therefore does not precede a phenomenon, ontologically or cognitively; as a model, it is the immanent type that remains at the root of metamorphosis, which materialises in the nearly infinite variety of natural forms. Each *morphé* is not a mere abstract *idéa*, but immediately forms something corporeal, perceivable and apparent.

Goethe’s morphology, however, assumes not only the recurrence of the archetypal rule in the natural world but also the presence of original phenomena, namely sensible germinal elements (such as the leaf) that are visible pregnant matrices wherein an entire organic universe is synthetically expressed. Thus, the stable and innate law (*Archetypus*) underlying the vital process of formation is different from the tiny concrete-tangible-visible detail (*Urphänomen*) from which it is possible to grasp intuitively and concisely the entire natural world.

<sup>2</sup> Goethe J.W., *Sämtliche Werke, Briefe, Tagebücher und Gespräche* (Frankfurter Ausgabe), F. Apel et al. (eds.), 40 voll., Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, Frankfurt a. M., 1985-1999, vol. 13, p. 49: “Das Höchste wäre, zu begreifen, daß alles Factische schon Theorie ist. Die Bläue des Himmels offenbart uns das Grundgesetz der Chromatik. Man suche nur nichts hinter den Phänomenen; sie selbst sind die Lehre”. (My transl.).

In the first part of this essay, I will highlight a few pivotal features of Goethian morphology, focusing on the significant – and often misunderstood – difference between archetype and original phenomenon. I will then attempt to show the centrality of the notion of polarity in Goethe’s worldview, referring in particular to some artistic-literary examples from *Faust*. In the second part of the paper, I will develop a cross-cultural comparison with the notion of polarity in the Taoist context. Unlike simple dualism, the polar relationship expresses an “elective affinity” as co-existence and circular unity between the essence and appearance, visible and invisible, permanent being (*Wesen*) and extemporaneous contingency (*Zustand*).

In traditional Chinese thought, the most famous symbol that expresses an analogous polar and a-dual connexion is that of *Taiji tu* (太极图). As Laozi claims in the *Daodejing* (道德经), the polarity of *yin* (阴) and *yang* (阳) represents the necessary mutual involvement relationship between all elements in the universe.<sup>3</sup> *Taiji tu* therefore symbolises the non-existence of pure, absolute and un-mixed conditions and describes a worldview characterised by incessant dynamism and the perennial contamination and alternation of opposites. In the way Taoist polar dynamics oppose the idea that there is only one truth (one ‘pole’) to be ‘dogmatically’ defended, Goethian morphology too does not express a world made up of univocal, rigid elements, nor a state of inert stillness, but rather a world characterised by the dynamic balance of fluid perspectives. Goethian morphology and the conception of *yin* and *yang* thus seem to share an organicist, holistic and anti-metaphysical approach that rejects substantialist dualism. However, to what extent is this analogy effective? In the second part of this essay, with a few examples of paintings, I will show not only some affinities but also crucial differences between Goethe’s aesthetics and Taoist-inspired art.

Despite being dynamic, Goethian forms still preserve a relationship with their archetypal matrix. For example, in Carl Gustav Carus (1789-1869) and Paul Klee’s painting (1879-1940), which are strongly influenced by Goethe’s morphology, the mineral, vegetal and animal elements represent monads – *Urbänomene* – that are a concrete expression of the archetypal law, namely of the immanent model underlying metamorphosis. In Taoist paintings, on the other hand, there seems to be no archetypal model underlying the metamorphic processes of nature. Especially in the ‘classical’ Chinese landscape painting of Shitao (石涛, 1642-1707), speaking properly

<sup>3</sup> Laozi, *Daodejing*, transl. by E. Ryden, with an Introduction by B. Penny, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2008, pp. 37 ff.

about morphology seems impossible, simply because the issue in the painting is the absence of form, that is, emptiness understood as an immense, impermanent scenario of dynamic processes. The Chinese painting's subject is not the *morphé* as an intensive matrix and a point of symbolic condensation but the essentially amorphous void that is the condition of possibility for every fullness and every form. Although Taoism shares a polar and dynamic vision of natural and artistic forms with Goethe's morphology, the only norm of Tao is spontaneity (*ziran* 自然) and not fidelity to a stable and innate archetypal form.

## 2. Goethe as Erscheinungsforscher: Morphology Between 'Delicate Empiricism' And Phenomenology

Goethe's 'morphological paradigm' was highly popular in the 19th and 20th century aesthetics and hermeneutics. Authors such as Carus and Schopenhauer and later Simmel, Klages, Spengler, Kassner, Warburg and Benjamin made explicit references to Goethe's morphological model to investigate inorganic, botanical and animal natures as well as to interpret language, artwork and history. As mentioned above, Goethe's morphology is not only naturalistic and scientific but also symbolic, intuitive and artistic, which is far removed from abstract hypotheses and purely quantitative methods.

According to Goethe, the notion of *Urphänomen* can be understood as the ability to see the essence of the idea only "with the eyes."<sup>4</sup> He is confident in the objectivity of the vision (*Anschauung*), i.e. in the in-difference and the circular polarity between the object that is shown and the gaze that captures its expression. This idea is summarised in the famous opening motto of the *Theory of Colours*: "If the eye were not sun-like, the sun's light it would not see."<sup>5</sup> Therefore, Goethe's morphology is above all a celebration of the gaze, of vision and of intuition against the abstract concept, the classificatory explanation, the theory that deludes itself into disregarding phenomena. Morphological intuition, therefore, does not imply that it is the subject which formulates the laws of nature; rather, subject and nature comprise the exchangeable poles of the same experiential unity.

<sup>4</sup> Goethe J.W., *Un fortunato avvenimento*, in *La metamorfosi delle piante* (1790), S. Zecchi (ed.), Guanda, Milano 2017, p. 98. (My transl.).

<sup>5</sup> Goethe J.W., *Scientific Studies*, ed. and transl. by D. Miller, Suhrkamp, New York 1988, p. XI.

Goethe's theory of knowledge is not based on the (Kantian) concept of subjective projection but on that of objective polarity: the "delicate empiricism" (*Zarte Empirie*) of which he speaks expresses a theory that is intimately identified with the object. With the notion of *Urphänomen*, Goethe intends to undermine the Cartesian divide between subject and object (*res cogitans* and *res extensa*) and simultaneously the Kantian idea that the objective world is only comprehensible from the a priori structures of subjective consciousness. To be effectively *original* and not derived from the ordering activity of the *ego cogito* or "pure" intuitions as transcendental forms of sensibility, the phenomenon, as an object, stands with the subject related to each other by essential identity.

From this perspective, Goethe is described by Ludwig Klages as the first modern phenomenologist (*Erscheinungsforscher*).<sup>6</sup> Nature, insofar as it shows itself, neutralises the gap between phenomenon and subjective rationality: it is not a question of analysing the mechanism, mathematical formula, geometric arrangement and the physical-chemical or atomic composition that lies behind the appearance (*phainomai*) of a natural phenomenon but rather of being, in the vision, one with nature. Therefore, Goethe's morphology is phenomenological due to its immersion in the *Lebenswelt*, in the world-of-life, and the investigation of nature entails a form of experience prior to the subject-object relationship. It is an experience of immediate sympathy and then of intuitive empathy, which Klages would describe as "*visio sine comprehensione*".<sup>7</sup>

Thought therefore is not detached from objects but penetrates immediately into sensible images, such that Goethe claims: "My seeing is already thinking, my thinking is seeing."<sup>8</sup> It is in *Urphänomen* that the polarity of invisible idea and visible manifestation is expressed in the unity of *Gestalt*. In the botanical world – the chosen field of Goethe's naturalistic investigation – the plant organs represent the metamorphosis of the fundamental organ of the leaf, which is the original phenomenon as visibly expressed in the botanical world tout court. Essence and appearance are simultaneously visible in the leaf, in which the eyes of the mind and those of the body operate in perfect symbiosis. Therefore, the leaf can be understood as the original cell, the monadological fragment and the primordial organ from which the entire colourful mixture of the vegetal world develops.

<sup>6</sup> Klages L., *Goethe come esploratore dell'anima* (1932), G. Lacchin (ed.), introd. by G. Moretti, Mimesis, Milano 2003, p. 59.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> Goethe J.W., *Sollecitazione significativa per una sola parola intelligente*, in *La metamorfosi delle piante*, cit., p. 146. (My transl.).

The original phenomenon is defined by Goethe as *aperçu* (a term which in French means a nod, signal or glimpse). It is a word that polarises the subject and object of vision and indicates the moment of intuitive perception. The detail of the leaf is *Urphänomen* insofar as it is *aperçu*, allowing one to glimpse miraculously and mysteriously – in its very dense symbolic condensation – the whole in the one. From the early 1880s, Goethe discussed “original forms” (*Urgestalten*) with Herder and how to trace these forms in all three kingdoms of nature<sup>9</sup>: the “original stone” (*Urstein*) in geology, “original plant” (*Urpflanze*) in botany and “original animal” (*Urtier*) in zoology. In the latter, the original phenomenon corresponds to the vertebra of the spinal column, and the various metamorphoses of the entire animal kingdom can be traced back to it. In the bone fragment, as in the mineral and inflorescence, the morphologist’s eye is able to grasp the appearance and manifestation of the very essence of nature.

The original phenomena are therefore not cognitive codes, abstract types or semiotic schemes that refer to a theory but are themselves theory – the immediate appearance of meaning. This sense is not ‘behind’, ‘inside’, ‘outside’ or ‘above’ them but ‘within’ them and must be intuited in its individual expression. Consequently, morphology is the intuitive understanding and interpretation of the *Gestalt* of the phenomenon as an expression of its internal formative principle. This principle is the inner formal law – the archetype – that remains recognisable despite the environmental influences and external conditioning. The individual animal, as well as the plant, is defined by Goethe as a microcosm whose archetype has shaped each of its forms. The form of the phenomenon is thus an expression of its peculiar inner formative impulse.

Therefore, if the decisive aspect of Goethe’s morphology must be recognised in the concept of metamorphosis, there remains – despite the intrinsic dynamism of *Gestaltung* – a law governing the dynamic process of formation.

Form is always mobile, dynamic, becoming and passing through, but at the same time the irreducibly metamorphic essence of natural phenomena presents constants, responds to laws and develops on the basis of archetypal models and general principles.

<sup>9</sup> See Herder J.G., *Sämmtliche Werke*, 33. voll., B. Suphan et al. (eds.), Weidmann, Berlin 1877-1913, vol. 13, p. 49.

### 3. Polarity, metamorphosis and character in Goethe's *Faust*

From what has been outlined above, for Goethe, the cognitive relation between subject and object, thought and phenomenon, inside and outside, stimulus and perception is not one of cause and effect, but rather of polar co-originality. This peculiar relationship of polarity has been defined as “the necessary connection and the mutual dependence of two opposing principles, phenomena, terms or concepts.”<sup>10</sup> Goethe defines the electrical, magnetic and light/dark polarities as “original polarities” (*Urpolaritäten*). These are concrete “arising phenomena” (*Nullpunkte-Quellenpunkte*) in which the idea is objectified.<sup>11</sup> The constant state of flux that characterises the dynamic essence of the universe comprises conflicting antagonistic forces that never express themselves in a single phenomenon but in two diagrammatically opposed entities: “Polarity implies a condition of complementarity between opposites, such that each of the two poles, although limited by the other, also finds its reason and its constitutive foundation in the other.”<sup>12</sup>

For Goethe, the dynamic of polarity not only concerns natural phenomena (such as magnetism and electricity) but also plays an important role in poetry. We will present some examples of polarity related to Goethe's *Faust*.

The dynamic of polarity in Goethe's masterpiece concerns the tension between the finite and infinite, human and divine, knowledge and eroticism. In *Faust*, the original contradiction between light and darkness lives on. The protagonist of the Tragedy is the expression of an apparently irreconcilable polarity between divinity and animality. In the first part of the work, he has clear Luciferian characteristics: “Am I a god? I see so clearly now!”<sup>13</sup>, “I, made in God's image”<sup>14</sup>, and “I, more than Cherub”<sup>15</sup>. The Spirit of the Earth even calls him “demigod” (*Übermensch*)<sup>16</sup>, as both irony and

<sup>10</sup> Giacomelli A., *Polarity*, in S. Tedesco, F. Vercellone (eds.), *Glossary of Morphology*, Springer, Cham 2020, p. 425.

<sup>11</sup> See Witte B., Buck T., Dahnke H.D., Otto R., Schmidt P. (eds.), *Goethe Handbuch. Personen, Sachen, Begriffe L-Z*, 4 voll., Springer, Stuttgart-Weimar 1998, vol. IV/2, p. 1081. See also Goethe, J.W., *Gedenkausgabe der Werke, Briefe und Gespräche*, 24 vols., E. Beutler (ed.), Artemis, Zürich 1961, vol. 17, pp. 690-99.

<sup>12</sup> Giacomelli A., *Polarity*, cit., p. 425.

<sup>13</sup> Goethe G.W., *Faust* (1808-1832), 2 voll., transl. by S. Atkins (ed.), with a new foreword by D.E. Wellbery, Princeton Univ., Princeton-Oxford 2014, vol. I, p. 15, v. 439: “Bin ich ein Gott? Mir wird so licht!”

<sup>14</sup> Ivi, vol. I, p. 16, v. 516: “Ich Ebenbild der Gottheit!”

<sup>15</sup> Ivi, vol. I, p. 19, v. 618: “Ich, mehr als Cherub”.

<sup>16</sup> Ivi, vol. I, p. 16, v. 490.

mockery.<sup>17</sup> Further, Faust reveals an opposite nature: “No peer of gods! I suffer from that truth – my counterpart’s the worm that grovels in the dust”.<sup>18</sup> He is neither God nor a worm, but both – indifferently God *and* worm. The pole of omnipotence (light-God) is inseparable from the pole of a miserable finitude (darkness-worm). As has been claimed, “Faust’s spirit hovers between the chaotic vastness of infinite aspiration for macrocosmic omniscience, [...] and, on the opposite side, the resisting medium on environment as well as the restricting fetters of the ego”.<sup>19</sup> Faust’s efforts are always destined to backfire: he wishes for light and finds himself in darkness, he believes himself to be God and discovers himself to be a worm, he seeks the company of the Spirit of the Earth and obtains that of Mephistopheles and he believes he can save Marguerite but finally witnesses her execution.<sup>20</sup> The highest and lowest elements, “Höchst’ und Tiefste”,<sup>21</sup> coexist in him in a *coincidentia oppositorum* consisting of high enthusiasms and deepest depressions.

The entire tragedy is marked by a succession of “light and dark, point and counterpoint, attack and repartee, blaring prestos and muttering diminuendos.”<sup>22</sup> Activity and quietism, life and death, sensual satisfaction (Gretchen) and classical beauty (Helena), Dionysian intoxication and Apollonian calm constitute the polar-circular co-existential unity in Faust, where there is no succession, duality or hierarchy, between the two co-existing poles but absolute contemporaneity, simultaneity and co-belonging.

Not only the theme of polarity but also that of metamorphosis are central to Goethe’s *Faust*. Faust wants to experience everything: good and evil, pleasure and pain, great loves and fortunes, great catastrophes and escapes as well as richness and despairs. Faust thus traverses and embodies the metamorphic variety of the world, and his long and intense life is that of change. He continues to desire ever-different forms. “In the figure of Faust”, writes Wellbery, “modernity is imagined as a thirst that won’t be slaked, a process of creative destruction.”<sup>23</sup> Yet, this burning thirst for novelty, despite the constant strive for self-improvement and the kaleidoscope

<sup>17</sup> See Siani A.L., *Luce, tenebra e colore in Goethe. Per un'estetica (dell') immanente*, in L. Russo (ed.), *Premio Nuova Estetica*, Aesthetica Preprint, Palermo 2011, p. 214.

<sup>18</sup> Goethe G.W., *Faust*, cit., vol. I, pp. 19-20, vv. 652-653: “Den Göttern gleich’ ich nicht! Zu tief ist es gefühlt:/ Dem Wurme gleich’ ich”.

<sup>19</sup> Cardinal C.H., *Polarity in Goethe’s Faust*, “PMLA. Journal of the Modern Language Association of America”, 64/3 (1949), p. 451.

<sup>20</sup> See Siani A.L., *Luce, tenebra e colore in Goethe*, cit., p. 214.

<sup>21</sup> See Goethe G.W., *Faust*, cit., vol. I, p. 46, v. 1772.

<sup>22</sup> Cardinal C.H., *Polarity in Goethe’s Faust*, cit., p. 451.

<sup>23</sup> Wellbery D.E., *Introduction to Goethe*, G.W., *Faust*, cit., p. XVIII.



of forms that characterises his life, Faust cannot escape his own nature. “You are just what you are”, says Mephistopheles to Faust: “Pile wigs with countless curls upon your head, wear shoes that lift you up an ell, and still you will remain just what you are.”<sup>24</sup>

While the fixity of the archetype is presented as a law of nature in Goethe’s scientific studies, in the human and literary sphere, the archetypal stability concerns character. As mentioned, natural phenomenon, in its irreducibly metamorphic essence, displays constants and responds to laws, and develops on the basis of general models and principles, which, although immanent to experience, order the development of form. Similarly, individual character is marked by transformation (*Verwandlung*) and simultaneously is pre-determined by the peculiar inner formative impulses of the archetype. Therefore, the personality of the individual grows and develops, like plants and animals, in accordance with the original law that marks its genesis. We are not in the realm of unlimited characterological perspectivism since, for Goethe, there is undoubtedly a change of form (of character). However, this change occurs periodically based on an internal principle (law) that is entirely original, predetermined, necessary and immutable. No form can therefore betray its archetypal character. In the field of characterology, the development of the personality form is based on a germinal and innate model that guarantees the unity of the human *Gestalt* despite its metamorphoses. The characterological core – like the natural archetype – can expand or contract, but it can never contravene its own immanent form.

According to Goethe, in this particular sphere of metamorphosis, as in the plant and animal spheres, there is no pure, accidental or imponderable randomness but rather a polar in-difference between being and becoming, immutability and change, freedom and necessity.

#### 4. Taoist Ontology and Goethe’s Morphology: Some Affinities And Differences

As we have already mentioned, the Goethean *Weltanschauung* characterised by a holistic ontology, i.e. the negation of any rigid dichotomy between transcendence and immanence and between idea and phenomenon, seems to disclose important affinities with

<sup>24</sup> Goethe, G.W., *Faust*, cit., vol. I, p. 46, vv. 1806-1809: “Du bist am Ende – was du bist. Setz dir Perücken auf von Millionen Locken, Setz deinen Fuß auf ellenohe Sokken, du beibst dich immer, was du bist”.

traditional Chinese Taoist thought. The Taoist vision of the cosmos, like Goethe's, is characterised by dynamic processuality and vital fluidity expressed as a complementarity and polar alternation between elements (full-empty, black-white, sky-earth, matter-spirit, light-shadow, inhalation-exhalation, etc.). This relationship is famously represented by the Taoist symbol of *Taiji tu*. Within this symbol, the empty is represented by the dark element (*yin*) and the full by the light one (*yang*). Originally, *yin* and *yang* denoted, respectively, the shadow and sunny sides of a mountain.<sup>25</sup> If the symbol is interpreted in a static way, as though representing a fixed situation, the balance of complementarity between the two elements becomes clear. These elements are chromatically opposite but of identical and specular form, and each contains a 'germ' of the opposite element. If the symbol is interpreted in a dynamic sense, representing a circular movement, then the balance of alternation between the two elements also stands out. The 'germ' of an element in the opposite element represents the possibility of one element transforming into the other.<sup>26</sup> Therefore, according to Taoist ontology,<sup>27</sup> the universe is ruled by the *yin-yang* principle of alternation. Similarly, according to Goethean ontology, all degrees of nature are linked by an "elective affinity" and by an "original polarity". The breathing dynamic of Taoist life expresses a rhythm, alternation and polarity that recall Goethe's continuous process of "systole and diastole": the inspiration and expiration of the living soul, in which the inner and outer must always be viewed as interwoven.<sup>28</sup>

The Taoist vital flow, which in Chinese is called *qi* (氣), permeates an immanent reality devoid of metaphysical dualisms between the sensible and intelligible planes, between 'material' and 'spiritual'. In the flow of *qi* as 'breath' and 'vital energy', the essence of the world is expressed as eternal modification, transformation and metamorphosis. This is, once again, a worldview analo-

<sup>25</sup> See Graham A.C., *Yin-Yang and the Nature of Correlative Thinking*, Institute of East Asian Philosophies, Singapore 1986.

<sup>26</sup> See Pasqualotto G., *Estetica del vuoto. Arte e meditazione nelle culture d'Oriente*, Marsilio, Venezia 2002, pp. 14-15 and *Oltre la filosofia. Percorsi di saggezza tra Oriente e Occidente*, Angelo Colla, Costabissara 2008, pp. 47-104.

<sup>27</sup> It is well known that ontology is the study of being (from the Greek ὄντος, genitive singular of the present participle of the verb εἶναι, "to be" and from λόγος, "speech"). On the other hand, the morphology of the Chinese language does not presuppose the existence of the verb "to be", nor – strictly speaking – the conjugation of verb tenses (see Jullien F., *Du "temps": Éléments d'une philosophie du vivre*, Grasset, Paris 2001, pp. 98-9). Therefore, it is only possible to speak of "Taoist ontology" if this means a peculiar processual view of the world and a dynamic complementarity between the elements, in which no "being" is opposed to "becoming".

<sup>28</sup> See B. Witte, T. Buck, H.D. Dahnke, R. Otto, P. Schmidt, (eds.), *Goethe Handbuch*, cit., vol. IV/2, p. 1034; see also Giacomelli, A., *Polarity*, cit., p. 426.

gous to Goethe's for whom the essence of every being can only be grasped in conjunction with its form, and for whom that form is fundamentally formation (*Gestaltung*) always in action. Everything, according to Goethe, as in Taoism, is transformed: transformation is life; life is transformation.<sup>29</sup> Both ontologies reject the stasis, fixity and rigidity of any scheme and instead promote transition and processuality. The term Tao (道) itself represents this dynamism, as it is usually translated as 'way' or 'course': the Tao is thus a path that is formed in the walking.<sup>30</sup> Just as Taoism denies the ontological difference between an original essence and a derived copy in the name of creation as modification and transformation (*biànhuà* 变化, *zàohuà* 造化),<sup>31</sup> Goethe too rejects the Platonic fixation and abstraction of forms, which constitute one of the axes of the history of Western thought.<sup>32</sup> The variety of nature, according to Goethe, is stylised in the monad form, in *Urphänomen*, but is not abstracted in the sense of being separated from matter and placed beyond life.

These 'family resemblances' between Taoism and Goethe's morphology – both of which reject the fixity of reality and emphasise the dynamic polarity of becoming – do not, however, legitimise the assertion of a convenient and unproblematic equivalence between the worldviews. There is in fact a significant difference that calls into question this comparison: for Goethe, the law governing the natural world, the literary-artistic world and the world of human *ethos* is archetypal, whereas in the Taoist context, the law – or rather the rule – (*liaofa* 了法) does not have the archetypal character of a constant model but is spontaneity itself (*ziran* or *tsu-jan* 自然). Although inseparable from the sensible form, Goethe's archetype represents a stable and essential structural element: an invariant underlying feature of variation. The Taoist rule is essentially the absence of rules, or a 'spontaneous order', whereas the archetypal law represents the immutable in the ever-changing as per Goethe.

While Mephistopheles claims: "You are just what you are" (see *supra*), revealing the substantial immutability of the character as archetype, Shitao says: "The perfect man has no rules" (*zhìrén wù*

<sup>29</sup> See Ghilardi, M., (ed.), *Shitao. Discorsi sulla pittura del monaco Zucca Amara*, pref. by G. Pasqualotto, Jouvence, Milano 2014, p. 38.

<sup>30</sup> See Wang R.R., *Yinyang: The Way of Heaven and Earth in Chinese Thought and Culture*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2012, pp. 44-5. See also Mirzakhani, K., *An Ironic Approach to the Absolute. Schlegel's Poetic Mysticism*, Lexington, Lanham and others 2020, p. 65.

<sup>31</sup> See Ghilardi M., (ed.), *Shitao*, cit., p. 38 and pp. 75-6.

<sup>32</sup> See Wilkinson E.M., *Goethe's conception of form*, in Willoughby, I.A., *Goethe: Poet and Thinker*, Arnold, London 1962, pp. 167-184; Schulte J., *Coro e legge. Il "metodo morfologico" in Goethe e Wittgenstein*, "Intersezioni", 2 (1982), pp. 99-124; F. Moiso, *Goethe: la natura e le sue forme*, cit., pp. 14 ff.

fǎ 至人無法),<sup>33</sup> revealing the absence of any paradigmatic law underlying both subjectivity and nature. In Taoism, therefore, there is no unchangeable archetypal core to which the world – even in the variety of its metamorphoses – remains faithful.

It can be said, very schematically, that while Goethe's morphology is based on the formative presupposition of the archetype, Taoist ontology is based on the transcendental action of emptiness. In other words, in the Taoist context, it is not a question of intensively investigating the relationship between the archetype and its monadological-phenomenal manifestation (*Urphänomen*) but of grasping the empty nature of phenomena. Such emptiness (*wu* 無), in classical Taoist texts such as the *Daodejing* and the *Zhuangzi*,<sup>34</sup> refers to an absence that encompasses the transcendental condition of possibility of all determination. Therefore, in Taoist thought, no origin (*Ur-*) and no archetype exist to legitimise the metamorphosis of the world, but there is only emptiness as a universal condition of possibility for the circulation of vital breaths and dynamic interpenetration of any polarity. This void is the inexhaustible matrix of every natural development and artistic creation.

##### 5. Conclusion: A brief cross-cultural comparison of paintings by Carl Gustav Carus and Shitao

This distinction is particularly clear in paintings, and mainly in the field of landscape painting. For a brief comparison between Goethean and Taoist paintings, we will consider the landscape paintings of Carl Gustav Carus and Shitao, respectively. The choice of utilising Carus is justified by the fact that he famously had a direct relationship with Goethe, and he was strongly influenced by his morphology.<sup>35</sup> With regards to Shitao, he probably makes the most significant pictorial and theoretical contribution to traditional Chinese painting (*Sayings on Painting from Monk Bitter Gourd, Kugua Heshang Huayulu* 苦瓜和尚画语录, early 18th century). Like Shitao, Carus complements his painting with a theoretical reflection (*Letters on landscape painting, Briefe über Landschaftsmalerei*, 1815-1824).

Regarding Carus, the element that is worth emphasising con-

<sup>33</sup> See Ghilardi, M., (ed.), *Shitao*, cit., p. 77.

<sup>34</sup> Watson B., (ed.), *The complete Works of Zhuangzi*, Columbia University Press, New York 2013.

<sup>35</sup> See Kirchner B., *Carl Gustav Carus, seine "poetische" Wissenschaft und seine Kunsttheorie, sein Verhältnis zu Goethe und seine Bedeutung für die Literaturwissenschaft*, Rheinische Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität, Bonn 1960.

cerns the revelatory value of detail and of individual natural elements: between 1818 and 1820, Carus had already painted a series of landscapes under the influence of Caspar David Friedrich. One of these – the so-called *Tannenwald* (1820) – particularly impressed Goethe. The picture, writes Johann Henrich Meyer in a review, “shows a quit forest area densely populated with fir trees with a stream running through stones.”<sup>36</sup> The pines and stones painted by Carus can be considered *Urbänomene*: concentrated *Gestalten* of the plant and mineral worlds. The painted tree and gravel as well as the ruins of cathedrals in other paintings represent monads, in which the universal is manifested in the particular, ideality in concreteness and generality is materialised in the individuality of the minute phenomenon. Moreover, in this pictorial context, the original phenomenon condenses the essence, the substance and the soul of nature, expressing its archetypal laws. With due historical-conceptual distinctions, something similar appears in Paul Klee’s painting, which in turn is strongly imbued with Goethian morphology. The fantastic landscapes and gardens painted by Klee (*Garden*, 1922; *Landscape with Yellow Birds*, 1923; *Big Garden*, 1924; *Blossoms in the Night*, 1930) can indeed be considered a pictorial expression of Goethe’s metamorphosis of plants and animals. The visible element of *Gestaltung* manifests and expresses the invisible element of the archetype, of the ‘idea’ as an internal vital formative impulse or, as Klee would say, the equally invisible element of “quality.”<sup>37</sup>

Coming back to Carus, the pictorial landscape represents, in physiognomic terms, the sensitive and dynamic face in which the soul of the world (*Weltseele*) is expressed, that is, nature’s eternal, immutable and archetypal character. At the same time, the natural landscape is for Carus the place of transposition of man’s moods (*Stimmungen*), which find their phenomenal expression there. It therefore is a painting based on the intensive condensation of archetypal essences (characters, psychic contents, emotional tones and moods). Thus, the painted landscape becomes, through its details, the material and visible manifestation, or the *Urbänomen*, of a dialectic between the interiority of the author and that of nature.

In Shitao’s painting, following the Tao means exactly the oppo-

<sup>36</sup> Groche S., “Zarten Seelen ist gar viel gegönnt”: *Naturwissenschaft und Kunst im Briefwechsel zwischen C. G. Carus und Goethe*, Wallstein Verlag, Göttingen 2001, p. 140. See also Knittel A.P., *Zwischen Idylle und Tabu: die Autobiographien von Carl Gustav Carus, Wilhelm von Kugelgen und Ludwig Richter*, Thelem, Dresden 2002, p. 26.

<sup>37</sup> See Giacomelli A., *Baubaus absconditum. Arte, corpo e mistica alle radici del Modernismo*, Mimesis, Milano 2019, pp. 179-180.

site: not intensively condensing the archetypal character of nature, let alone the painter's personal moods, but rather 'emptying the heart'. In order to transfer forms onto paper or silk, the painter must first achieve *wu xin* (無心), "the emptying of the heart-mind, the liberation from all distractions, worries, fantasies, memories, prejudices".<sup>38</sup> This means that the components of the portrait are not original phenomena as signs, traces and visible fragments of a personal character nor of stable archetypal-natural laws but expressions of the Tao itself, i.e. of an exchangeable and fluid relationship between the natural elements. The "one stroke" (*yi hua* 一畫) that Shitao mentions is the morphogenetic act that materialises through the brush, which allows painting to generate the world, i.e. the "ten thousand beings".<sup>39</sup>

If we think of paintings like *Morning Mist among the Golden Bamboos*, 1669; *Landscapes with flowers and plants*, 1699; *Clouds and Mountains*, 1702; what they express is a correlation between the cosmos and painting technique. Portraiture is a practice that, by recreating the cosmos, triggers a resonance between man and nature, a breathing dynamic that adheres to the flow of reality. It is significant that the Chinese term for 'landscape' (*shānchūān*, 山川) literally translates to 'mountain-river' or 'mountain-water' (*shānshuǐ*, 山水): landscape is not a symbolic, intensive and individual monad, nor a phenomenal manifestation of interiority, but a re-creation of the processes of the universe. Taoist landscape painting is thus a sensitive manifestation of the 'void' as the author's non-self and, simultaneously, a cosmic monad, giving nature with its impermanence a form. If Goethe's morphology, in its dynamism, is guided by the archetypal *nómos* of which *Urphänomen* is the manifestation, the Taoist worldview reflects perhaps the most radical expression of formlessness.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Pasqualotto G., *Prefazione a Ghilardi, M., (ed.), Shitao*, cit., p. 14.

<sup>39</sup> See Ghilardi M., (ed.), *Shitao*, cit., p. 64.

<sup>40</sup> See Jullien F., *The great image has no form, or On the nonobject through painting* (2003), transl. by J.M. Todd, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago-London 2009.

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