

Goethe in Naples: A Morphology of *Ordered Chaos*

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If I did not take such interest in the things of Nature and see that there are ways of sorting out and comparing hundreds of observations despite their apparent confusion—as a surveyor checks many separate measurements with a single strait line—I should often think I was mad myself.

Goethe, *Italian Journey*¹

[The Italian] Baroque is not necessarily equivalent to “formlessness.” Rather it brings forth a different, perhaps deeper form—one, at least, from which nothing of the chaotic has been excluded (as it is has in classical art).

Ernst Bloch, “Italy and Porosity”²

The following discussion hinges on the premise that every description is riddled with errors, though some errors are the indispensable conduits of possible clarifications. This statement encapsulates the challenge a city presents even to the most attentive observer, as nothing is more difficult than describing the morphology of a city in a linear and systematic way, by expurgating chaos. An adequate description would involve the acknowledgment of a myriad of interconnected details, which together constitute a relational space not amenable to a unitary measure or to systematic differentiations.

The city presents complexity irreducible to a simple concatenation of causes and effects and produces conflicts that refute simple solutions. Even if we had the technological ability to quantify and qualify every single detail of a city, the “total” image would remain ambiguous. The city refutes transparency, but this does not make it impenetrable. Confusion is a form of initiation the city demands; it is the writer’s first challenge but also an inalienable dimension of the encounter with the city. The description of a city is essentially the description of an encounter.

Perhaps the greatest lesson a city teaches to the gifted visitor is this: while the city might preclude the form of “re-cognition” premised on the already known, it offers the opportunity to reposition and even unhinge the habitual frame of reference. The focus of this paper is to delineate the painstaking detours Goethe has to take to arrive at this deceptively simple conclusion—a conclusion he will never fully extricate. We will see how, through trials and errors, he gradually departs from a universal gaze exemplified by his theorization of the *Urpflanze* (the Primal Plant) and attempts to fix his lenses on more elusive and interstitial dimensions of the city.

¹ See J. W. Goethe, *Italian Journey [1786-1787]*, trans. W. H. Auden and Elizabeth Mayer (New York: Penguin Books, 1970), 309.

² See Ernst Bloch, “Italy and Porosity,” in *Literary Essays*, trans. Andrew Joron et al., ed. Werner Hamacher and David E. Wellbery (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 456.

Goethe's Method of Description

Goethe arrives in Naples in February 1787, departs for Sicily in March, and returns to Naples in May, where he stays until June. During this relatively brief sojourn, he composes a fascinating array of journal entries, which he will later gather in the legendary travelogue known as *Italienische Reise* (Italian Journey). Of the countless foreign descriptions of Southern Italy, Goethe's has long been considered canonical owing to the remarkable refinement he brings to his images. Nevertheless, his descriptions also exemplify problems inherent to all classifications, particularly those aimed at reducing complexity to simplicity. In retrospect at the end of his journal, Goethe admits to the ambiguity lurking at the margins of even his most precise descriptions. The following closing passage provides a sense of Goethe's troubled initiation into the realm of the enigma:

We wish to express our feeling in judgments and words, but before we can do that we must first recognize, by intuition and understanding, what we are looking at; so we begin to identify, classify, differentiate. But then we find that this, too, if not impossible, is very difficult, and in the end we return to a wordless beholding. (1970, 489)³

Every description must grapple with an elusive dimension of reality. Goethe understands how easily his own descriptive method can override its object, mold it into a presupposition, or force it to disappear. One of his most luminous intuitions is found in a page dedicated to Naples: "It is not perseverance I have to learn," he realizes, "so much as quickness of perception. Once I can get hold of a matter by its fingertips, listening and thinking will enable me to grasp the whole hand" (216). This quickening of perception will prove to be Naples's most valuable lesson: a sharpening of the peripheral vision that will attune the scientist-poet to resemblances and affinities that exceed simple categorizations. Though Goethe refutes purely quantitative descriptions, he still holds faith in the possibility of obtaining a total qualitative image. Naples, however, will not allow him to grasp "the whole hand"—it will continue to slip away. This suggests to the following thesis: an adequate description is one that does not sacrifice complexity to simplicity for the sake of creating a coherent image of reality.

No city ever reveals itself to a unified model of reality, no matter how complex and luminous this model might be. Such is the pivotal problem in Goethe's description of Naples. However, to appreciate the complexity of his encounter with Naples we need to consider the context motivating his visit, specifically two determinant factors on which I will soon elaborate: firstly, his scientific pursuits, consisting of a phenomenology of nature encompassing human and non-human phenomena and best exemplified by his theorization of the metamorphosis of the *Urpflanze* (the Primal Plant); secondly, his determination to break away from the *Sturm und Drang* literary movement and the Romantic hyper-subjectivism of his early work.

Goethe's personal crisis begins in 1775 at the age of twenty-six, following the publication

³ Auden and Mayer translate the sentence "zu einer schauenden und genießenden Bewunderung zurück" as "and in the end we return to a wordless beholding." See the original German text, *Goethes Italienische Reise Vol. 1* (Leipzig: Insel Verlag, 1913), 277.

of *Götz von Berlichingen* (1773) and *Werther* (1774), which bring him great fame. By 1787 Goethe flees to Italy determined to find traces of Homer in *Magna Grecia*, and to train his new poetic voice in classic soil. It is important to bear these factors in mind for they provide us the conceptual and existential frame motivating Goethe's initial approach to Southern Italy—an approach that, as we will see, Naples challenges in ways that will produce an array of interesting and paradoxical outcomes.

Here is the main point: the challenge of producing an adequate description of Naples, in Goethe's case, does not come from a sentimental idealization of classical grandeur, as some critics claim. His Achilles' heel resides, more specifically, in a heightened notion of *the simple and necessary form*—a germinal form expressing the inner logic of even the most complex phenomena. This is not the Platonic immutable idea(1); rather, it is a notion of form expressing the mutable laws of Nature. Whether he examines a plant, Homeric poetry, or a Greek temple, Goethe focuses on its entelechy. He calls entelechy the “formative force” that realizes itself in each particular form and begets a unitary measure to phenomena that otherwise would seem to outpace understanding.

For Goethe, entelechy is the principle by which all natural and man-made phenomena find their right path and express their inner necessity. This principle is inextricably linked to an idea of metamorphosis predicated on “the simple and necessary form.”⁴ His phenomenology designates the evolution of living organisms in terms of essences inherent to things rather than *a priori* ideas—this suggests an idea of immanence opposed to transcendence, but still anchored to essence.

Goethe's theorization of the entelechy provides us an essential entry point to his epistemology and consequently to his descriptive method. His approach is problematic because it presupposes the possibility of reducing the complex form to the simple form. As we will see, Naples and Southern Italy will put this axiom to a hard test, and will lead Goethe into the domain of configurations that, owing to their contingency, resist his method of inquiry. Naples in particular presents a space in which the arbitrage of culture dictates a baffling conflation of artifice and nature, chaos and order, myth and abyss—a nearly intractable state of affairs that tests the limit of analytical knowledge. In other words, by 1787, Naples is *already* an allegory of the precariousness of Modernity and of the orders of knowledge, culture, and space Modernity presupposes.

At this juncture, Goethe's formulation of entelechy intersects with the Baroque image of ordered chaos, and also departs from it. What can we learn from this juxtaposition? Goethe's determination to locate a unitary principle of metamorphosis in a terrain steeped in Baroque excess may at first suggest a lack of historical perception or sensitivity. Yet this assertion risks precluding the inquiry Goethe's reading of Naples deserves. The discursive regime presiding over late eighteenth-century Naples features two inextricably linked ideas, ordered chaos and the *omnia ubique* (everything everywhere), whereby metamorphosis is perceived as an expression of the play of the finite *within* the infinite. The Baroque *ratio* defines the infinite as the play of the finite—as a self-perpetuating proliferation of analogies, as a co-arising of forms generating new and unforeseen configurations. *Sacred chaos* is the name the Counter-Reformation gives to the Baroque principle of mutability, *ordered chaos*. Sacred chaos designates a cultural and a political

⁴ I will elaborate upon this point in greater detail in the course of this essay. Essentially, Goethe defines the entelechy as a life-force linking the greatest complexity to the simple and evolving “from simplicity to multiplicity” (1970, 263). For further analysis of Goethe's notion of metamorphosis, see Eva Maria Simms' fascinating essay: “Goethe, Husserl, and the Crisis of the European Science,” *Janus Head*, 8 (1) (2005), 160-172.

conceptualization of space predicated on a divine principle of essence.⁵ Conversely, Goethe's notion of metamorphosis is predicated on the idea of the simple and necessary form, a natural essence expressing the innermost order of chaos, and possibly a way of gaining a degree of immunity from the "vertigo of thought" chaos implies. As much as these formulations may seem to share, they reflect two very different visions of immanence. In his attempt to assert a unitary entelechy conjoining Nature and Being *without* recourse to the divine, Goethe introduces an extraordinarily compelling question: does chaos have an order immanent to things and not to ideas? Can life *as such* exceed both transcendental rationalization and divine ordinance?

Goethe's desire to bring into the anthropological plane that luminous entelechy of Nature and Being he perceives in Sicily's natural landscape and among the Greek temples of the ancient Magna Grecia may be viewed as both a quest and a question. At the moment he thinks he perceives the innermost order whereby the human and the natural worlds may be reconciled, he stumbles into Naples, a city mired in anomalies and challenging the idea of a "simple and necessary form" upon which his Homeric "classicism" relies.⁶

Indeed, in numerous entries about Naples, Goethe admits to a feeling of being led astray. These passages express that mixture of joy and frustration characteristic of the exuberant life of the city as he meanders through the streets in a state of contemplative indolence, indulging in endless distractions. What unsettles him is not distraction—which he eventually deems conducive to even deeper intuition—but something more difficult to assess and which he never fully admits. Sieving through the city, he records entangled phenomena that, we may infer, would have or should have obstructed his notion of essence, presenting to him a co-dependence of social, economic, religious and cultural indices arising and falling back into the stream of daily life, and contingent upon an historical situation he never seeks to explicate. Instead, Goethe's vision remains anchored to an essentialism that subverts his more subversive intuitions, leading him to clichés such as the "universal gayety" of the childlike Neapolitans and to an even more perplexing assessment—that those who work just enough to get by and enjoy life, work harder than everyone else. As he seeks his ultimate explanation, his quest becomes increasingly questionable.

Five Scenes: Homer, the Primal Plant, the Villa of the Prince of Pallagonia, Vesuvius, Naples's Form and Forma mentis

I will now lay out five primary scenes that will help contextualize Goethe's descriptions of Naples vis-à-vis the scientific and aesthetic framework guiding his observations. First, we will see how Goethe correlates the Homeric style of description with a phenomenology of nature

⁵ Notably, in Naples, the Counter-Reformation Church secured its power through strategies of appropriation. The Neapolitan Jesuits' incorporation of Greco-Latin classicism, and their willingness to accommodate archaic forms of magical exorcism and divination produced a very complex outcome. The Neapolitan anthropologist Marino Niola defines "sacred chaos" as an image bearing multiple significations pivoted on the idea of an "entropic immanence of the signs and sacred times." See *Il Presepe* (Naples: L'Ancora del Mediterraneo, 2005), 9. Niola also discusses this concept in *Il Corpo Mirabile: Miracolo, Sangue, Estasi nella Napoli Barocca* (Rome: Meltemi, 1997), 28.

⁶ It is worth noting that Goethe's classicism suggests an affinity with Aristotle's philosophy of immanence (*The Metaphysics*), which refutes Plato's transcendental idealism. Goethe's conception of order also departs significantly from the hyper-rational subjectivity buttressing the Cartesian *cogito* and the hyper-emotional subjectivity associated with Northern Romanticism.

exemplified by his theorization of the *Urpflanze* (the Primal Plant). Homer and the *Urpflanze* exemplify, for Goethe, an immanent principle according to which “the masterpieces of man [are] brought in obedience to the same laws as the masterpieces of nature [before which] all that is arbitrary and imaginary collapses” (*Italian Journey*, 385).⁷ That harmonious figuration of Nature and of all Being Goethe perceives so vividly on the Sicilian shores is, however, called into question when he encounters the semiotic pandemonium of the Villa of the Prince of Pallagonia. Vesuvius and Naples, too, challenge Goethe’s sense of measure, though here the contradiction of what he calls “the Terrible beside the Beautiful” appears to be more defused.

In Naples, Goethe is able to unfurl a dazzling array of resemblances: correlation after correlation, paradox after paradox; as the image of the city unfolds itself, he strives to grasp its *total* form. His senses become enwrapped in a confused morphology, ranging from the formal, the informal, the formless and the deformed—a situation that exposes the limitations of descriptive models relying on universal premises, regardless of whether the measure one deploys is qualitative or strictly quantitative. Nevertheless, by way of confusion he arrives at an important realization: “it is not perseverance I need to learn so much as a quickness of perception (*schnelles Auffassen*)” (216). Naples challenges Goethe’s sense of precision—“I do not have the mental organ to describe,” he laments—leading him to adjust his method of observation, moving from what he calls “exact sensory perception” (*exakte sinnlinche Phantasie*) to a more supple mode of attentiveness: *an attentive form of distraction*. Through a conflation of idleness, serendipity, and contemplation, he is able to intuit the entangled order of things and to perceive the murmur emanating from the folds of a city he sees “wedged between God and Devil” (215). Seeking to find the principle that may outpace this entanglement, he conjures what for him becomes a kind of anthropological entelechy that constantly refers cultural genealogy to more exact sciences, such as geometry, geology, and biology. In Naples, Goethe encounters a space manifesting a co-arising of order and chaos that challenges his semiotic grasp and yet instigates his semiotic impulse. Distinct finite phenomena and the infinite “copia” / abundance of a Sameness running through them inspires him to conceive of a principle of metamorphosis articulating an infinite variation of the finite, a dynamic he hopes, even when struck by a sense of “wordless beholding,” will allow him to hold fast to his belief in an “inner necessity” presiding over Nature and Being. Longing to understand this innermost order, he takes a fascinating trajectory.

Homer and the Primal Plant: Goethe’s Quest for a “Natural” Image of Culture

Every time I wish to write words, visual images come up, images of the fruitful countryside, the open sea, the islands veiled in a haze, the smoking mountain, etc., and I lack the mental organ which could describe them [und mir fehlen die Organe, das alles darzustellen]. . .

What I have always said has been confirmed: there are certain natural phenomena and certain confused ideas which can be understood and straightened out only in

⁷ In the original German text, the full sentence reads “Diese hohen Kunstwerke sind zugleich als die höchsten Naturwerke von Menschen nach wahren und natürlichen Gesetzen hervorgebracht worden. Alles Willkürliche, Eingebildete fällt zusammen: da ist die Notwendigkeit, da ist Gott” (Vol. 2, 1913, 123).

this country. (1970, 209; Italics mine)⁸

Two modes of descriptions come to mind. The first inscribes its object into an *a priori* frame of reference through a series of categorical identifications and differentiations: taxonomy is an example of this method. The second kind of description demonstrates—or de/monstrates—an unquantifiable dimension of experience at once as familiar and extraneous, and exceeding a simple and clear semiotics. We may relate this experience to the nature of resemblances, and we may call the method most apt at conveying it associative. By way of resemblances and associations we can extract elements from distinct registers and bring them together into a relation of sameness: the result is a composite image. The question is whether a juxtaposition so loosely constructed will ultimately reinforce our assumptions or derail us toward an order of knowledge that throws into relief a problem in our methods. In other words, a description grounded on resemblances may very well de/monstrate “a confused idea,” as Goethe calls it, and reveal to us a *monstrous* conflagration of elements irreducible to a secure semiotic system. Taking a clue from Walter Benjamin, we may call this situation a dialectics at a standstill: a dilemma Goethe himself insinuates in *Faust*. Mephisto’s retort “Many riddles are made here,” and Faust’s reply “Many riddles must be solved here” are two sides of the same coin.⁹ How then does Goethe extricate himself from this double bind?

Goethe’s descriptions oscillate between the two above-mentioned modes, relying alternatively on taxonomy and/or free association, denotations and/or connotations, scientific induction and/or aesthetic intuition. As I will soon show, he deploys an artillery of taxonomic indices when the object under scrutiny threatens to derail his sense of “natural” proportions; conversely, he unravels a flurry of free association when something seems to confirm to him the possibility of an harmonious reconciliation of opposites. His final goal is to extricate simplicity from complexity.

In the passages dedicated to Homer, Goethe reflects upon the fleeting sense of immanence emerging from the haze of the pristine Sicilian landscape. In a letter addressed to Herder on May 17, 1787, he claims finally to have discovered, in such a landscape, the essence of Homer’s descriptions, an unmannered distillation of details stemming from an “inner comprehension” of reality largely lost to his own contemporaries. This, Goethe concludes, is the greatest challenge confronting the troubled modern soul. “Given the constitution of our world,” he writes, “I see as little hope for us as for the Sicilian in his.” With a sort of enlightened hopelessness, he adds: “the scales have fallen from my eyes”:

[Homer’s] descriptions, his similes, etc., which to us seem merely poetic, are in fact utterly natural though drawn, of course, with a inner comprehension [Reinheit und Innigkeit] which takes one’s breath away. Even when the events he narrates are fabulous and fictitious, they have naturalness about them which I have never felt so strongly as in the presence of the settings he describes. Let me say briefly what I think about the ancient writers and us moderns: *They* represented things

⁸ See German text (Vol. 1, 1913, 216).

⁹ See Rolf Tiedemann’s essay “Dialectic at a Standstill: Approaches to the *Passagen-Werk*,” in *The Arcades Project / Walter Benjamin*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 929-954.

and persons as they are in themselves [Sie stellten die Existenz dar], *we* usually represent only their subjective effect; *they* depicted the horror, *we* depict horribly; *they* depicted the pleasing, *we* depict pleasantly. Hence all the exaggerations, the mannerism, the false elegance and bombast of our age. Since if one aims at producing effects and only effects, one thinks that one cannot make them violent enough. If what I say is not new, I have had vivid occasions to feel its truth . . . for the first time the Odyssey has become a living truth to me [ein lebendiges Wort] (1970, 310).¹⁰

Though an unmediated relation to reality may not be attainable to the modern writer, it can be reconstructed through what he calls “exact sensory imagination [*exakte sinnliche Phantasie*]”—a method of observation I will discuss below, in relation to Goethe’s theorization of the “Primal Plant.” Thus, Goethe strives to reorient his perceptions through the assiduous study of nature—a practice he hopes will provide the corrective to the phantoms of the imagination. He reiterates this point:

All the artists of antiquity had a great knowledge of Nature and an unerring sense of what can be represented and how. As Homer, these masterpieces of man were brought forth in obedience to the same laws as the masterpieces of Nature. Before them, all that is arbitrary and imaginary collapses: *there* is Necessity, *there* is God. (1970, 385)¹¹

Goethe believes to have discovered in Homer a method for obtaining a harmonizing description of reality—namely, a question of determining “what can be represented and how.” Arguably, this method presumes one can reduce complexity to simplicity by a process of selection. So Goethe probes the poesis of modernity by transposing a problem pertaining to the arbitrage of culture over the field of natural science. Through this detour he grafts *sense* into the realm of *essence*—the crucial question, he says, consists in determining “where the germ is hidden” (310). Goethe’s holistic aspirations—no less than his “clinically correct will to contrast” the North with the South, and modern alienation with the grandiose serenity of classical antiquity—owes to his Romantic essentialism, a propensity that will produce in Naples and in Sicily mixed results, as we will see.¹²

But first we must look at Goethe’s ambitious model of metamorphosis, *Urpflanze* (the Primal Plant), which provides the key to Goethe’s framework. In the above-mentioned letter to Herder, Goethe conjoins the Homeric model of description to his own theorization of the Primal Plant, both of which, he argues, adhere to an inner necessity he deems “applicable to all living organisms:”

¹⁰ See German text (Vol. 2, 1913, 45).

¹¹ See German text (Vol. 2, 1913, 123).

¹² For an analysis of Goethe’s “classicist” vision of Italy, see Ernest Bloch’s essay “Goethe’s Drawings: the *Ideal Landscape*,” in *Literary Essays* (1998, 473-477).

The Primal Plant is going to be the strangest creature in the world, which Nature herself shall envy me. With this model as a key to it, it will be possible to go on forever inventing plants and know that their existence is logical; that is to say, if they do not actually exist, they could, for they are not the shadowy phantoms of a vain imagination, but possess an *inner necessity and truth. The same will be applicable to all living organisms* [eine innerliche Wahrheit und Notwendigkeit. Dasselbe Gesetz wird sich auf alles übrige Lebendige anwenden lassen]. (1970, 310-311; my italics)¹³

We can object that Goethe is introducing us to the most intractable questions of all: What is life? (What isn't?) Given Goethe's stated ambivalence toward quantitative scientific methods, these questions may appear purely rhetorical. These questions may appear purely rhetorical, were it not that his concern for the "inner necessity and truth" of all created entities may suggest another order of questions. Implicitly, Goethe is asking: What is the inner necessity and truth of a description? Is there an inner thread conjoining the describer, the object of analysis, and the description? Can we describe an object without changing it? If so, can we conceive a phenomenology of metamorphosis that will not fall back into an ontological construct? Or is every description always a de/formation, a demonstration that produces its own *monstrum*, its own object?

The Urpflanze: A Phenomenology of Metamorphosis

Goethe was not a scientist by training (nor was he a poet by training), and his scientific work is incomplete, fragmentary, and broad-ranging, yet we can find in his work a coherent set of principles, such as his refusal to separate natural science from hermeneutics, the category of the human from the non-human, the Beautiful from the Necessary, knowledge from experience, theory from practice. For Goethe, one cannot appreciate the beauty of a landscape without wanting to study the lay of the land, or the beauty of a plant without wishing to learn about its structure and stages of development. Indeed, he writes numerous scientific studies of botany, meteorology, geology, anatomy, and color theory. Above all, Goethe's descriptions are prompted by an *ethos* aimed at extricating a correspondence between Nature and Being. Nature *is* Being, Goethe insists, and the ancient gods are the poetic manifestations of Nature's formative force. Such is, he believes, the order of knowledge emanating from Homer's verses. Unlike Hölderlin, his contemporary, Goethe does not ascribe the destitution of his age to the obliteration of divine radiance. Instead he ascribes the spiritual malaise of the modern world to a solipsism that severs the self from what lies beyond human determinations. Solipsistic—indeed, semiotic—despair is, for Goethe, the logical outcome of a world-view that has isolated, codified, and reduced every dimension of life to a quantitative, mechanistic, and materialistic index. A world so inscribed in the logic of abstraction is not just a disenchanted world, drained of divine radiance, but a world that no longer asks the question: what is life?

Goethe struggles on two fronts at once: on one hand, against the mechanistic science of Galileo, Newton and Descartes, and on the other against the phenomenological solipsism of the

¹³ See German text (Vol. 2, 1913, 46).

Kantian mind. How can a poet live in an un-poetic world entirely conditioned by the dichotomy of knowledge and experience? The poet can strive to overcome this impasse through a meticulous praxis: by recording his observation of natural phenomena and comparing them to the activity of the mind. Science protects Goethe from the phantoms of the subjective mind, and poetry from the disenchanting effects of mechanistic and materialistic construct. The result is an unorthodox phenomenology that places the human within a larger circle of being encompassing the non-human: the theory of the *Urpflanze* (The Primal Plant).

The *Urpflanze* insinuates itself in Goethe's phenomenology as a symbol of metamorphosis: a spatio-temporal entity unfolding itself, from simple to complex forms, in all living organisms.¹⁴ Goethe examines the protean metamorphosis of a plant, from seed, to germination, to leaf, to bud, to flower. By following precise scientific methods of observation, recording, and genetic modification, he tries "to envision how *life* in an organism and its *formative forces* find expression in a leaf and bone" (Simms, 162). He calls *entelechy* the formative force that manifests itself in a particular plant over time and that allows him, by extension, to grasp the spatio-temporal evolution of a living organism.¹⁵

The Primal Plant reveals itself to Goethe in 1787 in a Sicilian garden. In Sicily, he finds the appropriate landscape for a unitary image of Nature and Being that appeals to his classicist determination but challenges scientific description. In fact, he often refers to the *Urpflanze* as a phenomenon that tests the very limits of language: "My theory is difficult to describe . . . no matter how clearly and exactly it is written down, impossible to understand merely from reading" (*Italian Journey*, 389). This challenge has to do with an inherent ambiguity Goethe tries to overcome through an imaginative variation of what he calls "exact sensory imagination [*exakte sinnliche Phantasie*]." Holding that no mathematical measure is exact enough to quantify *life* and the protean unfolding of a *living* organism, Goethe insists on the relevance of buttressing scientific knowledge with a form of imagining trained on the logic of connotations. Eva-Maria Simms, a Goethean scholar, provides a concise description of Goethe's image of metamorphosis—a syncretism of science and aesthetics:

Metamorphosis is not merely the outward change of a plant, but it describes the essential form a plant assumes *over time*. If you imagine the series of gestures a plant unfolds throughout its life in *one image* you have a picture of Goethe's *Urpflanze*. What you see is condensation and expansion, a spiral progression, refinement of form. But to your physical eye the primal plant can never appear because your eyes cannot see the sequence of time. But in the human imagination the fullness of time can be grasped and represented. (2005, 170; my italics)

The *Urpflanze* is the imaginary horizon Goethe constructs in order to establish the possibility of reconciling Nature and Being. While probing the processes of condensation, expansion, and spiral progression, he discovers a spatio-temporal dimension that resists a systematic description:

¹⁴ Goethe looks at a fennel plant, examines the difference between the lower and upper leaves, and concludes that "the organism is always the same but it evolves from simplicity to multiplicity." (*Italian Journey*, 262.)

¹⁵ Simms indicates that *entelechy* is also a term "used by Husserl to describe a form of being in which an idea is striving to become actualized. It can be a plant but it can also be a historical/cultural impulse" (2005, 170). However, in Goethe the historical/cultural condition is not explicated. As we will see, when he transposes it to the social realm, his *entelechy* turns too schematic.

it is as if he were trying to draw the scientific coordinates of a space that we may say after Deleuze is *immanent to itself*. As we will see, the difficulty of producing a precise *and* unitary description of the law governing plant organization is further exacerbated when transposed to the realm of culture.

The Villa of the Prince of Pallagonia: A Perverted Metamorphosis

Sicily provides Goethe the appropriate landscape to apprehend the image of *Urpflanze*: the how and why of the morphology of plants. He also believes to have found therein the ideal background against which to experience the entelechy of Homeric poetry: that reconciliation of beauty and necessity he finds so wanting in the aesthetics of his time. Goethe perceives the luminous strangeness of the South through a composite figure, Homer/Primal Plant. In Naples, as we will soon see, Goethe will attempt a different kind of harmonization, this time consisting of the resolution of what he calls “the Terrible beside the Beautiful.” But before we move on to Naples, it is worthwhile remembering that it is in Sicily, on the outmost fringes of Europe *and* of Magna Grecia, that Goethe’s framework finds its nemesis, as exemplified in the extraordinary passages dedicated to the Villa of the Prince of Pallagonia. Here, Goethe’s Faustian quest for the secret of life clashes against its *doppelganger*¹⁶—a phantasmagoria deliberately designed to derail the fundamental entelechy presumably dictating the “natural” order of things. Goethe seizes the opportunity to unleash his rhetorical artillery, this time through a studied taxonomy of aberrations:

When a person is expected to describe some absurdity, he is always at loss, because however great his love for truth, merely by describing it, he makes it something, whereas, in fact, *it is nothing that wants to be taken for something* [da es eigentlich ein Nichts ist, welches für etwas gehalten sein will]. So let me preface my remarks with another general reflection: neither tasteless vulgarity nor assured excellence is the creation of the single man or one single epoch; on the contrary, with a little thought, one can trace the genealogy of both. (1970, 237; my italics).¹⁷

The following list may give you a better idea of what Prince Pallagonia has perpetrated in his madness:

Human beings: Beggars of both sexes, men and women of Spain, Moors, Turks, hunchbacks, deformed persons of every kind, dwarfs, musicians, Pulcinellas, soldiers in antique uniforms, gods and goddesses, persons dressed in French

¹⁶ See James L. Larson’s essay “Goethe and Linnaeus,” *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol. 28, No. 4. (Oct.-Dec. 1967), 590-596. Larson links Goethe’s botanical studies to Linnaeus, who established a hierarchy of concepts grounded on similarities found in Nature.

¹⁷ See German text (Vol. 1, 1913, 250).

fashions of long ago, soldiers with ammunitions pouches and leggings, mythological figures with grotesque accessories; for instance: Achilles and Chiron with Pulcinella.

Animals: Only parts of them; a horse with human hands, the head of the horse on a human body, deformed monkeys, many dragons and snakes, every kind of paw attached to every kind of body, *double heads and exchangeable heads* [Verdoppelungen, Verwechslungen der Köpfe]. . .¹⁸

Now imagine similar figures multiplied *ad infinitum*, designed without rime or reason, combined without discrimination or point. . .

But the bad taste and folly of an eccentric mind reaches its climax in the cornices of the low building, which slants this way and that, *so that our sense of hydrostatic balance and the perpendicular, which is what primarily makes us human beings and is the fundamental principle of all eurhythmics, is upset and tortured* [so daß das Gefühl der Wasserwage und des Perpendikels, das uns eigentlich zu Menschen macht und der Grund aller Eurhythmie ist, in uns zerrissen und gequält wird]. (1970, 239-240; my italics)¹⁹

The villa, Goethe writes, is “a madhouse . . . of misbegotten horrors” (241),²⁰ absolutely unworthy of description were it not that it testifies to the delirium of not just a single man or single epoch but of an entire genealogy. Here he is actually addressing genealogy, but only in a vast, abstract and generalized way. Not surprisingly, in his essay entitled “Goethe,” Walter Benjamin goes as far as to claim that “Goethe understood history only as natural history” (172), that “[he labored] his whole life long to imagine classical antiquity ahistorically and, as it were, suspended freely in space”(185).²¹ Significantly, Goethe dedicates one of the longest and most detailed entries in his journal to a presumably abnormal phenomenon that debunks his rarefied articulation of the Beautiful with the Necessary. Benjamin equates Goethe’s tendency to seek out a reconciliation of opposites to “a magic formula which [dissolves] the realities of social conflict into nothingness”(186).²²

How incomparably more comforting is, for the botanist-poet, the simple truth of the leaf of the fennel, which reassures him that “the organism is always one and the same,” that it evolves linearly “from simplicity to multiplicity” [aus der Einfachheit zur Mannigfaltigkeit entwickelt] (263).²³ Such is the law in accordance to which the temple of Jupiter found its monumental classic symmetry; yet the classical symmetries of *Magna Grecia* are by now just vestiges of a

¹⁸ See German text (Vol. 1, 1913, 252).

¹⁹ See German text (Vol. 1, 1913, 253).

²⁰ See German text (Vol. 1, 1913, 254).

²¹ Citing Soret, Benjamin notes: “Goethe is a liberal only in an abstract sense, but in practice inclines toward the most reactionary principles”(186). See “Goethe” in *Selected Writings Volume 2: 1927-1934*, trans. Rodney Livingstone et al., ed. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 161-193.

²² Analyzing Goethe’s rendering of social conflicts in *Faust*, Benjamin notes that “in the mysterious interplay between agrarian and technological activity on one hand, and the political apparatus of absolutism on the other, Goethe glimpses the magic formula which would dissolve the realities of social conflict into nothingness. Bourgeois agriculture methods operating under the dominant feudal tenure—that was the discordant image in which Faust’s greatest moment of fulfillment was to be crystallized”(“Goethe,”186).

²³ See German text (Vol. 1, 1913, 279).

bygone era, more likely to be lost than found in the Baroque social *textura* of Southern Italy. Beggars of both sexes, men and women of Spain, Moors, Turks, soldiers garbed in multiple foreign uniforms, gods and goddesses of the most diverse provenance, figures dressed in foreign fashions, Achilles and Chiron with Pulcinella: there is surely more to all this than a “nothing[ness] that wants to be taken for something” (237).²⁴ We may infer, instead, a continual overturning of signification, a condition provoked by a constant exchange of references. In Sicily, Goethe detects the intersection of Africa, the Orient and Europe, yet one wonders how much contamination he is able to tolerate, and whether entering Italy from the South, say, from Tunis rather than the Brenner, would have enabled him to approach Pallagonia’s delirium as something more than “the bad taste of an eccentric mind.”

We could regard the villa as an allegory of the Mediterranean filtered through a somewhat heavy-handed interpretation of the Baroque *omnia ubique* (everything everywhere), but no less “logical.” We could regard the villa as a history-machine belonging to the same register as the Neapolitan Baroque feast-machines—such as the *presepe*, the *cuccagna*.²⁵ Not unlike the villa, these sacro-secular apparatuses conjure a super-natural order capable of violating the forces of nature, for they are designed to communicate, by way of allegory, the image of an historical experience. In them, the idea of a natural law harmonizing the acts of nature and the acts of man is turned on its head entirely: the supernatural signifies the power of exorcising the violence inherent to both nature and man, it justifies all sorts of un-sanctioned combinations, borrowings and thefts. Not surprisingly, Pallagonia’s phantasmagoria and the Neapolitan feast-machines display an almost identical set of indices—heterogeneous cultural and racial references, a heterotemporal historical horizons, the syncretism of Catholic and pagan ritualism, the vestiges of legendary and real wars intertwined with infernal figures and carnival masks. Not harmony and unity, but violence and heterogeneity constitute the super-abundant “entelechy” of these Baroque apparatuses, more an erotics than an ethos.²⁶

²⁴ See German text (Vol. 1, 1913, 250).

²⁵ A brief description of the Neapolitan *cuccagna* and the *presepe* may help clarify this connection. The Neapolitan *cuccagne* were expensive theatrical apparatuses the Bourbon Kings erected, from the middle to the late eighteenth century, in Largo di Palazzo (today’s Piazza Plebiscito) just across the royal Palace. These *feast-machines* were left to the looting of the plebs during the last four Sundays of the carnival, and though they were given new themes each time, their salient elements remained the same. The following passage excerpted from Dieter Richter succinctly describes the matrix of the Neapolitan *Cuccagna* as “a structure (a castle of delights, a temple) entirely covered with quarters of meat, live and dead birds and other provisions. The setting featured wine spilling fountains, artificial trees hung with fluttering clothes, ponds filled with swimming geese and ducks, and herds (tended by wooden shepherds) grazing in the meadows” (translation mine). See, Dieter Richter, *Il paese di cuccagna: storia di un’ utopia popolare*, 119-120. (Florence: La Nuova Italia Editrice, 1998). I also recommend two seminal studies of the Neapolitan *Cuccagna*: Franco Mancini, *Feste ed apparati civili e religiosi in Napoli dal vicereame alla capitale* (Naples: Edizioni Scientifiche Italiane, 1997); Laura Barletta, *Il Carnevale del 1764 a Napoli: protesta e integrazione in uno spazio urbano* (Naples: Societa’ Editrice Napoletana, 1981). The basic common structure of the traditional *presepe* consists of a nativity scene set in ancient Bethlehem—that is, in a Naples dressed up as Bethlehem and celebrating the birth of the child-God, and the arrival of the new winter solstice. This framework, typically made of cork, features a mountainous landscape with a dense overlay of entrances and exits—bridges, arches, doors, windows, stairs, balconies, rivulets and caves—which lead the eye in and out of interlocking passages. This labyrinthine space mimics Naples’ entangled morphology and enciphers it within a miniaturized diorama populated by a teeming crowd of figures gesticulating to each other and to the viewer. Figures connoting enmity and friendship are conjoined in a sacro-secular chorus comprising sword-wielding Turks mingling with Arcadian pheasants, and indigent—even deformed—characters sharing the stage with a sumptuous entourage of Magi. This description is based on Marino Niola’s prominent study, *Il Presepe* (Naples: Societa’ Editrice Napoletana, 1983).

²⁶ A brilliant analysis of the baroque concept of *copia* is found in Marcus Boons’ book, *In Praise of Copying*

While Sicily's ancient temples and the landscapes that shroud them give Goethe intimations of the eternities of Nature, the Villa of the Prince of Pallagonia presents another kind of endlessness: the heterotemporal, heteronomous, and heterogeneous unfolding of a Mediterranean genealogy Goethe cannot situate, as he is unable to comprehend a space arising from the outer fringes of European history and imagination. His Northern European perspective is derailed, even de/formed, by the grotesque realism of creatures of exotic Mediterranean provenance. Yet, the delirium of the villa of Pallagonia simply *de-monstrates* the turbulences of a genealogy rendered monstrous by the normative order Goethe brings, inadvertently, to his image of the South: classical symmetry and/or the primitive innocence of the Southerner. Incidentally, this vision is perfectly consistent with the Northern European notion of Humanism, which regards the work of the Southern imagination either as the phantom of a delusional mind, or as a game, a mere diversion. Southern Italian humanism furnishes something other than a theory premised on teleological, transcendental or essentialist concepts. We could speak of a humanism *mineure*, which coincides with a heretical stance toward the official Northern canon. Though dialectics, a technique for reconciling opposites we also find in Goethe, is a Greek invention, the Greek notion of dialogue is not bound to it. The Greek *logos* never suppresses the polyphony of irreconcilable *logoi*—dialogue must exceed the reach of dialectics. It follows that the eclecticism Goethe finds in the Villa of Pallagonia is not so “irrational” as it is, ironically, as Greek as *Magna Grecia*.²⁷

Goethe's description of the Villa of Pallagonia does not move beyond a taxonomy of opprobrium owing to geometrical assumptions that constrain his framework. Goethe maintains that the perpendicular is “the fundamental principle of all eurhythmic” that makes us “human beings” (*Italian Journey*, 240). Perhaps, had he felt less outraged by the incongruities that everywhere “torture” his “sense of hydrostatic balance” he would have been able to detect an alterity immanent to any historical object, immanent to a geographical order of knowledge, and irreducible to a geometry so unequivocally abstract. The metonymical and allegorical excesses exhibited in the Villa seem to make a mockery of his Northern sense of order.

What should he make of “the four colossal giants in modern gaiters” facing the entryway, or the “the repulsive appearance of deformities” adorning the mansion, or the skewed proportion of rooms scattered with chairs with legs unequally sawn off “so that no one could sit on them”? How to square the moral rectitude of a Doric column with “the orchestra of monkeys [and] dragons alternating with gods”? (240). Had Goethe repositioned his gaze at a more slanted angle, he would have probably sensed there, too, a “full mystery in broad daylight” arising from multiple historical contexts.²⁸ Indeed, in its hyperboles, Pallagonia's “madhouse” introduces to Goethe—and us—an order of knowledge issuing from the South of the humanist mind, from the voluptuous imaginary horizon of Baroque Reason. In the final analysis, the “folly” of the prince displays more discernment than the wisdom of the lover of truth. *There* is the Mediterranean

(Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010).

²⁷ For a comprehensive analysis of the Southern Italian Humanism, see the following studies: Giuseppe Mazzotta (1999), Christine Buci-Glucksmann (1999), Ernesto De Martino (2000), Marino Niola (1997), Iain Chambers (2001). For a detailed analysis of problems concerning Northern Humanism, see John Carroll (2010).

²⁸ See Bloch, “Goethe Drawing” (1998, 473-477). Bloch discusses a drawing Goethe made in Sicily, featuring a Greek temple standing in the midst of marshy water, fallen trees, bushes, and a blurry hill drenched in the glorious light of the rising sun: “Full mystery in broad light” – “this,” Bloch writes, “is, first and foremost, the *inscription* of the temple; an enlightenment that does not dispel the mystery of ‘nature,’ as though it were present only in the dark, as something inimical. Instead, this enlightenment puts the mystery on display in daylight, with all its cloud-veils and all the charisma of its potent being” (475).

Africa, *there* is the Mediterranean Levant, *there* is the Mediterranean Kingdom of the Two Sicilies under Bourbon rule. And *there* is the Villa of Pallagonia: the blasted allegory of a porous *form* Goethe cannot yet name. But it does have a name: *Mare Nostrum*, Our Sea.

Naples and Vesuvius: The Nexus Between Geology and the Morphology of the City

In *The Arcades Project*, Walter Benjamin brilliantly elucidates the challenge inherent in any description aimed at extracting the logic of a complex space. He states: “a description of confusion is not the same as a confused description.” (*The Arcades Project*, 331)²⁹ In fact, every description is riddled with iterations and therefore with errors—from the Latin *errare*, which carries a double meaning: to make a mistake and to roam about. But not all errors are the same. Some open the way to productive conflicts. In the best cases the object of analysis triggers new and unforeseen configurations, new imaginary horizons. Indeed, something new shakes Goethe’s worldview: a crumbling of the projections through which the German culture has rationalized its hazy image of Southern Italy—essentially, as a “paradise inhabited by devils.”³⁰

The eccentricities of the Villa of the Prince of Pallagonia tarnish but do not dismantle Goethe’s conceptual edifice. Sicily still conjures in the poet’s vision intimations of a potent entelechy harmonizing the works of nature and works of man, the simplest and the most complex forms of life. Goethe’s aim remains to construct a universal phenomenology encompassing nature, art, culture and Being presided over by a universal principle of metamorphosis. His image of Sicily is not Platonic, yet it still relies on geometric indices—symmetry, the perpendicular, the vertical, and equidistance—presumptions not easily adaptable to a space exhibiting such a high degree of fluidity. As we are about to see, Vesuvius and Naples will present Goethe with a new set of challenges as he attempts, once again, to assess the nexus between *form*, *Nature* and *Being*. Ironically, the event that hails Goethe to Naples is the eruption of Vesuvius: nothing could be more emblematic of the *contaminatio* of form and formlessness underpinning Naples’s entangled *textura* and its molten anarchic order.

News of the erupting Vesuvius reaches Goethe in Rome on November 24, 1786. The event, he admits, “has something of the irresistible fascination of a rattlesnake” (*Italian Journey*, 145). Nevertheless, he stays in Rome for a few more months. By February 19, 1787, at the news of a more virulent eruption, he rushes to Naples determined to “discover the manner in which Nature, with incomparable power, develops the greatest complexity from the simple.” Vesuvius is hurling stones, flames and ashes and he can hardly wait to “make these mighty objects [his] own” (174). He will find no evidence of “simplicity” in Naples, in fact the manner in which the city presents and governs itself is far from linear, and the same could be said of the volcano. Nevertheless, these statements encapsulate what will soon become Goethe’s greatest challenge: the difficulty of producing an adequate description of confusion.

²⁹ This sentence refers to Edgar Allan Poe’s description of crowds. See Benjamin, “Baudelaire” (*The Arcades Project*, 1999, 331 [J56a,7]).

³⁰ See Benedetto Croce’s study, *Un Paradiso Abitato da Diavoli* (Milan: Adelphi, 2006), 83-96. Croce notes that Goethe’s depiction of the legendary Neapolitan Lazzari is far more reasonable than those of most foreigners – a concession that does not make Goethe’s framework any less problematic, in my view. Albeit sympathetic, Goethe’s benevolent depiction of the working poor still adheres to the stereotypical image Croce describes as follows: “phenomenal beings . . . ‘savages’ lost within a European city, and whose character and habits are both strange and inexplicable” (92). The translation of Croce’s text is mine.

Goethe's sojourn in Naples and his pilgrimages to Vesuvius produce a readjustment in his descriptive mode, which begins to rely increasingly on loosely arranged resemblances that conjure a broad reverberation of effects. The total gaze of the taxonomist, its explicative function, gradually gives way to distracted attentiveness, to serendipitous annotations. Goethe climbs the erupting Vesuvius, travels through the countryside, roams the streets of the city and pays visits to the mansions of the elite. Day after day he collects minerals, leaves, faces and gestures, archeological artifacts, and ritual details of everyday life, which he then tries to arrange into patterns: the narrative is fragmentary but not incongruous, as Goethe is always looking for a common thread, even when it does not lead him to a coherent explanation.

The following passage exemplifies the tumultuous accretion of images and sensations animating Goethe's increasingly unresolved image of Naples:

March 1, 1787

How should I describe a day like today?—A boat trip; some short drive in a carriage; walks on foot through the most astonishing landscape in the world; treacherous ground under pure sky; ruins of unimaginable luxury, abominable and sad; seething waters; caves exhaling sulphur fumes; slag hills forbidding living growth; barren and repulsive areas; but then luxuriant vegetation, taking root wherever it can, soars out of the dead matter, encircles lakes and brooks, and extends its conquests even to the walls of an old crater by establishing there a forest of noble oaks.

Thus one is tossed between the work of nature and the work of men. *One would like to think but feels too incompetent.* Meanwhile the living merrily goes on living. (*Italian Journey*, 188, my italics)

The principle of the *omnia ubique* presides over the entire morphology of the city. Not unlike the villa of Pallagonia, Naples is everything everywhere: natural and man-made phenomena, histories and geology collide within a densely folded space. Pompeii was unburied in 1748, forty years prior to Goethe's arrival and 1700 years after its demise: by 1787 the Greco-Roman matrix is merely an archeological vestige—Naples is no longer *Neapolis* and its *form* is most definitely anti-classicist. Also, by this time Naples is the second most densely populated metropolis in Europe, second only to Paris. The city and its surroundings reveal, even to the naked eye, an entangled genealogy comprising Spanish Baroque, Norman and Arabic, Gothic and Romanic structures. It is not clear to what extent Goethe is able to detect this contaminated genealogy and its wider social implications, for his attention is focused on a broader existential question: How does Naples's exuberant vitality correlate to the menacing immanence of Vesuvius? In other words: What kind of spatial relations does a precarious existence produce? Still searching for entelechy, Goethe looks for a *direct* correspondence between geology and the genealogy of the Neapolitan way of life. This determination to find a unitary measure of Nature and Being will lead him into dangerous territory.

Vesuvius: A Composite Morphology of Form, the Formless and the Self-deforming

Let us now follow Goethe's trajectory through some passages extracted from the entries he dedicates to his three visits to Vesuvius, on March 2, March 6, and March 20 of the year 1787. During his first visit, Goethe takes stock of the configuration of several strata of congealed lava, "one two months, one two weeks and one only five days old" (189), but the smoke, fog, and friable ground prevent him from reaching the new crater emerging from the mouth of the old one. Four days later, Goethe returns to Vesuvius determined to do all it takes to "enter the realm of Pluto" and gain a clearer picture of the erupting crater. This time, he climbs the volcano with his friend Wilhelm Tischbein, who reluctantly agrees to join him. Tischbein is a prominent painter who works for the Bourbon court of Naples and introduces Goethe to Naples's high society. He also accompanies Goethe on numerous excursions, including to Sicily, and gives him drawing lessons. When it comes to purely aesthetic judgments they agree on most things, but Vesuvius, Goethe admits, presents a challenge to the aesthete:

To a cultured artist like him, who occupies himself only with the most beautiful human and animal forms and even humanizes the formless—rocks and landscapes—with feeling and taste, *such a formidable shapeless heap as Vesuvius, which again and again destroys itself and declares war on any sense of beauty, must appear loathsome*. [ihm wird eine solche furchtbare, ungestalte Aufhäufung (wie Vesuv), die sich immer wieder selbst verzehrt und allem Schönheitsgefühl den Krieg ankündigt, ganz abscheulich vorkommen]. (1970, 192; my italics)³¹

The volcano's formless and self-deforming morphology undeniably frustrates that reconciliation of the Beautiful with the Necessary by which the classicist artist attempts to "humanize" Nature. Goethe, instead, is compelled to return to Vesuvius: the "mouth of hell" signals a phenomenon akin to the metamorphosis of the Primal Plant, though far more ambiguous.

The description of the second climb reads as an initiatory tale that will later unfold itself in even more mercurial ways as Goethe's attempts to extrapolate a *direct* correlation between the volcano and the chaotic dynamics of the city. Upon reaching the foot of the mountain, the two friends hire two expert guides who assure them it is safe to risk the climb. The older guide will help collect samples of lava as he can read the exact year of each strata, while the younger one will literally haul them up the steep and slippery slopes with a heavy leather thong he wears around his waist. Everything seems to bode well. The guides assure them that the crater is now erupting at regular intervals: all it takes to be safe is to keep count of each cycle and back up a few seconds before the new outpour begins. As if the guides were promising the entelechy he seeks, Goethe exultantly greets the prospect of reaching the glowing jaws of the mountain. But the task proves to be more dangerous than he expected, and he finds himself caught in the middle of an explosive cauldron:

³¹ See German text (Vol. 1, 1913, 198).

We had forgotten to keep our slow count and were standing on the sharp edge of the monstrous abyss when, all of a sudden, thunder shook the mountain and a terrific charge flew past us. We ducked instinctively, as if that would save us when the showers of stones began. The smaller stones had already finished clattering down when, having forgotten that another interval had begun and happy to have survived, we reached the foot of the cone under a rain of ashes which thickly coated our hats and shoulders. (1970, 194)

Insisting the count was “forgotten,” rather than undone, Goethe’s recklessness turns out to be well worth the riveting image now unfurling before his eyes—a close-up view of hot new lava carrying detritus from the lowest depths of the crater, before congealing into a jagged mesh. He notices that, over time, the eruptions produce an entanglement of strata, each one displaying the residues of multiple previous eruptions. Goethe describes this process in detail:

When lava flows sluggishly, the surface cools into solid masses. From time to time some obstructions bring these to a standstill. The masses behind are borne forward on the molten stream beneath and forced over the stationary ones. This process is repeated again and again, until finally the whole flow petrifies into jagged shapes. . . . Among the formless and melted products there were some large chunks which, on fracture, showed a resemblance to a type of more primitive rock. The guides maintained that they were old lavas from the lowest depth of the volcano, which it expels from time to time. (1970, 194-195)

These observations introduce him to the formless and self-deforming morphology of magma. An entirely unforeseen configuration unfolds before Goethe’s eyes: unlike the metamorphosis of the Primal Plant, which proceeds linearly from simplicity to complexity, magma displays a maddeningly tortuous complexity. Its formative forces—pressure, explosions, and condensations—produce an enmeshed space threading inside out and outside in.

Something else seems to confirm this porous configuration. Goethe notices on the side of the mountain a scattering of windowless houses resembling man-made caves and inquires about them:

On our way back to Naples I noticed some one-storey little houses constructed in a curious way without windows; the only light the room receives comes from the door opening on to the street. From early morning until late at night, the occupants sit outside until it is time to retire into their caves. (1970, 195)³²

The image of cave dwellers nestled inside the cracks of the mountain suggests an isomorphic configuration extending all the way to the city, which, Goethe observes, “is in uproar too, though of a somewhat different kind” (195). By now he has had occasion to observe Naples’s way of life

³² See German text (Vol. 1, 1913, 200-201).

and has concluded that, as a whole, the city lives in a state of “intoxicated self-forgetfulness,” himself included (207). He hopes this contagion will drive him to the source of that strange hyperkinetic idleness that modulates the erratic rhythms of the city. Perhaps there is an analogy to be made between geology and the psychic/civic space. Pondering to what extent the Neapolitan *forma mentis* mimics the formless lava gushing forth from the mouth of the crater, Goethe sets out for a new expedition to Vesuvius on March 20, which turns out to be a near-fatal endeavor:

I felt a great desire to get near to the place where the lava was issuing from the mountain . . . We tried to go half a dozen steps further, but the ground under our feet became hotter and hotter and whirls of dense fumes darkened the sun and almost suffocated us. The guide who was walking in front turned back, grabbed me, and we stole away from the hellish cauldron. (1970, 214)³³

This brush with death does not in the least tarnish Goethe’s delight—his enthusiasm is incurbable—but he does wonder about the confusion the “tremendous contrast” of harmony and monstrosity must cause in the Neapolitan psyche:

After refreshing our eyes with the view and our throat with wine, we wondered about observing other features of this peak of hell which towers up in the middle of paradise. . . . A magnificent sunset and evening lent their delight to the return journey. However, I could feel how confusing such a tremendous contrast must be. *The Terrible beside the Beautiful, the Beautiful beside the Terrible, cancel one another out and produce a feeling of indifference.* The Neapolitan would certainly be a different creature if he did not feel himself so wedged between God and the Devil. [Das Schreckliche zum Schönen, das Schöne zum Schrecklichen, beides hebt einander auf und bringt eine *gleichgültige Empfindung hervor*. Gewiß wäre der Neapolitaner ein anderer Mensch, wenn er sich nicht zwischen Gott und Satan eingeklemmt fühlte]. (1970, 215; my italics)³⁴

This conflation of hell and paradise, myth and abyss, is not merely metaphoric. It describes a concrete existential condition: a heightened awareness of the fragility of life, a sense of finitude that acknowledges chaos as the source, not the negation, of ideas such as the Beautiful, the Terrible, and the Necessary. What should we make of the Neapolitan’s presumed “feeling of indifference,” and of Goethe’s own desire to “tarry a little longer in this school for easy, happy living and try to profit more from it”? (215)³⁵ Is he becoming Neapolitan? Perhaps, we can approach this question through another one: How does the city communicate its contagious sense

³³ See German text (Vol. 1, 1913, 222). The phrase “between God and the Devil” brings to mind a well-known proverb – “Naples is a paradise inhabited by devils” – on which Benedetto Croce elaborates at length (2006, 11-28). See n.30.

³⁴ See German text (Vol. 1, 1913, 223).

³⁵ See German text (Vol. 1, 1913, 223).

of immanence? What could be the form and the *forma mentis* of a city so enmeshed in the double bind of the “the Beautiful beside the Terrible” that the distinction threatens, at any given time, to become a contradiction rather than merely indiscernible.

The Riddle: Ordered Chaos

Naples’s exuberant vitality is indeed a mystery in full light; yet unlike the temple of Jupiter, a monument of classical symmetry and transparency, Naples’s form—in the broadest sense, including the forms of life crisis elicits—challenges Goethe’s capacity to produce a coherent description. It is as though the fluidity presiding over the city’s *form* were throwing Goethe’s “hydrostatic balance” out of joint again; but unlike the Villa of the Prince of Pallagonia, this time the unhinging of his classicist frame gives way to a deeper appreciation. A strange blend of admiration, suspicion, and confusion permeates his encounters with a city that, to his astonishment, throws him into “a state of intoxicated self-forgetfulness”:

March 13, 1787

Today I shall write a few more words and let one letter chase after the other. I am well but I see less than I should. This place encourages languor and an easygoing life. In spite of this I am rounding up my picture of the city bit by bit. (1970, 203)³⁶

March 16

Naples is a paradise. *Everyone lives in a state of intoxicated self-forgetfulness* [trunkner Selbstvergessenheit], *myself included*. I seem to be a completely different person whom I can hardly recognize. (207, my italics)³⁷

In Rome I was glad to study: *here I want only to live* [so will man hier nur leben], forgetting myself and the world, and it is a strange [wunderliche] experience for me to be in a society where everyone does nothing but enjoy himself. (208, my italics)³⁸

March 17

Certainly the world is only a simple wheel and every point in its circumference is equidistant from its center. It only looks so strange because we ourselves are revolving with it. (209)

May 17

Even in Naples I find it impossible to collect my thoughts [Auch ist hier in Neapel kein Besinnens], though I hope I shall be able now to give you a better

³⁶ See German text (Vol. 1, 1913, 210).

³⁷ See German text (Vol. 1, 1913, 214-215).

³⁸ See German text (Vol. 1, 1913, 215).

description of this city than I did in my earlier letters. (309, my italics)³⁹

Again and again Goethe remarks on the “salutary” property of Naples’s dis/order: a *modus operandi* that seems to mimic the incandescence of magma. Goethe’s most lucid intuitions arise as he walks through the teeming streets: a space pulsing with tidal waves, counter-currents and interruptions. A walk through the ever-moving crowds induces in the poet a eurhythmic osmosis of the senses:

To thread oneself through the immense and ever-moving crowd is a peculiar and salutary experience. All merge into one great stream, yet each manages to find his way to his own goal. In the midst of so many people and all their commotion, I feel peaceful and alone for the first time. The louder the uproar of the streets, the quieter I become. (210)

A spirit of paradox seems to be emerging at the juncture of fusion and confusion: *ordered chaos*. He approaches this phenomenon with the same precision he devotes to the study of skeletons, plants, clouds, rocks, Greek temples, and similarly “eternal” forms. Naples, however, does not lend itself to a simple distillation of processes. The jagged movement of the crowd sets his body in motion, inducing a different mode of attention: a distracted attention attuned to ephemeral mutations, and to a commingling of forms that exceed simple explanations. A pivotal intuition insinuates itself in the mind of the scientist-poet: “It is not perseverance I have to learn so much as quickness of perception. Once I can get hold of a matter by its fingertips, listening and thinking will enable me to grasp the whole hand” (216). Though his desire to encounter the city in *its* own terms significantly alters his sense of “grasp” and the scope of his inquiry, his propensity for wholeness and totality remains essentially the same. This contradiction is truly fascinating (in the Neapolitan sense, whereby the word *fascino* connotes the condition of being under a magic spell) for it exemplifies that tension between knowledge and experience without which the *lived* cannot be *thought*. Goethe’s struggle allows us to appreciate just how difficult it is to produce an unpremeditated description of a city such as Naples—legendary *to a fault*. All this should prompt us to follow his thread of thought a little closer.

After his third climb to Vesuvius, Goethe begins to take an isomorphic detour, whereby he links the city’s *forma mentis* to its geological and geographical attributes, again eliding a fully genealogical appreciation. In his view, the cohabitation of “the Beautiful beside the Terrible” provides a fertile ground for the spirit of contradiction animating Naples, its strangely *indolent exuberance*, and may even explain its most distinctive riddle—that continuous co-arising, co-dependence, and commingling of opposite values, which at times evokes a sense of ordered chaos. The threat of imminent disaster, Goethe argues, is not the impediment but the source of Naples’s legendary aptitude for survival. As previously noted, this leads him to a paradoxical hypothesis: “The Terrible beside the Beautiful, the Beautiful beside the Terrible, cancel one another out and produce a feeling of indifference” (215).

Sounds good. But is it true? How can a “feeling of indifference” beget the inexplicable *joie de vivre* Goethe finds so compelling about Naples? What begets the marvelous sacro-secular rituals he records in his journal with lavish detail? What begets the need to declare, in a thousand

³⁹ See German text (Vol. 2, 1913, 44).

and one ways, the affinity *and* the difference between Nature and the Supernatural, the affinity *and* the difference between the ideology of the curse and the ideology of the miracle? *Ordered chaos*: something immanent to Naples's sense of space; something as archaic as the cults of Dionysus and Apollo and as modern as the Counter-Reformation. A co-arising of the very old and the very new emerges here; yet Goethe does not see how the two connect, for he is looking for a *continuous correspondence* among details that form an indirect and jagged chain of associations. Naples introduces to him a heterotemporal horizon and an imaginary riddled with correspondences that, in their contingency and in their asymmetry, test the limits of universal theoretical formulations. The chain of resemblances Goethe begins to see does not constitute an organic whole, but an entanglement. So Goethe cannot solve the riddle lurking in his morphology of the city in 1787 anymore than we can today in 2012. We, too, are compelled to "work around" intractable problems for which we have no clear solution, and we can only do so with the limited means we have at our disposal.

Goethe, however never admits this. He never fully explicates the relation between sameness and alterity inherent to the city's *form*. Perhaps the problem lies in his unitary principle of metamorphosis, which is premised on the idea of an essence, a thing *in itself*, evolving according to a linear order conjoining the simplest form to the most complex. Conversely, Naples expresses a discontinuous order that undermines the very idea of essence and translates it into "sense"—a mode of Being *beside itself*, incessantly transposed and transformed by kinship, affinities, and relationships. Goethe seems to realize this only intermittently, in those delightful moments of poetic abandon when he apprehends *precisely* what he does not know and feels no need to explain. The drive for explanation, however, eventually reasserts itself with dubious results.

Forma urbis *and* Forma mentis: *A Hypothetical Morphology of Naples's* Ordered Chaos

Reading through Goethe's passages on Naples, one gains the impression of a city striving to transpose life and death over the same, undifferentiated imaginary horizon, through a temporary interruption of linear time, of history, of modernity, and even of Nature. Naples's talent for reinventing the conjunction of life and death, and at a tempo congenial to its *pathos*—*allegro ma non troppo* (cheerfully, but not too much)—is nowhere more pronounced than in the sacro-secular ritual practices demarcated every aspect of the city's daily life. Goethe's aim consists of grasping the *forma urbis* and the *forma mentis* of the city, apprehending the affinities underpinning Naples's civic and psychic life. When he transposes over the field of human action, his notion of entelechy leads him to make questionable assertions. His anthropological figuration of *ordered chaos*, no doubt inspired by the most genuine poetic instinct, at times leads him astray, undermining his quest for "the necessary and true."

Let me now introduce a few excerpts revealing his dexterity at extracting elusive resemblances from a web of concrete details entangling the social, cultural, and spiritual *textura* of the city. First, a description of the feast of Saint Joseph, patron saint of all pastry cooks, or *frittaruoli*:

Under the black boiling oil they use for frying, there is a constant flare of flame; all fiery torments are assigned to this mystery. Last night they decorated their house fronts with appropriate paintings: Souls in Purgatory and Last Judgments were blazing on all sides. In front of their doors large frying pans stood on hastily erected stoves. One apprentice kneaded the dough, while a second shaped it into crullers and threw it into the boiling oil. A third stood beside the pan with a small skewer, picked out the crullers when they were cooked and put them on another skewer, held by a fourth practitioner. The third and fourth apprentices were young boys wearing blond, elaborately curled wigs which are regarded as the attributes of angels. To complete the group, there were some persons who handed wine to the cooks, drank themselves and cried their wares. *Angels, cooks, everybody shouted at the top of their voices.* They drew a great crowd because, on this night, all pastry goods are sold at greatly reduced prices and even a portion of the profits is given to the poor. (1970, 213; my italics)⁴⁰

Through the feast, economic, aesthetic, and spiritual functions form a relational space, but one ultimately irreducible to traditional empirical calculation. The Neapolitan feast allegorizes the precariousness of modernity, which the oxymoronic logic of the city is able to absorb, in fits and bursts, through a mutable configuration of time and space, the sacred and the profane, life and death, and so on. The feast belongs to an interstitial order of knowledge producing a functional but no less cryptic space, allegorical if never securely symbolic.⁴¹

The next two descriptions reinstate this open-ended confluence of opposites through a correlation of the feast and the funeral. This similitude, in Goethe's view, evinces the "natural" entelechy of the city, but it is a 'nature' completely enmeshed in artifice. Moreover, the Neapolitan sense of "naturalness" is enhanced by the artificial eruption of chromaticity that everywhere seems to construct its "gayety:"

One of the greatest delights of Naples is the universal gayety [ausgezeichnete Fröhlichkeit]. The many colored flowers and fruits in which Nature adorns herself seem to invite the people to decorate themselves and their belongings with as vivid colors as possible. All who can in any way afford it wear silk scarves, ribbons and flowers in their hats. In the poorest homes the chairs and chests are painted with bright flowers on a guild ground. . .

We usually think of a passion for gaudy colors as barbaric or in bad taste [barbarisch und geschmacklos], and often with reason, but under this blue sky nothing can be too colorful, for nothing can outshine the brightness of the sun and its reflection in the sea. The most brilliant color is softened by the strong light, and the green of the trees and plants, the yellow brown and red of the soil are dominant enough to absorb the more highly colored flowers and dresses into a

⁴⁰ See German text (Vol. 1, 1913, 220-221).

⁴¹ See Henri Lefebvre's *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 1991). Specifically, see Lefebvre's analysis of cryptic space found in chapter 4, "From Absolute Space to Abstract Space" (254-262). See also Paul De Man's discussion of the "pain" of allegory in his analysis of the Romantic urge for symbolic adequacy in his essay "The Rhetoric of Temporality," in *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 187-228.

general harmony. The scarlet skirts and bodices, trimmed with gold and silver braids which the women of Neptune wear, the pointed boats, etc., everything seems to be competing for visual attention against the splendor of sea and sky. (1970, 323)⁴²

A hyperkinetic concoction of noises, smells, colors, and movements seems to perform the funereal function of exorcising trauma: “As they live so they bury their dead,” Goethe explains, and “no slow-moving black cortege disturbs the harmony of this merry world”(323). This statement suggests an intermittent realization on Goethe’s part that the cosmic order might occasionally be experienced in terms of kinships, affinities, and relationships that are not strictly dualistic:

I saw them carrying a child to his grave. The bier was hidden under an ample mass of red velvet embroidered with gold, and the little coffin was ornamented and gilded and colored with rose-colored ribbons. At each of its four corners stood an angel about two feet high, holding a large sheaf of flowers over the sleeping child, who lay dressed in white. Since these angels were only fastened in place with wires, they shook with every movement of the bier and wafted the fragrance of the flowers in all direction. One reason why they tottered was that the procession was hurrying down the street at such a pace the priest and the candle-bearers at its head were running, rather than walking (323).

Everything in the Neapolitan funerals and feasts points to a allegorical correspondence of the sacred with the profane inherent in the Baroque order of things, which Goethe, however, never names, perhaps because it is an allegory so domesticated that it is hardly distinguishable from the ordinary. Such is the case of the *presepe*, a nativity scene that at Christmas could be seen in all the churches and in the homes of the rich and the poor. Goethe notices this representation on the roof-tops of houses, where its figures—the Madonna, Saint Joseph, the angels, the holy child, and the shepherds are sometimes substituted by *living sculptures*. A new link in the metonymical chain of resemblances turns up here between the *presepe* and the pantomime, a popular diversion among the wealthy and noble classes who stage elaborate representations of profane scenes from history, or poetry. Goethe has occasion to observe this baroque spectacle in the mansion of Sir William Hamilton, a British diplomat and a prominent collector of greco-roman artifacts. His twenty-year old wife, Lady Emma Hamilton, is Naples’s most celebrated “image of beauty as a moving statue,” as Goethe aptly describes her. Decked in Greek garb, she performs an extraordinary array of *attitudini* (attitudes), an uninterrupted succession of poses extrapolated from the theatrical and literary canon of the day. The result is an eclectic articulation of the neo-classical hit parade, which would seem to dovetail with Goethe’s theory of metamorphosis were it not so remarkably baroque:

⁴² See German text (Vol. 2, 1913, 63).

Dressed in this, she lets down her hair and, with a few shawls, gives so much variety to her poses, gestures, expressions, etc. that the spectator can hardly believe his eyes. He sees what a thousand of artists would have liked to express realized before him in movements and surprising transformations—standing, kneeling, sitting, reclining, serious, sad, playful, ecstatic, contrived, alluring, threatening, anxious, one pose follows another without break. She knows how to arrange the folds of her veil to match each mood, and has a hundred ways of turning it into a headdress (208).⁴³

And so it is that Medea, Antigone, Iphigenia, Penelope, and “all the antiquities, all the profiles of Sicilian coins” materialize and dissolve between the folded veils of this protean creature—a veritable living museum. For all its charms, Lady Hamilton’s performance is in Goethe’s view a futile exercise, elegant but no less problematic than the grotesque Villa of the Prince of Pallagonia. This perhaps explains his reticence to delve any further into what appears to him as a mere instance of change without transformation.

While the wealthy entertain themselves with rarefied allegories of metamorphosis, the underprivileged *folk*, the so-called *Lazzari*, invent ways of converting the public space into a viable habitat conforming to their material needs: work and sleep, but also leisure. The whole city is transformed into a home-theatre; yet, this composite space also turns the city into an allegory of precarious modernity. Though Goethe does not put things quite in these terms, he is able to assess the creative labor of the working poor as something that confutes the cliché of the Neapolitan never-do-well: “The longer and closer I looked, the fewer real idlers I could observe” (319). To prove this point, he lays out an annotated taxonomy comprising the activities of porters, carriage drivers, beggars, small children, garbage collectors, and peddlers, and concludes that, paradoxically, “in Naples it is the poorest class which works the hardest [meiste Industrie]” (320).⁴⁴

Unlike the Northern poor, the Neapolitan indigent is not a wretched destitute; on the contrary, Goethe argues, “the so-called Neapolitan beggar might well refuse to become Viceroy of Norway or decline the honor of being Nominated Governor of Siberia by the Empress of all the Russias” (321).⁴⁵ What could possibly motivate, let alone justify such a hyperbolic assertion on the part of someone so openly adverse to vacuous rhetoric (even in an actress)? Goethe is absolutely convinced that Nature “invited [the Cynic philosopher] to live in the South;” and he extrapolates from this that in Naples “the ragged man is not naked, nor poor he who has not provisions for tomorrow” (321).⁴⁶ After weeks of roaming the city and its surroundings he believes he has finally grasped Naples’s *ethos*: Mediterranean stoicism, a boundless ability to cope with crisis and make the most out of the least, as long as Nature gives shelter. Naples’s geography provides the ground for a more porous existence by rendering the boundary between indoor and outdoor, private and public space, personal and common property, relatively negotiable. His description of the daily life of the poor confirms this very porous spatial configuration, and yet, perhaps all Goethe has really found or rescued is his sense of essence, this time epitomized by the ideal of an “easy life:”

⁴³ See German text (Vol. 1, 1913, 215).

⁴⁴ See German text (Vol. 2, 1913, 59).

⁴⁵ See German text (Vol. 2, 1913, 60).

⁴⁶ See German text (Vol. 2, 1913, 60).

He may have neither home nor lodging, spend summer nights under the projecting roof of a house, in the door way of a palazzo, church or public building, and when the weather is bad, find a shelter where, for a trifling sum, he may sleep, but this does not make him a wretched outcast. When one considers the abundance of fish and sea food which the ocean provides . . . the abundance of a variety of fruit and vegetables at every season of the year . . . then *one gets an idea of how easy life is in these parts* [so läßt sich wohl begreifen, wie leicht dort zu leben sein möge.] (321, my italics)⁴⁷

Generalizations aside, Goethe detects in the Neapolitan *ethos* a creative aptitude—practical and necessary—that allows for the integration of work and leisure. Even the poorest “work not merely to live but to enjoy themselves” and “wish even their work to be recreation” (321). Nothing, for him, could be more antithetical to the Protestant work *ethos*, and yet what a perfectly reasonable stance! So much for the stereotype of the lazy Neapolitan *Lazzaro*, the living emblem of Southern backwardness in the eyes of even the most enlightened Northerners. Goethe empathizes deeply with the resilience of the Neapolitan poor, but his justifications often reflect a scant understanding of the city’s genealogical, social and economic context.

The Neapolitan Character: A Problematic Syllogism

The greatest challenge Naples poses to Goethe’s descriptions has to do with his tendency to rely on simplistic syllogisms. To put it schematically, Goethe’s description of the Neapolitan character proceeds as follows: When Nature provides the basic needs, life is free of care; therefore, the Neapolitan, even the poorest, “can take pain and sorrow as they come with cheerful resignation.” *Ad maiorem Dei gloriam*. This is the gist of the syllogism Goethe constructs in the following passage:

Today I rambled through the city in my usual fashion, noting many points . . . Everything one sees and hears give evidence that this is a happy country which amply satisfies all the basic needs and breeds a people who can wait without concern for tomorrow to bring them what they had today and for that reason live a happy-go-lucky existence, content with momentary satisfaction and moderate pleasures, and *taking pain and sorrow as they come with cheerful resignation* [Augenblickliche Befriedigung mäßiger Genuß, vorübergehender Leiden heiteres Dulden!] (1970,199; my italics)⁴⁸

By end of this entry he provides an example. He tells us the story of a group of street urchins lying in a circle on the paving stones with their hands pressed flat on the ground. It is a cold and

⁴⁷ See German text (Vol. 2, 1913, 60).

⁴⁸ See German text (Vol. 1, 1913, 205).

damp day, and Goethe is racking his brain to figure out the meaning of this mysterious gesture. The expression on the childrens' faces tells him that this is not a game. Finally, a reasonable explanation begins to take shape. A blacksmith in the neighborhood has been working on fitting a tire on a cartwheel. The process is as follows:

The iron band is laid on the ground, shavings are piled on it in a circle and set alight to make the iron sufficiently malleable. When the shavings have burnt themselves out, the tire is fitted on to the wheel, and the ashes are carefully swept out. The little street indians⁴⁹ take advantage of the fact that the paving stones are still hot and stay there till they have absorbed the last bit of warmth from them (200).⁵⁰

This succinct and precise description then leads him to a problematic interpretation:

I could give you countless other examples of *this capacity to get the most out of the least and make careful use of what would otherwise be wasted. These people display the most ingenious resource* [lebhafteste und geistreichste Industrie], *not in getting rich, but in living free of care* (200, my italics).⁵¹

From a socio-economic perspective, this conclusion seems preposterously reactionary, as it is hard to imagine the “cheerful resignation” of thousands of plebeians. The poverty of Neapolitan *Lazzari* was an undisputed fact co-opted by the Counter-Reformation Church and by the Bourbon crown for various ends and by propagandistic means. Some may be tempted to dismiss Goethe’s assessment as just another Northern European projection of primitive innocence, something approaching the old Jesuit trope of the “happy poor” abiding with “the wise folly” of the school of Christ, which alone has the power of beatifying poverty.”⁵² In fact, Goethe’s light-hearted portrait of the poor remains unsettling.

This being said, I would suggest a less literal approach: even the most luminous resemblance can become the ground for reductive and discriminatory rationalizations. Every representation can threaten to cross that thin line between de/scription and in/scription. Goethe’s descriptions are most effective when the anomalous resemblances he extrapolates (feast/funeral, sacred/profane, myth/abyss) are not forced into simplistic syllogisms, or dualisms. Despite this tendency, Goethe’s description of the life of the poor conveys, in the same breath, such a tangible matching of crisis and of resourcefulness, that the phrase “cheerful resignation” could suggest a form of transgression and *re-signation*: contrary to the Protestant German *ethos*, the *ethos* of the Neapolitan poor defines poverty as a material condition, not as a moral one, and therefore as a

⁴⁹ The word in the original text is “Huronen,” which is the Huron tribe native to Canada.

⁵⁰ See German text (Vol. 1, 1913, 206).

⁵¹ See German text (Vol. 1, 1913, 206).

⁵² In order to induce guilt among the rich patrons and extract donations, the Jesuits of the Counter-Reformation perfected the ideology of the “happy poor”: “the ‘wealthy poor’ can find the ‘treasure of poverty’ by admitting into their lives ‘the wise folly’ of the school of Christ, which alone has the power of beatifying poverty.” This glorified framing of the poor was intended to appease the indigent, while inducing guilt among the wealthy to instigate more generous donations to the Church. See Piero Camporesi’s *Il Paese della Fame* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1985), 12.

condition to be negotiated (or *re-signed*) with tragic-irony, if necessary, but not with shame.

This slightly more textured syllogism can go a long way. It could explain why Goethe marvels at the “gayety” of Neapolitan indigents that, he says, is so unlike “the wretched destitution” of the Northern poor. We could also infer that the “resourceful” Neapolitan, far from resigning “cheerfully,” *re-signs* the order of things in ways that violate those univocally tragic representations that inscribe the poor in the category of bare life. Against bare life, the Neapolitan erects artilleries of invention and intervention: techniques of life that tread the line between anarchy and order (which Goethe intuits, but which he is not fully willing to describe). The technique Goethe introduces to us through the dyad feast/funeral, for instance, both produces and is contingent upon a space that renders the terms of the dyad dynamic: a porous and supple space in which the stretching of boundaries is negotiated on a daily basis. The feast/funeral exemplifies a dyad that both resigns and re-signs its duality by stretching the boundaries between life and death, the necessary and the possible, or in Goethe’s own ecstatic words, “the Beautiful and the Terrible.”

Immanence: Sense Versus Essence

Goethe’s phenomenological approach to Naples would seem to confirm this point: Nature and Being belong to an immanent order of reality. But what defines this order, essence or a sense? When transposed over the anthropological plane, his notion of entelechy becomes virtually indistinguishable from a transcendental *a priori* construct, to the extent that essences are eternal by definition. The problem we may detect in Goethe’s reading of Naples does not reside so much in an ideology of transcendence *per se*, but with the challenges involved in establishing a paradigm of metamorphosis *unanchored* to the idea of essence.

Paradoxically, Goethe’s attempt to find an order emanating *from within* the chaotic immanence of the city throws him into the oxymoronic logic of the city, a *ratio*—a *vertigo* of thought—contingent to a historical experience Goethe subsumes within an ahistorical notion of entelechy. While defending the Southern way of life from contemptuous Protestant assumptions, he resorts to a unitary measure that prevents him from appreciating the alterity inherent in his object of inquiry. Whereas Goethe’s image of Naples betrays his desire to find a direct correspondence between Nature and Being, and to return each detail to a holistic order, a century and a half later, Walter Benjamin will present the city as a paradigm of *discontinuous* similarities irreducible to an *a priori* order. Goethe forces Naples into a metaphor of a unitary cosmos; Benjamin will introduce a paradigm for thinking about the city as an imploded historical force field, whereby *indirect similarities* arise, collide and fall apart within a mutable, constellated space.⁵³ Whereas Goethe looks for order within the chaos, Benjamin will perceive the city as the locus of the vertigo of thought.

Entering this vertigo is a vital philosophical task. Deleuze stresses a similar point in his monograph on Spinoza,⁵⁴ and further elaborates upon it, with Guattari, in *What is Philosophy?*

⁵³ This paradigm is exemplified in Walter Benjamin’s essay “Naples,” which he wrote in 1924 in collaboration with Asja Lacis. See *Reflections: Essays, Aphorism and Autobiographical Writings*, trans. Edmund Jephcott, ed. Peter Demetz (New York: Schocken Books, 1986), 163-173. Benjamin articulates his approach to indirect “non-sensuous similarities” in “Doctrine of the Similar” through a theory of mimesis – a theory of space and time central to his analysis of the urban experience. See *Selected Writings Volume 2: 1927-1934* (1999), 694-699.

⁵⁴ See Giorgio Agamben’s genealogy of Deleuze’s concept of absolute immanence in *Potentialities: Collected*

Deleuze and Guattari call immanence “the image of thought” immanent to nothing but itself, stressing that “whenever immanence is interpreted as immanent to Something, we can be sure that this Something reintroduces the transcendent.”⁵⁵ As an “image of thought,” they argue, the plane of immanence conjures “both what must be thought and what cannot be thought” (59); the vertigo of thought is an inalienable condition we must endure in order to conjure an idea of immanence free of a priori or transcendental concepts:

Perhaps this is the supreme act of philosophy: not so much to think of THE plane of immanence, as to show that is there, unthought in every plane, and to think it in this way as the outside and inside of thought, as the not-external outside and the not internal inside.” (*What is Philosophy?* 59-60)

Goethe’s notion of immanence cannot tolerate this not-external and not-internal spatial configuration, which dispenses with the idea of essence by foregrounding a “sense” of the unthought—a mode of thinking ready to endure all sorts of gaps, paradoxes and double-binds so to remain *in situ*; that is, situated within a mutable, political and historical context.⁵⁶ By contrast, Goethe’s notion of space is fairly context-free, firmly grounded on a linear entelechy comprising the Primal Phenomenon [*Urphänomen*] and the Primal Plant [*Urpflanze*], a general principle of the Absolute aimed at evincing an order immanent to chaos. Chaos *is* that Something Else to which immanence is immanent, no matter how obscure or hard to describe this order is that governs all natural and human phenomena.⁵⁷ This general principle reappears, however, in far bleaker tones, in an enigmatic work from the post-Italian phase, published in 1809, *Elective Affinities* [*Die Wahlverwandtschaften*]: a novel about how elements “choose” to bind. Goethe is fairly ironic about this: why do things seem to be so thoroughly established but then break apart? Is there a fundamental order that produces new affinities and which limits, if not necessarily accuses, human intentionality? Can “affinities” create distinctions that cannot be brought to reason?

A somber account of lives repressed unto death, this novel could be read as the glacial counterpart to Goethe’s image of Naples, which glows with vitality. In *Italian Journey*, he goes so far as to claim that in Naples he “*only want[s] to live*”—a phrase among others suggesting he has a limited understanding of the Neapolitans’ deep solidarity with the dead, and of their tragic irony. Strangely enough, this is precisely the kind of irony we find in Goethe’s *Elective*

Essays in Philosophy, ed. and trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 226-239. In his monograph on Spinoza, *Expressionism in Philosophy*, and later in his collaborative study with Félix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, Deleuze foregrounds a notion of absolute immanence inspired by Spinoza’s concept of univocal Being, which he opposes to the transcendental definition of immanence in line with a history of philosophy from Plato to Husserl.

⁵⁵ See “The Plane of Immanence” in Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell, 45.

⁵⁶ In Goethe’s thought, as well as in Deleuze and Guattari’s, Spinoza’s influence looms large. Yet, while Goethe’s phenomenology agrees with Spinoza’s crucial assertion that nature and spirit are *visible* manifestations of the divine, he strays away from the historical and political dimension of Spinoza’s groundbreaking formulation of immanence.

⁵⁷ For further elucidation of Goethe’s notions of the primal phenomenon and the primal plant, particularly as it pertains to immanence, see Andy Blunden’s essay, “The *Urphänomen* and the Absolute,” Talk for Hegel and Religion Conference, Sydney, September 2010. See also Walter Benjamin’s analysis of Spinoza’s influence on Goethe’s thought in Benjamin’s essay “Goethe” in *Selected Writings* (1999), 161-193 and particularly 172-173.

Affinities, a novel about people driven by death impulses they do not understand and which they try to master through calculations that prove to be catastrophic. Not knowing how to overcome or to transgress their crippling sense of the order of things, not knowing how to handle the risks their passions bring in their wake, they succumb to forces they are neither able to master nor to recognize.

Leading these dichotomies to their logical—and fatal—conclusion, Goethe brings to the fore the following idea: what seems most monstrous in life is in fact a *de-monstration* of life *as such*—an immanence that refutes any *a priori* order.

We may conclude that, far from being a carnivalesque interlude in the life of a quiet Northerner, Naples impressed Goethe with something more oblique than the “universal gayety” he ascribes to it: a force exceeding any entelechy and any essence, and which at the end of his life finds expression in a testament to life *as such*, as the sense and the non-sense beyond good and evil.

Conclusion

In Naples, Goethe’s fundamental challenge consists of attempting to describe the morphology of a space that nevertheless resists all unitary measures except paradoxical ones. The city introduces Goethe to an imploded historical space in which the arbitrary and the necessary, order and anarchy, myth and abyss inhabit the same immanent plane, but it is a plane that, in its very immanence, does not reveal itself to a total gaze, as the panorama of a purely theoretical construct may. The form of the city is paradoxical but not absurd. Goethe intuits this, and attempts to explicate the city’s morphology through numerous fascinating correlations; however, his explanations often fall flat: he does not venture far beyond the limited lexicon of words like *happy*, *beautiful*, *important*, *valuable*, or *care-free*. Furthermore, his intense concern for precision—or “exact sensory perception”—leads him to systematize his thoughts in terms of dualities, syllogisms, and syntheses that at times seem to be motivated by a therapeutic need to avert uncertainty and solve intransigent riddles. This dialectical tendency at times prevents him from probing the ambiguity his own descriptions bring to light, as if in spite of himself. Goethe’s phenomenology aims at reconciling Nature and human nature, and this perhaps explains his difficulty at articulating Naples’s *anarchic order* as a function of a genealogy immanent to Southern Italy, and encompassing an array of relationships between geology, geography, culture, religion, economics, and politics.

By the year 1787, Naples presents to the outsider a very dense accretion of signs presided over by the Baroque principle of the *omnia ubique*, a spatial order superimposing numerous indices: Spanish, French, Norman, Arabic, Egyptian, Roman, Greek, Gothic, Romanic, Christian, and pagan. Figuratively speaking, Naples replicates the molten incandescence of lava through a contamination of registers; it is a city tensely held together through a *language of actions* operating in several registers at once: high and low, sacred and profane, mythical and folkloristic, psychic and aesthetic, political and theatrical.⁵⁸ Goethe’s challenge consists in detecting the *entelechy* of a city that manages its crisis through a form of self-governed anarchy. This poses the

⁵⁸ Pier Paolo Pasolini elaborates upon a triangulation involving the language of human action, the “language of reality,” and the concepts of magma and *contaminazione* in “New Linguistic Questions” and “The Cinema of Poetry” in *Heretical Empiricism*, trans. Ben Lawton and Louise K. Barnett (Washington, DC: New Academic Publishing, 2005), 3-23 and 167-187.

implicit question: by what means, actions and techniques does such a city operate, pretend to operate, or dismantle its normative operative system?

Anxious to find an answer, Goethe reaches an impasse: despite his faith in the inner necessity of phenomena, he cannot articulate the logic of conflicts irreducible to a solution. In this regard, his failure is a success, though he never actually acknowledges this failure, or explores its implications. Nowhere does Naples suggest a resolution to its crisis, but it does display the most imaginative aptitude for management. The city responds to crisis through a *contaminatio*, a commingling of registers; hence, the invention of the funeral-feast, the feast-church, the church-theater, and the living-sculpture. We can regard Naples's propensity for spectacles as a manifestation of the cities-within-the-city constituting its invisible *textura*. Each invention produces an interruption in the web of contradictions and makes room for adjustments that, however, do not amount to systematic solutions. The negotiation of the Impossible, the Possible, and the Necessary simply defuses and defers crisis *ad infinitum*. These considerations suggest a paradox: in Naples, a sense of an ending produces a sense of the never-ending.

Two spatial models might help us visualize this point. We can imagine, for instance, the paradoxical geometry of the *möbius strip*: a surface with only one side and with only one boundary component, turning over itself in seamless continuity.⁵⁹ We can also envision the formless geometry of magma: thick lava erupting from the inner depth of a crater and solidifying on its outer surface; a process repeated again and again until the inner and the outer lining of the volcano congeal into a single plane, unfolding inside-out, and folding back into the friable matter. The conflation of inner/outer, hot/cold, liquid/solid produces, as it were, a fused and [con]fused space. This leads us to the central problem: for all his passion for mutable phenomena, Goethe cannot produce a precise description of confusion any more than he can admit anarchy—or anomalous forms of historical and genealogical evolutions—into his theory of metamorphosis.

Languor, distraction, interruption, gaiety, indifference, and intoxicated self-forgetfulness: these are keywords Goethe deploys to describe a city “wedged,” he writes, “between God and the Devil,” a threshold he himself is unwilling to enter. Unwilling to explore the mutable *ratio* of a space riddled with contradictions, Goethe retreats to his overarching principle of entelechy. Paradoxically, his attempt to subsume all of Nature—human and non-human—into a physical image of totality leads him, on the contrary, to enact the impossibility of aligning all the images of reality over a *continuous* evolutionary plane. Far from a compact field of vision, Goethe's struggle with description posits the metonymic derailment of the image. If the paradigm of the *omnia ubique* (everything-everywhere) reveals Naples, it is a paradigm Goethe never fully reads in its own terms. Naples resists a unitary image—it is always “para,” literally beside itself. And yet it is Goethe's palpable reluctance to see the city in this way that renders his descriptions so compelling. Always a Northerner, Goethe is also always reluctant to read Naples as merely a Southern carnival, or a Southern abyss.

⁵⁹ A *möbius strip* can be easily created by taking a paper strip and giving it a half-twist, and then joining the ends of the strip together to form a loop.

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