

ALESSANDRO NIERO

ON THE EPISTEMOLOGY OF *PHANTASIA*:
GOETHEAN SCIENCE BETWEEN EMPIRICAL
INQUIRY AND PHANTASMATIC VISION
AS EPITOMIZED IN THE POEM
EINS UND ALLES (1821)

TABLE OF CONTENTS: 1. *Introduction*; 2. *Goethe's phantasmatic looking, or the analogical power of imagination*; 3. *On the relationship between Weltgeist and Weltseele: Goethe's poem Eins und Alles as epitome of Goethe's poetic-scientific philosophy*; 4. *Appendix*.

1. Introduction

«Wonder of wonders, I am here» (CW 1, 155).¹ So reads the concluding line of Goethe's vibrant poem *Parabase* (*Parabasis*), which, as the ending suggests, perfectly depicts the astonished posture of the observer, and, beyond metaphor, of Goethe himself, before nature. A nature that manifests itself into the eyes of the observer as «self-insistent, always changing, [n]ear and far and far and near» (*ibid.*), but especially as incessantly shaping and reshaping new forms – caught by the observer in a never-ending process of creation. That such a sense of

¹ «Zum Erstaunen bin ich da» (FA I.2, 495). The abbreviation CW – as referenced in the main text – will be used from now on to refer to the English edition of Goethe's *Collected Works*, cited along with the respective volume and the relevant page(s). The abbreviation FA refers to the German Frankfurt edition (*Frankfurter Ausgabe*) of Goethe's complete works and will be employed from now on followed by the respective section (in Roman numerals), volume (in Arabic numerals), as well as the relevant page(s). Should the cited sources not be in English, the translations provided in the text are the author's own.

wonder provides the ideal foundation for the blossoming and unfolding of any truly philosophical inclination and praxis goes without saying. However, the scenario becomes even more intriguing – that is to say, more complex – when one considers the diverse publication contexts in which the poem appeared. Indeed, *Parabase* was first published in the third issue of the first volume of Goethe's scientific journal *Zur Morphologie* (*On Morphology*) in 1820 and was later incorporated, in 1827, into the section entitled *Gott und Welt* (*God and World*) of Goethe's *Ausgabe letzter Hand*, the final edition of Goethe's works, revised and edited by the poet himself.

Against this background, in which science, inspired by wonder, finds expression in poetry, the central claim of this essay already begins to emerge, namely that Goethe's scientific-poetic posture is eminently and inherently philosophical – a claim, however, that is far from being self-evident. As Goethe himself confided to Jacobi in a letter dated 23rd November 1801, his relationship with philosophy was anything but smooth or untroubled:

You can easily imagine my stance towards philosophy. If it is primarily concerned with making distinctions, then I cannot come to terms with it [...]; but if it unifies – or rather, if it elevates, secures, and transforms our original sense of *being one with nature* into a deep and tranquil contemplation, in whose perpetual *synkrisis* and *diakrisis* we may lead a divine life, even if we are not allowed to live such a life, then I welcome it, and you may judge my share in your work accordingly (FA II.5, 189).

As becomes clear from the excerpt, Goethe firmly opposed any allegedly philosophical absolutism of self-contained and distinct concepts. Essentially, he rejected any exclusively analytical conception of philosophy that relies blindly and solely on «*Begriffsbestimmungen*» ('conceptual definitions') and effects nothing but «*Zergliederung*» ('dissection') [Adorno 1973, 10]. Instead, Goethe sought to investigate the inherent relational unity of the world beyond any conceptual demarcations. While he did not in the least reject nor renounce the rigorous and indispensable moment of *Begriffsbestimmung*, considering it a necessary «means for intellectual (*geistig*) and scientific work» [*ibid.*, 12], Goethe still refused to elevate it to the ultimate goal of philosophical

inquiry. Such is – we contend – the framework of Goethe’s philosophical posture, overarching his characteristically «poetic-scientific nature» (FA II.5, 189).

Building on these premises, the aim is to outline the fundamental articulations of Goethe’s poetic-scientific philosophy – both as theory and as praxis. More specifically, we will first attempt to delineate and highlight the essential role imagination (*phantasia*) plays within his poetic-scientific epistemology. Then, in the second and final part of the essay, we will try to put his philosophical theory into practice by proposing a reading of the poem *Eins und Alles* (*One and All*). This poem has been selected for several reasons, the main one being the fortunate complexity it presents due to the juxtaposition in its second stanza of two weighty terms – *Weltseele* (world soul) and *Weltgeist* (world spirit), which are neither easy to clarify nor to address. This very difficulty has given rise to substantial critical debate, to which we seek to add our own perspective.

As for the methodological premises, our work will largely consist in terminological archaeology. Many objections could be raised in this regard. For his part, Matthew Bell holds that «[t]he search for unity and continuity in Goethe’s thought must be conducted on a level other than the rigorously philosophical» [Bell 1994, 2], since – he argues – one could easily gather a number of convincing arguments to ascribe Goethe to a large number of distinct philosophical traditions and, as a consequence, to none of them [cf. *ibid.*]. Yet, the aim of our work is not merely to trace the sources of Goethe’s oeuvre in order to find a fitting categorization for him as an intellectual figure, which – as a method – would not only fail to yield any satisfying results, but would also earn us Goethe’s posthumous ridicule [cf. Goethe 1984, 229]. Instead, our terminological investigation intends to bring to light the life of a few crucial concepts that underlie Goethe’s epistemology and that substantially structure and animate his poetic-scientific posture [cf. Adorno 1973, 18].

To begin with, a preliminary terminological clarification is necessary. The group of poems gathered under the title *Gott und Welt* has been defined by critics as *weltanschauliche Gedichte*, which roughly translates to ‘poems giving expression to a particular worldview (*Welt-*

anschauung)'. This, in fact, is the explanation Erich Trunz² provided for employing the term *weltanschaulich* to connote this group of poems, which – as he claims – articulate «Goethe's *Weltanschauung* from [his] later period in a formulaic and concise, yet also instructive and expressive manner» [Goethe 1993, 715]. Although it is to some extent understandable – albeit not justifiable – why Trunz made use of that term, since, on the whole, the collection acts as a *Resonanzraum* – a space of resonance – for the articulation of Goethe's philosophical ideas, I would nonetheless recall and stick to Adorno's substantial distinction between *Weltanschauung* and philosophy. Accordingly, arising from the human need to settle inner unrest by means of a coherent and totalizing, yet constrained system, *Weltanschauungen* have a merely private and subjective character, whereas philosophy, renouncing the comfort of a perfect conceptual form, understands and constitutes itself, above all, as a free spiritual attitude, i.e., as a critical, dynamic and reflective posture in response to the questions posed by the world [cf. Adorno 1973, 118-130]. Given Goethe's innate inquisitiveness [cf. Goethe 1984, 82] as well as his emancipation from the comforting certainty of an immutable *Weltgebäude* ('universe') [cf. Rössler 2020, 540-564], the use of the term *Weltanschauung* in relation to his thought cannot but be fully inadequate.

Nonetheless, Trunz explicitly resorted to the term *Weltanschauung* for one further reason. This reason lies in the term itself, namely in the highly significant and philosophically resonant concept of *Anschauung* ('looking', 'observation', 'intuition'). As Trunz put it, the imagery recurring in Goethe's philosophical (and *not* merely *weltanschaulich*) poems serves as a symbolic representation of the phenomena of life that Goethe primarily perceived and assimilated «through the eye» [Goethe 1993, 715], i.e. through the organ of vision, which, in turn, evokes the

² In this terminological context, it is by no means irrelevant to recall that from 1934 until 1945 Erich Trunz was a member of the NSDAP (National Socialist German Workers' Party), holding throughout the Nazi dictatorship significant positions in academia (cf. Herrmann 2003, 1909-1910). Consequently, his language could not possibly be free from ideological connotations, and especially his usage of the term *Weltanschauung* could not but carry traces of the auratic meaning attached to the Volkish *Weltanschauung* as well as to the *Weltanschauung* of the National Socialist party (cf. Mosse 1981, 13-145).

term *Anschauung* through the verb ‘*schauen*’, meaning ‘to see’, ‘to look’.³ It is crucial to note from the very beginning that Goethe’s notion of *Anschauung* is not restricted to the Kantian notion of “sensory intuition” as opposed to the a priori categories of understanding; on the contrary, as Costazza has put it, «although Goethe almost obsessively insists on the importance of seeing objects “with one’s eyes”, *Anschauung* is never for him something immediate, but rather the result of a construction, the culmination of a cognitive process» [Costazza 2007, 42-43]. Although this is true, it is nevertheless important to emphasize that for Goethe there is no absolute conceptual divide between the physical gaze and the spiritual vision, in the sense that neither can exist in absolute independence from the other: as Naumann-Beyer has put it, rather than attaining a pure spiritual vision, «the aim was to reconcile sensibility and reason» [cf. Naumann-Beyer 2000, 230]. This is why the concrete visual training was always an integral and essential part of Goethe’s epistemology, not least during his Italian journey.⁴ The following letter should suffice to demonstrate that physical sight is substantially interrelated with cognitive faculties, whose progressive refinement seems to be the explicit goal of Goethe’s (scientifically as well as artistically relevant) visual training in Italy:

To FRIENDS IN WEIMAR Rome, 7th November 1786.

I have been here ten days now and the general idea of this city emerges gradually before me. We walk about, observing everything, I get acquainted with the plan of Rome, old and new, look at the ruins, the buildings, visit one or the other villa. After that we take the principal sights quite slowly. I just open my eyes and look and go away and come back again. We don’t forget to observe the people and so we cover the ground step by step. Decidedly Rome is the only place where one can prepare one’s mind for Rome. The most interesting thing I have met with on

³ In light of the very mediating function of the eyes and concrete sight within the framework of Goethe’s conception of *Anschauung*, Naumann-Beyer classifies it explicitly among the variants of *Anschauung* mediated through a medium (*mediale Variante*) (cf. Naumann-Beyer 2000, 215).

⁴ Cf. for instance Goethe 1976, 18; *ibid.*, 67; *ibid.*, 79. In a letter to Jacoby dated 5th May 1786, a few months before departing for Italy, Goethe wrote: «If you say that one can only *believe* in God, then I tell you: I set a high value on *seeing*» (FA II.2, 629). On Goethe’s optocentrism cf. also Lange 2011, 22-23.

this journey from the human point of view is the Republic of Venice, not as I saw it with my eyes [*mit Augen des Leibs*] so much as with my mind [*mit Augen des Geistes*] [Goethe, 1957, 183].⁵

2. Goethe's Phantasmatic looking, or The Analogical Power of Imagination

After hinting at the prominent role played by both physical and spiritual observation (*Anschauung*) in Goethean epistemology, we will now examine more closely the concrete articulation of Goethe's scientific approach as it takes shape in the context of his Italian journey. While it is true that Goethe had already embarked on scientific research prior to his Italian journey – he began in the late 1770s with geological studies and then also conducted research in the field of comparative anatomy, which led to his 1786 essay on the discovery of the intermaxillary bone in humans – it is his Italian journey that marked a turning point not only in his botanical studies, but, more significantly, in the development of his future morphological research.

In Italy, Goethe had the possibility to come into direct contact with an exceptionally diverse natural world and an unparalleled artistic heritage – an environment that offered him not only immediate sensory engagement, but also the opportunity to conduct in-depth observations. The research hypothesis that occupied him most intensely during those years (from September 1786 to June 1788), was that of the primordial plant (*Urpflanze*), i.e. the model of an assumed original plant, from which all existing plant varieties were thought to have descended. While Goethe had his first vivid intuition of the *Urpflanze* in Padua during his visit to the botanical gardens on 27th September 1786, it was in Sicily, in Palermo, that he thought he might 'see' the primordial plant with his own eyes. In order to appreciate the full weight of this event, we must quote a longer passage from Goethe's *Italian Journey*, where he describes the somewhat mystical episode occurred in the public garden of Villa Giulia:

⁵ As far as Goethe's notion of the spiritual eye is concerned, cf. Werner 2024, in which the author explores the semantic breadth of *Geist*, examining it especially as a site of sensual imagination.

Palermo, Tuesday, 17th April 1787

Truly, it is a misfortune to be pursued and tempted by many different *spirits* (*Geister*)! This morning I went to the public garden with the firm, calm resolve to continue my poetic dreams, but before I realized it, another *specter* (*Gespenst*) seized me, one that has been skulking behind me for the last few days. The many plants that otherwise I was used to seeing only in tubs and pots, indeed for most of the year behind glass windows, stand here, fresh and happy, under the open sky; and by fulfilling their intended purpose completely, they become clearer to us. Confronted with so many kinds of fresh, new forms, I was taken again by my old *fanciful idea* (*Grille*): might I not discover the primordial plant amid this multitude? Such a thing must exist, after all! How else would I recognize this or that form as being a plant, if they were not all constructed according to one model? I took pains to investigate how the many diverse shapes differed from each other. And I invariably found them *more similar than different*. When I tried to apply my botanical terminology, I was able to, but there was no profit in that, it disquieted me without helping me to proceed. (CW 6, 213-214; italics mine)

This passage is crucial and remarkable for a number of reasons. First and foremost, the expression ‘botanical terminology’ undoubtedly refers to Linnaeus’s botanical nomenclature, which Goethe was thoroughly acquainted with [cf. Wenzel 1998; cf. Detering 2020, 183-206], but which, while broadly applicable, proved eventually to be inadequate for Goethe’s investigation of the primordial plant. This is why, Goethe, despite fully acknowledging the scientific value of Linnaeus’s ‘dissective’ approach, refrained from adopting his strictly analytical method of classification unconditionally: «For as I tried to internalize his sharp, witty distinctions, his precise, purposeful, yet often arbitrary laws, a conflict arose within me: that which he sought to separate by force had, according to the deepest need of my being, to strive for unity» (FA I.24, 408-409). In fact, Goethe was seeking to lay the groundwork for a new approach to the observation of nature that would not only serve as an alternative, but rather as a complement to the Linnean *Systema Naturae* (1735) [cf. Poggi 2000, 105]. Goethe’s position is better understood considering that, at the time, he was in close intellectual exchange with Herder and was most notably collaborating with him on his *Ideas for a Philosophy of the History of Humanity* (*Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit*). The aim of Herder’s monumental work was to

establish a natural foundation for the history of humankind, grounded in a generative force that animates and gives form, continuity and harmony to the cosmos [cf. Sbarra 2025, 68-70] – the exact opposite of Linnaeus' dissective method.

Secondly, it is particularly noteworthy that Goethe, when referring to his research hypothesis – the *Urpflanze* – uses terms that are anything but scientific, defining it as a «fanciful idea» («Grille») or even a «spectre» («Gespenst»). While it might be argued that these are nothing but literary embellishments undermining the objective epistemological validity of Goethe's method, such seemingly unscientific language plays in fact an unexpectedly crucial role. More specifically, both the term 'fanciful idea' (*Grille*) and 'spectre' (*Gespenst*) evoke and hint explicitly at the spiritual realm of imagination, which in ancient Greek was significantly referred to as *phantasia*.

In light of the term's depth and complexity, a terminological clarification is essential. First of all, in German, several terms can be used to translate 'imagination' or 'fantasy', namely *Fantasie/Phantasie*, *Imagination* and *Einbildungskraft*. Disregarding strictly etymological concerns – of which it may suffice to mention that *Phantasie* is the oldest of the three terms, whereas *Einbildungskraft* was first introduced in the 16th century – from the 16th to the 18th century these three terms were to a great extent used interchangeably to indicate «the spontaneity of the human mind in the construction of illusion (aesthetic variant) and reality (epistemological variant)» [Schulte-Sasse 2010a, 88-89]. Even though later distinctions were not actually drawn consistently [*ibid.*, 113], the first differentiations between *Phantasie* and *Einbildungskraft* were made around the mid-18th century, before settling definitively towards the end of the century [cf. Schulte-Sasse 2010b, 782-786]. Specifically, a main distinction was drawn «between a positive, visual, and reflective *Einbildungskraft* and a negative, disintegrative *Phantasie*» [*ibid.*, 786].⁶ Although this distinction

⁶ Cf. Crescenzi 1996, 15-32, where the author clearly highlights the connection between the Enlightenment's theoretical-moral criticism of *Schwärmerei* (*fanaticism, enthusiasm*) and the rejection of the irrational and the fantastic in mid-18th-century aesthetics and poetics by pointing to the implicit distinction between a destructive and degenerate imagination, and one which, remaining anchored to the rational truths of the Enlightenment, carried forward its aspirations.

had taken firm roots among the leading thinkers of the time [cf. *ibid.*, 784-786], in Goethe the two terms continued to be used interchangeably [cf. Pulvirenti *et al.* 2022],⁷ even though, as we will see, he did introduce some internal differentiation as well. As evidenced by the illuminating letter Goethe sent to Knebel on 21st February 1821 (cf. FA II.9, 152), Goethe – while acknowledging the Kantian distinction between a passive *reproduktive Einbildungskraft* and an active *produktive Einbildungskraft* – nonetheless developed his own autonomous conception of imagination [cf. Pulvirenti *et al.* 2022]. Essentially, Goethe conceived of imagination as a powerful faculty of poetic creation and representation that – liberated from the dominion of reason – remained deeply connected to the forces of life [cf. *ibid.*].

Looking at the diachronic development of the terms *Fantasie/Phantasie*, *Imagination* and *Einbildungskraft*, historically, they were always associated with the body and the realm of corporeal senses [cf. Schulte-Sasse 2010a, 89]. In fact, from its earliest conceptualizations, imagination was held to be a faculty of limited, if not negligible, epistemic value – Plato, for instance, linked imagination (*phantasia*) with opinion (*doxa*) [cf. Plato 1997, 288]. With the rise of Christianity, imagination was further condemned as an unreliable human faculty that, bound to body and matter, inevitably led to sin [cf. Schulte-Sasse 2010a, 91]. In the 18th century however, originating in England, a pivotal shift took place, whereby fantasy, albeit still associated with the corporeal sphere, was gradually revalorized owing to a general upgrading of sensibility [cf. *ibid.*].⁸ The emancipation of sensibility and the concurrent rehabilitation of imagination as a plastic teleological faculty allowing to envision and design potential future plans [cf. *ibid.*, 101] brought about significant changes on a cultural and anthropological level. Indeed,

⁷ A particularly telling example of the interchangeability of the terms *Einbildungskraft* and *Phantasie* in Goethe can be found in his letter to the Hereditary Grand Duchess Maria Paulowna, dated 3rd January 1817. In the enclosure to his letter, the elderly Goethe articulates his conception of imagination, notably referring to it as *Phantasie*. Cf. Goethe 1988, 384-386.

⁸ Cf. Kondylis 2002. The author identifies in the rehabilitation of sensibility (*Rehabilitation der Sinnlichkeit*) a foundational moment of the Enlightenment, which affected and prompted philosophical inquiry at all levels and constituted one of its principal ideological weapons against theological ontology and morality.

the whole process was accompanied by a crisis of the idea of identity: whereas up until the early 18th century personal identity was grounded in a transcendent and immaterial principle of reason that guaranteed the unity of the individual over time, in those years an alternative view began to take shape – one that perceived identity as rooted in the body, understood as the physical boundary of one's individuated self [cf. Schulte-Sasse 2010b, 784-785]. This led, first and foremost, to a transition from a vertically structured culture (ranging from materiality to spiritual immateriality) to a horizontally oriented one, accompanied by a loss of transcendence in favour of an orientation towards immanence. Secondly, this cultural shift gave rise to a new and affirmative conception of the eye, of sight, as well as of visual representations [cf. *ibid.*, 91-92].

Returning with renewed eyes to Goethe, as previously mentioned, Goethe's philosophical posture rejected an absolute separation between poetry – specifically understood as the realm of poetic language – and science. While he by no means implied the absolute identity of the two domains, he nonetheless viewed them as comparable fields, operating according to analogous principles. On the one hand, Goethe argued that the poet – whose subject matter is the whole world – must acquire sufficient knowledge to reach a deeper comprehension of the world, and thereby learn how to express it in words (cf. FA II.12, 153). Essentially, Goethe exhorted the poet to base their poetry on experimental truth, thus drawing implicitly a parallel between the poet and the scientist, who also should be committed to increasing their own knowledge and to aiming at objectivity: «“The objectivity of my poetry,” said [Goethe], “may be attributed to [my] great attention and discipline of the eye; and I ought highly to prize the knowledge I have attained in this way”» [Goethe 1984, 84]. On the other hand, Goethe also contended that a scientist can only attain and deliver valuable results through developing and nurturing their imaginative faculties:

In fact, a great scientist without this high gift [i.e. imagination] is impossible. I do not mean an imagination that goes into the vague and imagines things that do not exist; I mean one that does not abandon the actual soil of the earth, and steps to supposed and conjectured things by the standard of the real and the known. Then it may prove whether this or that supposition be possible, and whether it is not

in contradiction with known laws. Such an imagination presupposes an enlarged tranquil mind, which has at its command a wide survey of the living world and its laws. [*ibid.*, 280]

As becomes evident from this excerpt, taken from a conversation with Eckermann dated 27th January 1830, Goethe adopted a differentiated perspective on imagination. While he showed little regard for imagination when it did not further the acquisition and expansion of knowledge, as it would eventually degenerate into potentially perilous vagueness and groundlessness, he nonetheless considered imagination to be an indispensable quality for a good scientist.⁹ What such nuanced perspective on imagination suggests, is that Goethe attributed a distinct form of ‘logic’ to the imaginative faculty, capable of producing scientifically valuable insights, albeit eluding classical logic. Indeed, it is along these lines that Goethe could argue that «imagination has its own laws, to which the understanding cannot and should not penetrate» [*ibid.*, 172]. The essence of Goethe’s argument is that knowledge that is acquired by means of understanding and analytical scientific observation is undoubtedly fundamental, yet not sufficient to come to terms with life, neither for the scientist nor for the poet.

In order to understand what type of ‘logic’ Goethe ascribed to imagination, it is useful, if not inevitable, to (re-)turn to Aristotle.¹⁰ Recalling Aristotle in this context is by no means incidental, since the two thinkers shared – *mutatis mutandis* – several important aspects, especially regarding their natural theory: one need only consider concepts such as

⁹ Although Goethe – as an eminent Enlightenment thinker – favoured an imagination adhering to the rules of reason, as a good and literally objective scientist, he fully acknowledged the existence of other nuances of imagination as well, certainly less enlightening, but no less human. Cf. Willoughby 1962, 11.

¹⁰ Alongside the Bible and Plato’s works, Goethe counted Aristotle’s works among the three «main masses [from the old world] which have produced the greatest, most decisive, and often even an exclusive effect [on the culture of science]» (FA I.23/1, 616). Although Goethe generally acknowledged Aristotle’s authority and the weight of his long tradition, he devoted himself primarily to the study of Aristotle’s *Poetics* and *De Coloribus* (pseudo-Aristotelian, generally attributed to Theophrastus), but he also demonstrably engaged with *De Sensu et sensibilibus*, *De Anima*, *De Somniis*, *Meteorologica* and *Physiognomica* [cf. Manasse 1972, 28–29]. For a detailed overview of Goethe’s position on Aristotle cf. Grumach 1949, 769–790.

actuality and potentiality (which come into play in the developmental process of organisms), the hierarchical classification of beings as well as analogy as a means of investigating the natural world [cf. Schlechta 1938, 76].¹¹ Moreover, we argue that another central point of convergence between the two lies in the absolute indissolubility in reality (yet not formally) of soul and body (*Leib*), which gives rise to a form of life (*Seele/Daimon*) capable of praxis and ethics [cf. Stekeler-Weithofer 2010, 212-222; cf. CW 1 230-233]. On these grounds, we would like to examine Aristotle's *De Anima* in order to show how Aristotle's conceptualization of imagination eminently illuminates Goethe's own understanding of it [cf. Schlechta 1938, 90-92].

According to Aristotle, imagination (*phantasia*) is «that in virtue of which an image (*phantasma*) arises for us» [Aristotle 1984, 680; *De An.* 428a2]. By linking it to the perceptive soul, i.e. to corporeal sensibility and, particularly, to the sense of sight, Aristotle further asserts that:

imagination must be a *movement* resulting from an actual exercise of a power of sense. As sight is the most highly developed sense, the name *phantasia* (imagination) has been formed from *phaos* (light) because it is not possible to see without light. And because imaginations remain in the organs of sense and resemble sensations, animals in their actions are largely guided by them, some (i.e. the brutes) because of the non-existence in them of thought, others (i.e. men) because of the temporary eclipse in them of thought by feeling or disease or sleep [*ibid.*, 682; italics mine].

By virtue of this definition, three important considerations can be made. First and foremost, the fact that Aristotle conceived of imagination as a form of *movement* and further associated it with the sense of sight explains both its intrinsic dynamism and its capacity to project scenarios into potential times and places – that is, into the realm of

¹¹ As far as Schlechta's work is concerned, Manasse argues that although the author identifies plausible and significant similarities between Goethe and Aristotle, he entirely disregards Plato's influence on Goethe. Moreover, Manasse rightly underlines that Goethe did not derive his concept of *entelechy* from Aristotle, but from Leibniz [cf. Manasse 1972, 50-51]. Nevertheless, this does not detract from the fact that these affinities persist and reflect a partially shared approach to science based on «analytical insight and method» [Goethe 1998, 89].

possibility. Secondly, the etymological derivation that links imagination with light, thus emphasizing its visual nature, evokes the following lines by Goethe, written on the assumption that the eye is capable of perceiving light – and thus of seeing, both physically and fantastically – just because it is «sonnenhaft» («sunny»): «If the eye were not sunny, / how could we perceive light?» [Goethe 1970, LIII]. Thirdly, Aristotle insisted on the distinction between imagination and thought (*to noein*), arguing that, in human beings, imagination can only unfold its true potential when it is not being governed by the higher faculty of thought.

Although Aristotle classified imagination as a faculty inferior to intellect, this should not lead us to assume that he regarded it as entirely unreliable, fallacious or devoid of any cognitive value. On the contrary, as Zucca clarifies, *phantasia* plays an essential role in the constitution and composition of our own experience of the world: «without imagination there could be no synthesis of one's perceptions over time, no awareness of perceptual change, and no recognitive use of the perceptions themselves» [Zucca 2015, 232]. Moreover, Zucca has demonstrated that the fundamental principle Aristotle drew upon in the description of the origin and activity of imagination is the resemblance between a movement and the movement from which it originates: indeed, perception involves the reception of a sensible form without matter (*aisthema*), whereas imagination (*phantasia*) originates on the retention of that form once the sensible stimulus is over, which is specifically referred to as a *phantasma*. While the *phantasma* no longer constitutes perception, it nonetheless shares a resemblance with the perceptual movement in so far as it originated from it [cf. *ibid.*, 224]. It thus becomes clear that the relationship between *aisthema* and *phantasma* is neither one of pure identity nor of absolute difference – rather, it is a relationship of similarity within difference, in which certain formal relations (in the manner of an imprint – cf. *ibid.*, 237) are preserved so that the likeness still remains recognizable. Essentially, what we are dealing with here is an analogical process in its own right. It is self-evident that, despite differing from strictly logical reasoning, analogical thinking does not stand in opposition to it. On the contrary, in Aristotle, analogical thinking constitutes the very foundation of intellection and thought. In fact, the human intellect can conceive of something only by reactivating a perceptual image, i.e. a *phantasma*, which links the concept to one of its

possible individual instances [cf. Zucca 2015, 249]. In other words, it is only through imagination that the intellect can gather perceptive content. This implies that imagination underlies not only the constitution of our seemingly continuous experience through the synthesis of various *aisthemata*, but also intellection itself.

Against this Aristotelian background – where imagination is conceived as an *analogical movement* primarily rooted in the corporeal-perceptual sphere, which not only shapes our experience of the world, but also underpins the constructions of concepts – the earlier passage concerning Goethe's spectre – or rather *phantasma* – of the *Urpflanze* should now appear far from illogical or a-logical, but rather thoroughly analogical. The only difference is that, whereas for Aristotle the concepts of the intellect stand at the top of the epistemological hierarchy, in Goethe we can already see the clear signs of a shift toward a horizontal epistemology, which, by revaluing sensibility and imagination, grants them a central rather than merely secondary role in matters of knowledge. Only from this perspective can one fully grasp and appreciate what has been defined as «a turning point in [Goethe's] morphological construction of nature» [Pulvirenti *et al.* 2022]: namely, his theorizing – in the aforementioned letter to Knebel, dated 21st February 1821 – of the concept of a 'discerning imagination' (*umsichtige Einbildungskraft*), which Goethe presents as essentially analogical as well as complementary to the intellect and the language:

Furthermore, we may also assume a *discerning* imagination which casts its gaze about during someone's exposition, seizing upon what is alike and akin in order to confirm what has been exposed.

Thus appears the desirable value of analogy, which transposes the mind to many related points, so that its activity might reunite all that belongs together, all that resonates in harmony. (FA II.9, 152)

At this point, it is not surprising that Goethe's epistemological method, as he expounds it in the following letter to Herder from Italy, perfectly corresponds to Goethe's definition of analogy as a mediating figure that «not only can link qualitative properties, but also establish formal rela-

tions between different things and structures» [Goeth 2023, 6] and that thus «brings distant things into immediate proximity» [*ibid.*, 19]:

Rome, December 29th [and 30th], 1786

[...] *The ability to discern similar relationships – even when they are far off from one another* – and to trace the genesis of things is also extraordinarily helpful to me here. And if I had the time to truly envision all works of art and then compare them with one another, I believe I could contribute something valuable to the history of art, even without possessing great erudition. (FA II.3, 203; italics mine)

These lines stress once more the essential connection between looking, imagination, and analogy – in terms of the phantasmatic-imaginative institution of formal relationships of likeness within difference – underpinning Goethe's epistemology.

Goethe, for that matter, always expressed interest in and appreciation for the analogical method, an approach he most likely adopted through his engagement with Herder¹² [cf. Pörksen 1981, 287; Goeth 2023, 12-13; Sbarra 2025, 68], as well as in contrast to Kant's «formalism without any genesis of forms» [Franzini 2025, 44; cf. Vassányi 2011, 354]: «There is nothing wrong with thinking by analogy; analogies have the virtue of not concluding and not aiming for ultimate answers» (CW 10, 303), comments Goethe in one of his insightful maxims. The consequences of all this for the whole framework of Goethean morphology cannot be overlooked. Indeed, it is only against this background – characterized specifically by a phantasmatic mediated search for a unifying (as well as epistemologically sound) analogy between living beings, while preserving their diversity – that the ample scope of Goethe's morphological studies becomes visible. Though he does not abandon the solidity of conceptual thought nor the necessity of logic, Goethe essentially seeks to study and explore, through the *movement* of analogy, the eternal metamorphosis of the world, just as if it were a «moving image» [Franzini 2025, 46].

¹² Cf. Irmscher 1981, esp. 65 for Herder's use of analogy as an instrument of discovery of new realms of knowledge.

3. On the Relationship between *Weltgeist* and *Weltseele*: Goethe's poem *Eins und Alles* as Epitome of Goethe's Poetic-Scientific Philosophy

The poem *Eins und Alles* (*One and All*)¹³ was composed by Goethe in Jena on 6th October 1821. It was first published in 1823 as an advance publication in the journal *Morgenblatt für gebildete Stände* and appeared in the same year also in Goethe's scientific journal *Zur Naturwissenschaft überhaupt*. Eventually, just like *Parabase*, *Eins und Alles* was included in the group of poems *Gott und Welt* (1827) (cf. FA I.2, 1084) and must therefore be regarded as a philosophical poem as well.¹⁴ Its title is already eloquent enough in his full-voiced evocation of the ancient pantheistic formula *Ἐν καὶ Πᾶν* (*hen kai pan*), which not only was particularly dear to the Neoplatonic tradition, but in the 18th century served also explicitly as «the slogan of Spinozist pantheism» (*ibid.*). By the time Goethe wrote down the poem however, the formulation was already being reinterpreted due to the influence of idealist philosophy, especially that of Schelling (cf. *ibid.*).

While it is essential to listen carefully to the voices (i.e. the lives) of the concepts that animate the poem and resound through the veil of its words, it is still not feasible in this context – if ever – to follow and trace all these echoes. For this reason, particular attention will be devoted to the poem's second stanza, which, even on its own, opens to literally cosmic spaces. While some may challenge my approach on the grounds that the interpretation of one single stanza of a poem can hardly be representative of the poem as a whole, I nonetheless argue that the reading of the stanza we shall attempt is, in fact, emblematic of Goethe's posture as a philosopher *tout court*, insofar as it exemplifies the modalities of his authentic pursuit of knowledge in its highest and truest form, *sophia*.

As a matter of fact, *Eins und Alles* stands out in many ways as a particularly significant piece in Goethe's oeuvre. First of all, it has an important relationship of specular opposition and continuity with the

¹³ The full text of the poem – both in the German original and in English translation – can be found in the appendix to this paper.

¹⁴ Cf. Mayer 2004, 443, where the author refers explicitly to the poem *Eins und Alles* as a text on natural philosophy.

prominent poem *Vermächtnis* (*Testament*), which Goethe wrote in 1829, published in the second edition of *Wilhelm Meister's Journeyman Years* (1829), placing it at the conclusion of the collection of maxims *Reflections in the Spirit of the Wanderers*, and in which he took up – while inverting their meaning – the final three verses of *Eins und Alles* (cf. FA I.10, 585-586).¹⁵ Secondly, Goethe himself – in a letter to Riemer dated 28th October 1821 (written only a few weeks after composing *Eins und Alles* and therefore with particular relevance to it) – attributed to his own *Naturgedichte* ('poems of nature') a true poetic character, in that he considered them to be «gifts and graces of the moment, which, after a long preparation, ultimately appear by chance and unbidden» (FA II.9, 215). In the same remarkable letter, Goethe further argues that:

These stanzas perhaps contain and manifest the most abstruse elements of modern philosophy. I am almost led to believe that it is perhaps only poetry that may succeed in expressing – however partially – such mysteries, which in prose usually appear absurd, for they can only be conveyed through contradictions that cannot be grasped by common reason. (*ibid.*)

The peculiar virtue of poetry, as opposed to the logic of the intellect, lies precisely in its inherently analogical character, i.e. in its capacity to initiate a *movement* that transcends the (still indispensable) boundaries of conceptual thought and leads from the known to the yet unknown, thus opening up new horizons in life, science and knowledge. Only on these premises can one fully understand in what sense Goethe could confide to Eckermann to have sought to express an *idea* in some brief poems of his, such as *The Metamorphosis of Plants* and *The Metamorphosis of Animals* [cf. Goethe 1984, 166-167], which alongside *Eins und Alles* belong to the group *Gott und Welt*. Indeed, Goethe's notion of 'idea' (*Idee*) must not be confused with that of 'concept' (*Begriff*). While the former, though equally abstract, attempts to render a dynamic and articulated movement, the latter is self-contained and therefore easily put into language. This is why, in Goethe, ideas are an integral part of a poetic-symbolic process, by means of which «an object of perception (*Erscheinung*) [is transformed]

¹⁵ In the present work, we will not be able to address this important poetic constellation. For a reading broadly in line with the arguments presented in this work as well as for further bibliographical references, cf. Sorg 2004, 477-478.

into an idea, the idea into an image, [but] in such a way that the idea always remains infinitely operative and unattainable so that even if it is put into words in all languages, it still remains inexpressible» [Goethe 1998, 141]. Essentially, a true symbol cannot do without the knowledge encapsulated within the clear and distinct boundaries of concepts but must always analogically-phantasmatically transcend them; in its particularity, it always aims to represent a universal movement and act «as a live and immediate revelation of the unfathomable» [*ibid.*, 37]. In other words, Goethe understands poetry essentially as a living symbolic body, perpetually coming into being and revealing itself. As Franzini has put it, «poetry [...] finds its original meaning in the symbol, in the symbolization of the world: for it is here that we witness the rejection of both unified and abstract positions, as well as perspectives – such as Hegelian dialectics – that aim at a logical reconciliation of difference» [Franzini 2025, 50].¹⁶

Thirdly, it is precisely in light of this phantasmatic-symbolic perspective that the peculiar juxtaposition of *Weltseele* (world soul) and *Weltgeist* (world spirit) in the poem's second stanza arouses particular interest. If it is true that (poetic) symbolism is an analogical movement that can make a lively, vivid, resonant image – the very phantasmatic body of poetry – out of an abstract concept, then neither *Weltseele* nor *Weltgeist* can be treated as mere distinct, self-contained concepts set in mutual opposition. Let us read the poem's second stanza, listen to its voices and see.

Weltseele komm uns zu durchdringen!
 Dann mit dem Weltgeist selbst zu ringen
 Wird unsrer Kräfte Hochberuf.
 Teilnehmend führen gute Geister,
 Gelinde leitend, höchste Meister,
 Zu dem der alles schafft und schuf.
 (FA I.2, 494)

¹⁶ In his *Introduction to Propylaea* (1798), Goethe articulates explicitly the interrelation between concept and idea, and, in turn, the interrelation between idea and the analogical method in the practice of art: «Accurate knowledge of the individual parts of the human body and the ability ultimately to perceive them as a whole are of the greatest advantage to the artist. He will also find it most useful to take note generally and specifically of related objects, assuming he is capable of conceptualizing and grasping the close relationship of seemingly dissimilar things» (CW 3, 82).

Soul of the world, soak into us, descend,
 Then with the very *Weltgeist* to contend
 Our finest faculties contract;
 Spirits benign will guide and sympathize,
 Sublimest masters gently ways devise
 To the perpetual Creative Act.
 (CW 1, 243)

On a purely denotative level, in this stanza the lyrical I (which is actually a plural 'I', thus a 'we', thereby attempting to involve the reader in the poetic experience) [cf. Mayer 2004, 438-439], invokes the *Weltseele*, the soul of the world, asking it to permeate them so they may then be able to grapple («ringen») with the *Weltgeist*, the spirit of the world. The confrontation with the *Weltgeist* is said to be the highest vocation of us human beings, who – along Spinozist lines – should be constantly striving after higher goals of knowledge [cf. Nadler 2001, 115-123]. In this pursuit of ever higher stages of knowledge however, we do not stand alone, for there are good spirits and eminent masters who guide us towards the One who creates and has created all things.

Accordingly, Hölscher-Lohmeyer interpreted the stanza as describing an ascensional cognitive-existential journey in stages: life is first infused into us by *Weltseele*; subsequently, we, as living beings filled with the soul of the world, are drawn to pit ourselves against the *Weltgeist*; and finally, after attaining true knowledge, we can attain the intellection of the first principle, the source of all creation, realizing only eventually that *Weltseele* and *Weltgeist* are two sides of the same creative force [Hölscher-Lohmeyer 1982, 28-29]. As we can see, Hölscher-Lohmeyer exposed a persuasive conceptual reading of the stanza, essentially grounded in the terminological-oppositive distinction between *Weltseele* and *Weltgeist*.

Let us now examine both these concepts more closely, beginning with *Weltgeist*. According to Adorno, who specifically referred to Kant and the German Idealist philosophy, the concept of *Geist* encompasses both the more ordering and analytical moment of *Verstand* ('intellect') and the superordinate, self-reflective moment of *Vernunft* ('reason') [cf. Adorno 1974, 109-113 and 126-128]. However, as Adorno pointed out, such a distinction does not derive from the concept of *Geist*

itself but can only be drawn on the basis of the object which the *Geist*, seen as a single faculty (*Vermögen*), relates itself to, i.e. on the basis of its purpose and application [cf. *ibid.*, 127]. Kondylis, too, emphasized the historically and diachronically evident polysemy of the concept of *Geist*, which the Enlightenment was compelled to confront and which in its superordinate sense corresponded to God himself [cf. Kondylis 2002, 9-19]. The polysemic entanglement becomes even more complex because during the Latin Middle Ages the highest human faculty was often referred to as *mens* ('mind') [cf. *ibid.*, 12], which, in the early modern period, was taken up again by Spinoza in his *Ethics* (1677) to denote the inherent and necessitating intellect of God or Nature, in which the mind of every single human being also participates [cf. Spinoza 2002, 228-229 and 243-277].

Against this background and in light of the notable influence Spinoza exerted on Goethe,¹⁷ it is more than plausible that the Goethean conception of *Weltgeist* may have been affected by Spinoza's conception of *mens*. As Goethe himself clarified in a letter to Jacobi dated 21st October 1785, while he did not entirely share Spinoza's conception of nature, it was nevertheless the one that came closest to his own (cf. FA II.2, 603). However, it should not be forgotten that Goethe's conception of Spinoza was mediated and deeply influenced by Herder. As Barbera indicated, the idea of God-Necessity that Herder derived from Spinoza, although he reshaped it in a distinct manner in his *God. Some Conversations* (1787), was, on the one hand, linked to the notion of the internal necessity of nature, and, on the other, situated within the framework of a theory of conflicting and progressively harmonizing forces, in which God was held to be the *Urkraft* ('primordial force') [cf. Barbera 1989, 18]. While this marked a significant revision of Spinoza's conception, his legacy, in terms of immanence, internal finality and necessity [cf. Rehbock 1990, 144-145], lived on in Goethe, who – we contend – *mutatis mutandis*, also embraced Spinoza's notion of *aeternitas mentis* ('eternity of the mind'). By *aeternitas mentis* Spinoza essentially meant

¹⁷ As a fundamental text on Goethe's reception of Spinoza, cf. Bollacher 1969. Cf. also Lange 2011, where the author examines the quality of Goethe's Spinozism and assesses its highly distinctive role as a bridge for Spinoza's influence on the exponents of German Idealism.

that the human mind – once it has successfully managed to know God adequately, i.e. intuitively – must survive corporeal death, because by attaining the highest epistemic truth it cannot but be regarded in its eternal necessity as *sub specie aeternitatis* ('under the aspect of eternity') [cf. Spinoza 2002, 374]. While Spinoza's notion of *aeternitas mentis* has a few intricate implications that cannot be explored in this context [cf. Nadler 2001], it nonetheless constitutes a sufficiently solid conceptual foundation that perfectly resonates with Goethe's idea of the eternity of the spirit (*Geist*), as he expressed it for instance in a conversation with Eckermann upon witnessing the sunset:

«At seventy-five,» he continued, with much cheerfulness, «one must of course think sometimes of death. But this thought never gives me uneasiness; for I am convinced that our spirit (*Geist*) is indestructible, and that its activity continues from eternity to eternity. It is like the sun, which seems to set only to our earthly eyes, but which in reality never sets but shines on unceasingly.» [Goethe 1984, 49]

With regard to the Goethean concept of *Weltseele*,¹⁸ while there is broad consensus today that it cannot be assessed adequately if one disregards any Schellingian influence (cf. FA I.2, 1079), for decades scholars have been debating the nature of the particular relationship between the two philosophers. As Trunz made clear regarding the genesis of Goethe's cosmological poem *Weltseele*, the poet most likely composed it around 1800, during a period of particularly intense relations with the Jena circle around Schelling and Steffens; moreover, Goethe read all Schelling's works on the philosophy of nature published in those years, among which *Ideas for a Philosophy of Nature* (1797) and *On the World Soul* (1798), engaging even in discussions with Schelling on pertinent topics [cf. Goethe 1993, 647]. On these grounds, earlier criticism generally tended to absolutize Schelling's influence on Goethe [cf. Jäckle 1937]. In 1981, however, Pörksen tried to relativize the relationship between Goethe and Schelling. In her view, while Goethe found

¹⁸ The term *Weltseele* occurs three times within Goethe's oeuvre: first, as the title of the eponymous poem *Weltseele*; second, in Goethe's essay on meteorology *Towards a Theory of Weather (Versuch einer Witterungslehre, 1825)*; and third, in *Eins und Alles*. For an extensive reconstruction of the complex development of the term *Weltseele* from its origins, yet with particular attention to the German context, cf. Vassányi 2011.

in Schelling's philosophy of nature fundamental concepts that could illuminate his own conception of nature, he nonetheless perceived in Schelling's philosophical language an indiscriminate abuse of symbolism in disregard of any conceptual adequacy [cf. Pörksen 1981, 294; 297-298]. Along the same lines, in 1985 Hölscher-Lohmeyer insisted on the substantial autonomy of both the term *Weltseele* itself and the genesis of the eponymous poem, arguing that neither was subject to any compelling influence from Schelling [cf. Hölscher-Lohmeyer 1985]. By contrast, in 1995, while appreciating the previous work of recontextualization, Adler nonetheless decided to argue for a profound and highly fruitful mutual influence, «whereby Schelling took up Goethe's Spinozism, and Goethe, in turn, lyrically elaborated the epistemological consequences of this mode of thought» [Adler 1995, 159].

On these grounds, we may conclude that between Goethe and Schelling – despite each maintaining distinct and never fully overlapping positions – there existed an exchange that mutually nourished and influenced each other. Considering also that the two collaborated on a project that was meant to result in a didactic poem on nature [*ibid.*, 151], it is not difficult to assume that their cosmological positions must have been, to a considerable extent, closely aligned. As a result, Schelling's conception of *Weltseele* could provide us with valuable insight into Goethe's own conception of it. Proceeding chronologically, in the introduction to his *Ideas for a Philosophy of Nature*, Schelling, explicitly referring to the *Weltseele* of the ancients, defines it simply as an «animating principle», which pervades the whole nature and produces a «hierarchy of life» [Schelling 1988, 35]. A little further down, Schelling writes that «*Mind*, considered as the principle of life, is called *soul*» [*ibid.*, 38]. Finally, turning to the treaty *On the World Soul*, Schelling provides one further definition: «These two conflicting forces [one expansive, the other contracting], when considered in unity or presented in conflict, lead to the idea of an *organizing principle* that forms the world into a *system*. Perhaps the ancients sought to hint at such a principle through the *Weltseele*» [Schelling 2000, 77]. Essentially, Schelling conceived of nature as an organized system of forces, one positive and expansive, the other negative and contracting, whose tensive interplay constituted the one and only formative principle of the world.

As it appears, Schelling drew no substantial distinction between *Weltseele* and *Weltgeist* – in other words, the Mind or the Spirit of the World animated the world as much as the Soul of the World formed and organized it. Moreover, even in Spinoza's *Ethics*, in which the term *Seele* appears only once as a criticism of the human superstition about the soul's immortality, there nonetheless occurs the formulation (in the Scholium to Proposition 13, Part 2) that all beings are animated, thereby presupposing – like Schelling – a hierarchy of life [cf. Spinoza 2002, 251]. As Renz argues, Spinoza's panpsychism does entail an all-encompassing animation of all individual entities, albeit in a graduated fashion. This seems to suggest that each individual possesses a different degree of intelligibility and, consequently, a different level of participation in life, that is in terms of life's experiential accessibility [cf. Renz 2010, 198-203]. As it becomes clear, even the notion of *Weltgeist*, which, in Goethe, is of distinctly Spinozist heritage, is not free of internal contradictions.

We can now return to the second stanza of *Eins und Alles*, which we had temporarily set aside, leaving the question unasked of how the concepts of *Weltseele* and *Weltgeist* relate to one another. As we have seen, Hölscher-Lohmeyer's reading remains confined to the pure denotative level, strictly following the distinctions of language and relying fully on the semantic certainty of the terms *Weltseele* and *Weltgeist*, which, however, are by no means univocal concepts, neither for Schelling nor for Goethe. For his part, Hisayama, the most recent voice to have joined the discussion, recognized that, although the oppositional logic of *Weltseele* and *Weltgeist*, culminating in the final reconciliation of the opposites, may function on a purely denotative level, it proves entirely inadequate on the symbolic level that *Eins und Alles* seeks to achieve [cf. Hisayama 2018, 39]. Although he acknowledged that both terms should be read symbolically, he eventually failed to draw the consequences from this insight [cf. *ibid.*, 46].

Let us try an alternative reading that better corresponds to Goethe's own epistemological claims, one that, consequently, treats *Weltseele* and *Weltgeist* not as rigid and petrified concepts, but as moments of a plastic, phantasmatic idea, of a truly poetic living symbol. Instead of remaining mere spectators, let us immerse ourselves

in the becoming, phantasmatic space of the poem and ourselves give voice to that initial vocative. Thereby, it will no longer be a mere invocation to the soul of the world, asking for its presence and closeness, but rather the very emergence of life coming into being, i.e. the very original act of poetry, which cannot occur but through a calling, a naming.¹⁹ In other words, that invocation corresponds to the very attempt to express the concept of *Weltseele* symbolically by bringing it to life. Once we have pronounced that poetic invocation and thus entered the phantasmatic space of the poem, we will see that the boundaries between things are not absolutely defined (as empirical observation makes us believe) but plastic, permeable and variable, which is why things will appear to us «more similar than different» (CW 6, 214).²⁰ Permeated by the animating flow of the *Weltseele*, we will further acknowledge that the *Weltseele* did not just give things life, but also a form, a metamorphic one, and therefore cannot be absolutely distinguished from the *Weltgeist*, which, in a Spinozist sense, stands for the immanent, formally normative cause of our existence. As a matter of fact, our phantasmatic visual experience disproves the absolute conceptual distinction and complete opposition of the two terms.

Without yielding in the slightest to ambitions that would erase all distinctions – as this would strip Goethean epistemology of all meaning – it can be concluded that the ultimate purpose of Goethe's symbolism is to highlight the inter-relations and the inter-actions between things beyond the clear boundaries of concepts. Against this background, the relationship between *Weltseele* and *Weltgeist* cannot be reduced to them being two opposite sides of a single principle. Rather, the phantasmatic vision allows us to focus on their

¹⁹ For the meaning and function of the vocative as well as its use in poetry, cf. Agamben 2023, 11-28, especially 19.

²⁰ The inherent unity of things, made possible by the adoption of a phantasmatic gaze, recalls what Gadamer calls the *Familienähnlichkeit* ('family likeness') of Heraclitean gnomic sentences, in which apparent paradoxes and oppositions are overcome by hinting at the fact that every concept contains its opposite within itself [cf. Gadamer 1999, 60]. It is no coincidence, in fact, that Grumach includes the poem *Eins und Alles* (specifically, its last two stanzas) among the traces of Heraclitus's influence on Goethe [cf. Grumach 1949, 744].

interdependent relationship, which appears to be eminently dialectical. As such, *Weltseele* and *Weltgeist* can be said to symbolize the two moments whose interaction enact the articulation of life, essentially understood as a movement of self-differentiation [cf. Gadamer 1999, 92; cf. Kondylis 2002, 271]. As a result, what it all boils down to is by no means mere opposition, but rather (conflicting) dialogue, interaction, and rhythm. As Goethe clearly states in a diary entry dated 17th May 1808, the articulation of the *Weltgeist* entails two interdependent moments, producing a rhythm in which the expansive, generative, emergent moment of the *Weltseele* alternates and interacts with the contracting, specifying moment of the *Weltgeist*, in a movement that is eminently dialectical and – this must be firmly emphasized – never merely oppositional: «On metamorphosis and its meaning; systole and diastole of the *Weltgeist*, from the former arises specification, from the latter the progression into the infinite» (FA II.6, 306). *That* is «the real pulse of life» (CW 4, 262).

While to express this articulation, two different words or concepts are needed – one that hints at the primordial expansive origin (*Weltseele*), the other at its contracting articulation (*Weltgeist*) – thanks to their proximity within the poetic space (the two terms occur, in fact, in consecutive lines), they can easily transcend the firm boundaries of their linguistic form and, by virtue of their symbolic-phantasmatic nature, overflow and thus inter-relate again. As Goethe himself put it: «[A]ll things are interrelated, and what after all is life but these interrelations?» [Goethe 1957, 500].

Appendix

Eins und Alles

Im Grenzenlosen sich zu finden
Wird gern der Einzelne verschwinden,
Da löst sich aller Überdruß;
Statt heißem Wünschen, wildem Wollen,
Statt läst'gem Fordern, strengem Sollen,
Sich aufzugeben ist Genuß.

Weltseele komm uns zu durchdringen!
Dann mit dem Weltgeist selbst zu ringen
Wird unsrer Kräfte Hochberuf.
Teilnehmend führen gute Geister,
Gelinde leitend, höchste Meister,
Zu dem der alles schafft und schuf.

Und umzuschaffen das Geschaffne,
Damit sich's nicht zum Starren waffne,
Wirkt ewiges, lebendiges Tun.
Und was nicht war, nun will es werden,
Zu reinen Sonnen, farbigen Erden,
In Keinem Falle darf es ruhen.

Es soll sich regen, schaffend handeln,
Erst sich gestalten, dann verwandeln;
Nur scheinbar steht's Momente still.
Das Ewige regt sich fort in allen:
Denn alles muß in Nichts zerfallen,
Wenn es im Sein beharren will.

(FA I.2, 494-495)

One and All

In boundlessness, itself discovering there,
The singular would gladly disappear,
Satiety is then absolved quite;
Ardent wishing, savage will abate,
Strict obligation, coping, ah, with Fate:
In self-abandon is delight.

Soul of the world, soak into us, descend,
Then with the very *Weltgeist* to contend
Our finest faculties contract;
Spirits benign will guide and sympathize,
Sublimest masters gently ways devise
To the perpetual Creative Act.

And with effect to make creation new,
Its weaponed rigour soon enough undo,
Action eternal, vivid, rose;
And what was not, now wishes to unfold,
Become unsullied suns, a coloured world;
No circumstance permits repose.

It has to move, to be creating deed,
First make its form, then, changing it, proceed;
All stopping, short-illusion's twist.
For the Eternal onward moves in all,
And into nothing everything must fall,
If it in being would persist.

(CW 1, 241 and 243)

References

- Adler, J. [1995], Schellings Philosophie und Goethes weltanschauliche Lyrik, in: *Goethe-Jahrbuch* 112, 149-165.
- Adorno, T.W. [1973], *Philosophische Terminologie*, Band 1, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp.
- Adorno, T.W. [1974], *Philosophische Terminologie*, Band 2, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp.
- Agamben, G. [2023], *La voce umana*, Macerata, Quodlibet.
- Aristotle [1984], *The Complete Works*, Vol. 1, ed. J. Barnes, Princeton (New Jersey), Princeton University Press.
- Barbera, S. [1989], *Goethe e il disordine. Una filosofia dell'immaginazione*, Venezia, Marsilio.
- Bell, M. [1994], *Goethe's Naturalistic Anthropology. Man and Other Plants*, Oxford, Clarendon Press.
- Bollacher, M. [1969], *Der junge Goethe und Spinoza: Studien zur Geschichte des Spinozismus in der Epoche des Sturms und Drangs*, Tübingen, Niemeyer.
- Costazza, A. [2007], Alla ricerca dell'"essentia formalis" in "rebus singularibus": il metodo scientifico di Goethe tra "scientia intuitiva" e contemplazione estetica, in: G. Lacchin (ed.), *Johann Wolfgang Goethe. Evoluzione e forma*, Seregno (Milano), Herrenhaus, 33-51.
- Crescenzi, L. [1996], *Antropologia e poetica della fantasia. Per una genealogia della narrativa fantastica nel romanticismo berlinese*, Fasano (BR), Schena editore.
- Detering, H. [2020], *Menschen im Weltgarten: Die Entdeckung der Ökologie in der Literatur von Haller bis Humboldt*, Göttingen, Wallstein Verlag.
- Franzini, E. [2025], Goethe e l'estetica del Settecento europeo, in: E. Agazzi (ed.), *Goethe, Herder e la cultura italiana nell'Illuminismo europeo*, Milano, FrancoAngeli, 41-51.
- Gadamer, H. [1999], *Der Anfang des Wissens*, Stuttgart, Reclam.
- Goeth, S. M. T. [2023], *Analogie zwischen Wissenschaft und Ästhetik. Eine Vermittlungsfigur der Moderne bei Kant, Novalis und Goethe*, Berlin/Boston, De Gruyter.
- Goethe, J. W. [1957], *Letters from Goethe*, transl. M. v. Herzfeld, C.A.M. Sym, New York, Thomas Nelson & Sons.
- Goethe, J. W. [1970], *Theory of colours*, ed. and transl. C.L. Eastlake, Cambridge (MA) /London, M.I.T. Press.
- Goethe, J. W. [1976], *Tagebuch der italienischen Reise 1786. Notizen und Briefe aus Italien mit Skizzen und Zeichnungen des Autors*, ed. C. Michel, Berlin, Insel Verlag.

- Goethe, J. W. [1983-1989]: *Goethe. The Collected Works*, New York, Suhrkamp (CW):
- [1983], *Selected Poems*, Vol. 1, ed. C. Middleton, transl. M. Hamburger, D. Luke, C. Middleton, J. F. Nims and V. Watkins;
- [1986], *Essays on Art and Literature*, Vol. 3, ed. J. Gearey, transl. E. v. Nardroff, E. H. v. Nardroff;
- [1987], *From My Life. Poetry and Truth. Parts One to Three*, Vol. 4, ed. T.P. Sain, J.L. Sammons, transl. R.R. Heitner;
- [1989], *Italian Journey*, Vol. 6, ed. T. P. Saine, J. L. Sammons, transl. R.R. Heitner;
- [1989], *Conversation of German Refugees. Wilhelm Meister's Journeyman Years*, Vol. 10, ed. J. K. Brown, transl. J. v. Heurck, K. Winston;
- Goethe, J. W. [1984], *Conversations with Eckermann (1823-1832)*, transl. J. Oxenford, San Francisco, North Point Press.
- Goethe, J. W. [1985-2013], *Sämtliche Werke. Briefe, Tagebücher und Gespräche*, 40 Bände (in 45), ed. Friedmar Apel et al., Frankfurt a.M. and Berlin, Deutscher Klassiker Verlag [FA]:
- [1988], *Gedichte 1800-1832*, I.2, ed. K. Eibl;
- [1989], *Wilhelm Meister Wanderjahre*, I.10, ed. G. Neumann, H-G. Dewitz;
- [1991], *Zur Farbenlehre*, I.23/1, ed. M. Wenzel;
- [1987], *Schriften zur Morphologie*, I.24, ed. Dorothea Kuhn;
- [1997], *Das erste Weimarer Jahrzehnt: Briefe, Tagebücher und Gespräche vom 7. November 1775 bis 2. September 1786*, II.2, ed. H. Reinhardt;
- [1991], *Italien. Im Schatten der Revolution. Briefe, Tagebücher und Gespräche vom 3. September 1786 bis 12. Juni 1794*, II.3, ed. K. Eibl;
- [1999], *Goethe mit Schiller. Briefe, Tagebücher und Gespräche vom 24. Juni 1794 bis zum 9. Mai 1805. Teil 2, vom 1. Januar 1800 bis zum 9. Mai 1805*, II.5, ed. V. C. Dörr, N. Oellers;
- [1993], *Napoleonische Zeit: Briefe, Tagebücher und Gespräche vom 10. Mai 1805 bis 6. Juni 1816. Teil 1, Von Schillers Tod bis 1811*, II.6, ed. R. Unterberger;
- [1999], *Zwischen Weimar und Jena. Einsam-tätiges Alter 2: Briefe, Tagebücher und Gespräche vom 6. Juni 1816 bis zum 26. Dezember 1822. Teil II, Vom 27. Oktober 1819 bis zum 26. Dezember 1822*, II.9, ed. D. Schäfer-Weiss;
- [1999], *Johann Peter Eckermann. Gespräche mit Goethe in den letzten Jahren seines Lebens*, II.12, ed. C. Michel, H. Grütters.
- Goethe, J. W. [1988], *Goethes Briefe und Briefe an Goethe*, Band III: 1805-1821, ed. B. Morawe, München, Verlag C. H. Beck³.

- Goethe, J. W. [1993], *Goethes Werke*, Band I: Gedichte und Epen, ed. E. Trunz, München, Verlag C. H. Beck¹⁵.
- Goethe, J. W. [1998], *Maxims and Reflections*, ed. P. Hutchinson, transl. E. Stopp, London, Penguin Books.
- Grumach, E. [1949], *Goethe und die Antike. Eine Sammlung*, Bd. 1, Berlin, Walter de Gruyter.
- Herrmann, H. P. (Red.) [2003], Art. Erich Trunz, in: C. König (ed.), *Internationales Germanistenlexikon 1800-1950*, Bd. 3: R – Z, Berlin/New York, Walter de Gruyter, 1909-1911.
- Hisayama, Y. [2018], Weltseele, Weltgeist und das Ungesagte in Goethes Altersgedicht »Eins und Alles«, in: *Goethe-Jahrbuch* 135, 39-46.
- Hölscher-Lohmeyer, D. [1982], Die Entwicklung des Goetheschen Naturdenkens im Spiegel seiner Lyrik – am Beispiel der Gedichte „Mailed“ – „Selige Sehnsucht“ – „Eins und Alles“, in: *Goethe-Jahrbuch* 99, 11-31.
- Hölscher-Lohmeyer, D. [1985], »Verteilet euch nach allen Regionen«. Über Goethes Weltseele, in: D. Borchmeyer, T. Heimeran (ed.), *Weimar am Pazifik. Literarische Wege zwischen den Kontinenten. Festschrift für Werner Vordtriede zum 70. Geburtstag*, Tübingen, Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1-13.
- Irmscher, H. D. [1981], Beobachtungen zur Funktion der Analogie im Denken Herders, in: *Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte* 55(1), 64-97.
- Jäckle, E. [1937], Goethes Morphologie und Schellings Weltseele, in: *Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte* 15, 295-330.
- Kondylis, P. [2002], *Die Aufklärung im Rahmen des neuzeitlichen Rationalismus*, Hamburg, Felix Meiner Verlag.
- Lange, H. [2011], Goethe and Spinoza: A Reconsideration, in: *Goethe Yearbook* 18, 11-33.
- Manasse, E. M. [1972], Goethe und die griechische Philosophie, in: H. Reiss (ed.): *Goethe und die Tradition*, Frankfurt am Main, Athenäum, 26-57.
- Mayer, M. [2004], Das lyrische Spätwerk. 1819-1832, in: B. Witte, T. Buck, H-D. Dahnke, R. Otto, P. Schmidt (eds.), *Goethe-Handbuch*, Bd. 1: Gedichte, Stuttgart/Weimar, Metzler, 436-449.
- Mosse, G. L. [1981], *The Crisis of German Ideology. Intellectual Origins of the Third Reich*, New York, Schocken Books.
- Müller-Seidel, W. [1990], Lyrik, Tragik und Individualität in Goethes später Dichtung, in: G. Buhr, F. A. Kittler, H. Turk (eds.), *Das Subjekt der Dichtung: Festschrift für Gerhard Kaiser*, Würzburg, Königshausen & Neumann, 497-518.
- Nadler, S. [2001], *Immortality and the Jewish Mind*, Oxford, Clarendon Press.

- Naumann-Beyer, W. [2000], Art. Anschauung, in: K. Barck, M. Fontius, D. Schlenstedt, B. Steinwachs, F. Wolfzettel (eds.), *Ästhetische Grundbegriffe (ÄGB). Historisches Wörterbuch in sieben Bänden*, Bd. 1: Absenz – Darstellung, Stuttgart-Weimar, Verlag J. B. Metzler, 208-246.
- Plato [1997], *Complete Works*, ed. J. M. Cooper and D. S. Hutchinson, Indianapolis/Cambridge, Hackett Publishing Company.
- Pörksen, U. [1981], Goethes Kritik naturwissenschaftlicher Metaphorik und der Roman »Die Wahlverwandtschaften«, in: *Jahrbuch der deutschen Schillergesellschaft* 25, 285-315.
- Poggi, S., [2000], *Il genio e l'unità della natura. La scienza della Germania romantica (1790-1830)*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 17-66 and 99-127.
- Pulvirenti, G., Gambino R. [2022], Einbildungskraft (Imagination), in: *Goethe-Lexicon of Philosophical Concepts* 3. DOI 10.5195/glpc.2022.59 (accessed July 15, 2025).
- Rehbock, P. F. [1990], Transcendental anatomy, in: A. Cunningham, N. Jardine (eds.), *Romanticism and the Sciences*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 144-160.
- Renz, U. [2010], *Die Erklärbarkeit von Erfahrung*, Frankfurt am Main, Vittorio Klostermann.
- Rössler, R. [2020], *Weltgebäude: Poetologien kosmologischen Wissens der Aufklärung*, Göttingen, Wallstein Verlag.
- Sbarra, S. [2025]: Le Idee per la filosofia della storia dell'umanità di Herder e il Faust di Goethe, in: E. Agazzi (ed.), *Goethe, Herder e la cultura italiana nell'Illuminismo europeo*, Milano, FrancoAngeli, 67-80.
- Schelling, F. W. J. [1988], *Ideas for a Philosophy of Nature as Introduction to the Study of This Science*, ed. R. Geuss, transl. E. Harris, P. Heath, Cambridge/New York/Melbourne, Cambridge University Press.
- Schelling, F. W. J. [2000], Werke 6, Von der Weltseele – eine Hypothese der höhern Physik zur Erklärung des allgemeinen Organismus (1798). Vorrede zur Uebersetzung (1798), ed. J. Jantzen, T. Kisserm, K.T. Kanz, W. Schieche, in: F. W. J. Schelling, *Historisch-kritische Ausgabe*, im Auftrag der Schelling-Kommission der Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, Reihe 1: Werke, ed. H. M. Baumgartner, W. G. Jacobs, J. Jantzen, H. Krings, Stuttgart, Frommann-Holzboog.
- Schlechta, K. [1938], *Goethe in seinem Verhältnis zu Aristoteles. Ein Versuch*, Frankfurt am Main, Vittorio Klostermann.
- Schulte-Sasse, J. [2010a], Art. Einbildungskraft/Imagination, in: K. Barck, M. Fontius, D. Schlenstedt, B. Steinwachs, F. Wolfzettel (eds.), *Ästhetische Grundbegriffe (ÄGB). Historisches Wörterbuch in sieben Bänden*, Bd. 2: Dekadent – Grotesk, Stuttgart-Weimar, Verlag J. B. Metzler, 88-120.

- Schulte-Sasse, J. [2010b], Art. Phantasie, in: K. Barck, M. Fontius, D. Schlenstedt, B. Steinwachs, F. Wolfzettel (eds.), *Ästhetische Grundbegriffe (ÄGB). Historisches Wörterbuch in sieben Bänden*, Bd. 4: Medien – Populär, Stuttgart/Weimar, Verlag J. B. Metzler, 778-798.
- Sorg, B. (Red.) [2004], Eins und Alles, in: B. Witte, T. Buck, H-D. Dahnke, R. Otto, P. Schmidt (eds.), *Goethe-Handbuch*, Bd. 1: Gedichte, Stuttgart/Weimar, Metzler, 474-478.
- Spinoza, B. [2002], *Complete Works*, ed. M. L. Morgan, transl. S. Shirley, Indianapolis-Cambridge, Hackett Publishing Company.
- Stekeler-Weithofer, P. [2010], Über die Seele bei Platon, Aristoteles und Hegel, in: K. Crone, R. Schnepf, J. Stolzenberg (eds.), *Über die Seele*, Berlin, Suhrkamp, 210-230.
- Vassányi, M. [2011], *Anima Mundi. The Rise of the World Soul Theory in Modern German Philosophy*, Dordrecht/Heidelberg/London/New York, Springer.
- Wenzel, M. [1998], Art. Linné, Carl von, in: H-D. Dahnke, R. Otto (eds.), *Goethe-Handbuch. Personen, Sachen, Begriffe L-Z*, Band 4/2, Stuttgart/Weimar, Metzler, 666-668.
- Werner, C. [2024], Der Ort sinnlicher Vorstellungen in unserem Geist, in: S. Gregorio, G. Reuter, M. Vogel, C. Werner (eds.): *Geist und Imagination. Zur Bedeutung der Vorstellungskraft für Denken und Handeln*, Berlin, Suhrkamp, 9-42.
- Willoughby, L. A. [1962], The Living Goethe, in: E. M. Wilkinson, L. A. Willoughby (eds.): *Goethe. Poet and Thinker*, London, Edward Arnold, 9-19.
- Zucca, D. [2015], *L'anima del vivente. Vita, cognizione e azione nella psicologia aristotelica*, Brescia, Edizione Morcelliana.

Keywords

imagination; science; Goethe; *Weltseele*; *Weltgeist*

Abstract

The fact that Goethe – in his posture that is essentially philosophical (and, it must be stressed, not *weltanschaulich*) – employs analogy as cognitive method and tool in both the scientific and the poetic field, is by now widely and uncontroversially acknowledged in Goethean scholarship. Therefore, what this essay first aims to demonstrate, is not so much the functioning of the analogical process as it takes shape in Goethe, but rather its phantasmatic origin – that is, to show the consubstantiality of imagination (*phantasia*) and analogy. The objective is thus to situate more precisely

the role of imagination within Goethe's epistemological horizon, reaffirming the centrality of analogically operating imagination alongside conceptual logic. In the second and final part of the essay, the intention is to read Goethe's philosophical poem *Eins und Alles* (One and All) as an epitome of his philosophical posture. By superimposing different levels of reading – one logical-conceptual, the other symbolic-phantasmatic – of the poem's second stanza, which stages the alleged confrontation between *Weltseele* (world soul) and *Weltgeist* (world spirit), the essay seeks to put into practice the theory of Goethe's scientific approach and thereby assess its epistemological value within the poetic space.

Il fatto che Goethe – nella sua postura essenzialmente filosofica (e, va sottolineato, non *weltanschaulich*) – si avvalga dell'analogia come metodo e strumento conoscitivo privilegiato, tanto in ambito scientifico quanto in ambito poetico, gode oramai di ampio consenso nella critica goethiana. Per questo, l'obiettivo che ci si prefigge non è tanto quello di mostrare il funzionamento del processo analogico, quanto piuttosto di rinvenirne l'origine fantasmatica, vale a dire di dimostrare la coappartenenza di immaginazione (*phantasia*) e analogia. Si intende così collocare in modo più preciso il ruolo dell'immaginazione all'interno dell'orizzonte epistemologico di Goethe, ribadendone l'assoluta centralità accanto alla logica concettuale. Nella seconda e ultima parte del saggio ci si propone di leggere il componimento filosofico goethiano *Eins und Alles* (*Uno e Tutto*) come epitome della postura filosofica di Goethe. Sovrapponendo diversi livelli di lettura – l'uno logico-concettuale, l'altro simbolico-fantasmatico – della seconda strofa, in cui ha luogo il presunto scontro tra *Weltseele* (anima del mondo) e *Weltgeist* (spirito del mondo), si tenterà di mettere in pratica la teoria dell'approccio scientifico goethiano e di valutarne così il valore epistemologico all'interno dello spazio poetico.

Alessandro Niero

PhD candidate in Germanic and Slavic studies at Sapienza University of Rome, Italy, and at Charles University of Prague, Czech Republic

E-mail: alessandro.niero@uniroma1.it