

**BIODIVERSITY AND AESTHETICS:
SOME HISTORICAL REMARKS**

Endre Szécsényi

 ORCID: 0000-0002-9280-3833

ELTE Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest (01jsq2704)

Contacts: szecsényi.endre@btk.elte.hu

ABSTRACT

This article explores the historical roots of the aesthetic experience of biodiversity, focusing on a formative period of modern aesthetics between the mid-17th and late 18th centuries. Drawing on the works of Balthasar Gracián, Joseph Addison, and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, the paper argues that the diversity and multitude of living species – what we now call biodiversity – were already central to proto-aesthetic and early aesthetic reflections on nature. Although lacking modern ecological awareness, these authors attributed profound emotional, philosophical, and symbolic value to the variety of life. Gracián's concept of the innocent gaze, Addison's aesthetic of novelty and fullness of being, and Goethe's morphological insights into metamorphosis each exemplify a distinct mode of aesthetically engaging with biodiversity. The study concludes with critical reflections on the limits of linking aesthetic appreciation to ethical responsibility in contemporary debates on conservation, warning against instrumental or scientific appropriations of aesthetic experience.

Keywords: Aesthetic experience of nature, Gracián, Addison, Goethe.**BIODIVERSITÀ ED ESTETICA: ALCUNE OSSERVAZIONI STORICHE**

Il presente articolo indaga le radici storiche dell'esperienza estetica della biodiversità, concentrandosi su un periodo formativo dell'estetica moderna compreso tra la metà del XVII e la fine del XVIII secolo. Attraverso l'analisi delle opere di Balthasar Gracián, Joseph Addison e Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, si sostiene che la diversità e la molteplicità delle specie viventi – ciò che oggi chiamiamo biodiversità – fossero già centrali nelle riflessioni proto-estetiche e nelle prime elaborazioni estetiche sulla natura. Pur privi di una consapevolezza ecologica moderna, questi autori attribuivano alla varietà della vita un profondo valore emotivo, filosofico e simbolico. Il concetto di sguardo innocente in Gracián, l'estetica della novità e della pienezza dell'essere in Addison e le intuizioni morfologiche sulla metamorfosi in Goethe rappresentano ciascuno un diverso modo di rapportarsi esteticamente alla biodiversità. Lo studio si conclude con una riflessione critica sui limiti del legame tra apprezzamento estetico e responsabilità etica nei dibattiti contemporanei sulla conservazione, mettendo in guardia contro usi strumentali o scientifici dell'esperienza estetica.

Parole chiave: Esperienza estetica della natura, Gracián, Addison, Goethe.

«Ecology is Nature-Philosophy *secularized*».
(Ian Hamilton Finlay, *Unconnected Sentences
on Gardening*, 1980)

1. INTRODUCTION

In this paper¹, I discuss some aspects of the first period of *modern* aesthetics, from the middle of 17th century to the late 18th century. In this one and half centuries, the emerging modern aesthetics was paradigmatically engaged in the experience of nature, and not in art. Even in his *Critique of Judgment* (1790), Immanuel Kant takes the *paradigmatic* examples of the free beauty, and both the mathematically and dynamically sublime from nature.² The topic of biodiversity (i.e. the variety and abundance of living species) can be found as an important ingredient of the proto-aesthetic or early aesthetic experience of nature, but, unlike our ecological understanding, biodiversity was still considered as a natural fact, something which was established in the great chain of being, to be appreciated, but not something we can or have to preserve. If there was any human duty associated with the early aesthetic appreciation of biodiversity, it was rather a gratitude to the creator. Modern natural sciences, which simultaneously rose in the 17th century, supported the traditional faith that Nature was the creation of a benevolent and wise god; the fresh scientific discoveries and the new model of the universe did not refute this conception at all as we have learnt from several excellent studies of the intellectual history of modern sciences. And it is also obvious that the ardent issues of our present – the global dangers from climate change, the massive extinction of species, or the consequences of the Anthropocene – could not still be raised and discussed in this period. Taking the significant differences between the two ages or between the two intellectual and social-political environments seriously, one can rightly raise the question: what could we learn from the intellectual historical reflections on this one-and-half-century period that would be beyond antiquarian interest?

In what follows, I will show that, on the one hand, biodiversity³ has played a significant role in the modern aesthetic appreciation of nature from the very beginning, long before the ecological function and importance of biodiversity was recognised as a scientific fact, and, on the other, that already this proto-aesthetic or aesthetic⁴ approach to the variety and multitude of living beings could shape the status of man in the relation to their natural environment. I will briefly discuss three figures – a Spaniard, an Englishman and a German – of this period: the Jesuit Balthasar Gracián from the middle of the 17th century, the essayist, playwright and editor Joseph Addison from the very early 18th century, and finally Goethe who needs no introduction. All three were prolific authors, all three were both creative writers and people with deep

¹ Its first version was presented at the international workshop «Cultivating the Idea of Biodiversity: The Arts and their Languages for an Ecologist Engagement in the Public Space» at the University of Palermo on the 7th of June, 2023. – Both my in-situ participation at the event, and the elaboration of this paper were supported by the National Research, Development and Innovation Office (Hungary), Project Nr. OTKA K143294 *Perspectives in Environmental Aesthetics* (2022–2025).

² Even if by the time Kant's mature aesthetics was published, the focus of philosophical aesthetics has shifted to art and the genius artist, and Kant himself discussed these issues too in the first part of the Third Critique. – There was, of course, a significant theoretical interest in the arts during this period, but from the perspective of *modern* aesthetics, the experience of nature (and everyday life) had theoretical primacy.

³ In this paper, by «biodiversity» I simply mean the variety and abundance of living species on Earth; I am well aware that it is an anachronistic use in the light of the contemporary scientific definition of the word.

⁴ I use «aesthetic» and «proto-aesthetic» as historical categories, because I think that modern aesthetics emerged only from the early 18th century onwards as an unprecedented form and manner of experience, so I do not use «aesthetic» as an umbrella category that generally refers to the arousal of delight, admiration and similar emotions.

philosophical or theoretical interests; all three can be considered as significant contributors to modern aesthetic thinking, and all three had explicit opinions on the function and aesthetic meaning of biodiversity. Moreover, Addison was a «Humorist in Gardening», as he called himself in a famous *Spectator* essay in which he announced a new taste in garden design⁵, while Goethe was also a philosopher-botanist and a garden expert as it has been quite conspicuous, for example, to the readership of his novel *Die Wahlverwandtschaften* (1809).

Gracián created his oeuvre before the great discoveries of Newtonian natural sciences and before the so-called scientific revolution; Addison was already well aware of the fresh scientific discoveries, and several essays of his dealt with or referred to physico-theological and modern scientific issues or directly continued the tradition of Protestant meditations famously cultivated by Robert Boyle. At the same time, Addison couldn't have read Carl Linneaus' *Systema naturae* (1735), which was already very well-known by Goethe and his generation, while they otherwise still couldn't have known anything about the theory of evolution or the methods of modern ecology. Nevertheless, Goethe didn't build on or develop Linneaus' great system to name and to order every living being in nature, rather he was interested in the unfolding and the development of plants and animals, moreover in their interactions with the environment. My selection, although arbitrary, will hopefully prove at least illustrative. Finally, inspired by this brief historical overview, I will try to draw some lessons for contemporary aesthetic thinking in the form of a few closing remarks.

2. THE ADMIRABLE VARIETY AND MULTITUDE OF CREATURES

The multitude and variety of creatures in the framework of divine creation was an ancient topic. We have already known from the Genesis that in the third day the plants were created, in the fifth and sixth days all the animals. First the fish and the birds: «Let the waters bring forth *abundantly* the moving creature that hath life, and fowl that may fly above the earth in the open firmament of heaven» (Gen 1: 20), then the animals of land: «Let the earth bring forth the living creature after his kind, cattle, and creeping thing, and beast of the earth after his kind» (Gen 1:24).⁶ The swarm of living species was a clear sign of the power and generosity of the creator. And their order or hierarchical arrangement was a sign of his wisdom. However, in the *mode* of appreciation of this feature of nature, Gracián invented something new, and I am inclined to name it a proto-aesthetic gaze. At the outset of the first volume of his allegorical novel, *El Criticón* (1651), Gracián introduces one of his main characters whose name is Andrenio, he is *the man of nature*. According to the fiction, Andrenio grew up imprisoned in a cave on the island of St. Helena, he was fed by wolves. Having followed an enormous earthquake, the mountain collapsed, and he escaped from his dungeon. This was for the first time in his life he could look around and could wonder at nature on the surface of the earth in sunlight. His first impressions and later reflections upon both nature and his own first reactions were disclosed in the form of a dialogue with the shipwrecked and disillusioned Critilo, the other main

⁵ J. Addison and Others, *The Spectator*, vol. 4., D. F. Bond (ed. by), The Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1965, p. 188. (No. 477.)

⁶ We can find similar descriptions in other ancient cosmogonies, too, for example, Empedocles taught that «[u]nder strife [the four elements] have different forms and are all separate, but they come together in love and are desired by one another. From them comes all that was and is and will be hereafter – trees have sprung from them, and men and women, and animals and birds and water-nourished fish, and long-lived gods too, highest in honor». (Fr. 21.) Or: «formerly unmixed things were in a mixed state, owing to the exchanging of their ways. And, as they were being mixed, countless types of mortal things poured forth, fitted with all kinds of forms, a wonder to see». (Fr. 35.) Empedocles, *The Extant Fragments*, transl. by M. R. Wright, Yale University Press, New Haven, London, 1981.

character, who represents *the man of the world* in this novel. Andrenio's original admiration was not relied on the recognition of the visible world's order and its beauty, that is, of the *cosmos*, as we might expect based on similar earlier illustrations, like, e.g., Cicero's example in his *De natura deorum* (II. 95.), which he had taken from Aristotle's now lost *De philosophia*,⁷ or Lucretius' lines, inspired from the same textual source, on «the novel aspect of nature» from his *De rerum natura*.⁸ Instead, we are informed about Andrenio's violently passionate reactions to nature, to «the grand theatre of the universe», which precede any intellectual insight, in the second chapter:

the whole vigour of my Soul applying it self to the Windows of my Eyes with that Contentment, and Curiosity, that it disabled the rest of my Senses to perform their Function, that for a whole day I remained immoveable, unsensible, and dead, being overwhelmed by over-powering of too strong a Life. I would here express, but it is impossible, the intense violence of my Affections, the extravagant Raptures of my Soul; [...] the wonder and amazement I then conceived, are not so clearly forgotten, but that the sense thereof, do strongly affect me.⁹

Not the intellectual insight into the great order of nature is mentioned here, but an irresistible stream of emotions which triggered both enthusiasm and long lasting affections in our hero. Critilo – who is continuously interpreting Andrenio's memories by phrasing and explaining them in a philosophical or moral language – associates Andrenio's amazed state of mind with the first man's: «O! How much I envy thee [...] this unknown happiness of thine, the only privilege of the first Man, and you, the Faculty of seeing all at once, and that with Observation, the Greatness, Beauty, Harmony, Stability, and Variety of this created Fabirck»¹⁰. According to Critilo, Andrenio possesses Adam's innocent gaze, and through it he is capable of perceiving and enjoying the whole creation with the proto-aesthetic qualities of greatness (sublime), beauty, harmony – and variety. The latter is the source of the modern aesthetic category of novelty.¹¹ Later Addison also discusses the aesthetic appreciation of nature mostly, but not exclusively, under the category of novelty, and identifies the special joy of the aesthetic experience provided by the polite imagination of the spectator as «innocent pleasure», in that I tend to see a heir of Adam's and Andrenio's innocent gaze.

⁷ A few pages later, in the framework of considering the beauties of the world as the creations of the divine providence, Cicero writes: «let us behold the whole Earth [...] clothed with flowers and grass and trees and corn, forms of vegetation all of them incredibly numerous and inexhaustibly varied and diverse. [...] Think of all the various species of animals, both tame and wild! think of the flights and songs of birds! Think of all the various species of animals, both tame and wild! think of the flights and songs of birds! of the pastures filled with cattle, and the teeming life of the woodlands! Then why need I speak of the race of men? [...] whose industry diversifies and adorns the lands and islands and coasts with houses and cities. [...] Then how great is the beauty of the sea! how glorious the aspect of its vast expanse! how many and how diverse its islands! how lovely the scenery of its coasts and shores! how numerous and how different the species of marine animals...» Cicero, *De natura deorum; Academica*, transl. by H. Rackham, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1967, p. 219. These beauties can be recognised by the intellect, «as we can picture them in our minds», and the profusion and variation of these things are essential ingredients of their beauties, in the cases of both inanimate and animal (on land, in water and in the air) creatures and in the case of human productions on the earth.

⁸ «[C]onsider the pure splendor of the sky and all within its confines [...]. Suppose that all these marvels were now revealed to mortals for the first time and were suddenly and unexpectedly thrust before their eyes, what more wonderful spectacle than this could be imagined, what spectacle that people would be less prepared to conceive as credible, if they had not yet witnessed it? None in my opinion; so marvelous would this sight have been. As it is, however, the spectacle has so satiated us that it has palled, and no one thinks it worth gazing up at the lambent precincts of the sky». Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things*, transl. by M. Ferguson Smith, Hackett, Indianapolis, Cambridge, 2001, p. 61. (II: 1031–39). For the several species of living creatures and their numerous members, see *Ibid.* (II. 1075ff).

⁹ B. Gracián, *The Critick*, transl. by P. Rycout, Henry Brome, London, 1681, p. 15.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

¹¹ Paul Rycout, the 17th-century English translator, who, of course, could not know anything about the future aesthetic career of this quality, gave «Novelty» as marginal subtitle to this very passage of *El Criticón*. Both Cicero and Lucretius mentioned «novelty» in similar context, but rather as a rapidly fleeting feature of the wonderful.

In the third chapter of *El Criticón* we can read about the «Natures Comeliness» («La hermosa naturaleza»). This is how the chapter starts:

The Variety of Nature is one part of its comely adornment, and affords us matter to busie our Heads in Contemplation, and our Tongues in Praises: our Souls are naturally propense to observe the effects of Nature: The wisest man [... always recommended us to proceed] to such sublime Rapture as may serve to raise in us the returns Gratitude and Glory to the supream Creator. Though admiration be the Daughter of Ignorance, yet it is the Mother of Content; to admire in small things is folly, and to stand unstruck at more miraculous Prodigies is inadvertency.¹²

Then two pages later Andrenio adds:

that which with most delight I considered, was, that amongst the multitude of Creatures, there should be so great diversity, and difference, that not one leaf of a Plant, nor of a Sparrow, should have a resemblance of another Species. In this, said Critilo, the wise Creator determined not only to supply the meer necessities, and wants of Man, for whose sake all was created, but bountifully to extend his hand in a various plenty, that so he, who had been thus liberal in his Gifts, might well expect man should nor be sparing or niggardly in his returns of service.¹³

The first feature of natural beauty immediately perceived by the man of nature is the variety of nature: the multitude and diversity of living beings, anachronistically, the biodiversity of nature. This instinctive or visceral appreciation of nature which naturally raises to the level of enthusiasm is tightly connected to the feeling of gratitude toward the creator of all the species. In Critilo's explanation this abundance is far more than the needs of human beings, so it is a kind of surplus, whose providential goal is to improve man's propensity to show more gratitude and respectful attitude towards the Creator. A few pages later Andrenio – at least in the contemporary English translation of the novel – summarizes his first proto-aesthetic impressions as follows:

I have admired four strange Prodigies in this Universe, vis. [i] The multitude and variety of Creatures, [ii] the harmony and agreement in Contraries, [iii] their beauty and ornament mixed with profit, and convenience, and [iv] their mutations with Permanency. Yet above all, I remained confused in the knowledge of the Creator, who is so manifest in his Creature, and yet hid in himself; whose Attributes are imprinted on very step, and action of his Work, as his Omnipotency in the execution, his Providence in the Government, his Beauty in the perfection, his Bounty in the communication [...]. And notwithstanding this great God is hid, though known, not seen, though manifest, far distant, though near; this is that riddle which hath confused my Understanding, and left me in an extasie of love, and adoration.¹⁴

So the multitude and the variety come as *the first* wonder of nature to be admired, and it can lead the spectator to the creator, but in a special way. We can feel and taste his presence in every wonder around us in nature, yet we cannot gain clear knowledge of his attributes. This is definitely not the paved way of natural theology originating from the ancient Stoics (like Cicero) or from St Paul (Romans 1:20). The proto-aesthetic experience of nature – including the diversity and multiplicity of living beings as her first and perhaps most direct manifestation – is not for our intellect, but for our heart (which is one of the magic words of the 17th century): the hiding god can be felt and extatically loved but always remains unknown. Or, to put

¹² B. Gracián, *The Critick*, cit., p. 25.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 38–39.

it another way, if God were fully transparent in his creatures or in the whole system of creation to our understanding, there would be no room left for the ever-renewing charm of novelty, our heart would remain untouched, and we could only speak about the satisfaction of the intellect, but never about the «extasie of love, and adoration» in feeling.

In the last passage of chapter 3, Andrenio concludes by saying that: «These are [...] the first Rudiments of my Life, better conceived than related [*bien sentida que relatada*]; for where the Thoughts are screwed beyond their natural power, there must consequently want words to utter them [*que siempre faltan palabras donde sobran sentimientos*]»¹⁵. Here the Spanish original helps us to notice the ultimate emphasis on sentiments or feelings; Andrenio speaks about the inexpressible *profusion* of sentiments which were born in his soul during his first encounter with the abundance of the created nature. For him nature was *originally* the source of a series of proto-aesthetic experience, whose first phase (the first «rudiment») was the variety and the multitude of living beings.¹⁶

3. THE HAPPINESS OF EXISTENCE

Addison's famous *Spectator* essay-series entitled «The Pleasures of the Imagination» (1712) is considered one of the first articulations of the modern aesthetic experience. Unsurprisingly, especially in the case of the *primary pleasures* of the imagination, he drew most of his examples from nature. He differentiates three aesthetic qualities, the great (sublime), the beautiful and the novel or uncommon, and he also stresses that these can be mixed, and the aesthetic effect, i.e., the «innocent pleasure» which the given object excites is greater if more than one aesthetic quality is present. His first examples of the novelty are the «Groves, Fields, and Meadows» which are always «pleasant to look upon, but never so much as in the opening of the Spring, when they are all new and fresh»; further examples of the novelty are the natural objects «in Motion» like «Rivers, Jetteaus, or Falls of Water»¹⁷. His aesthetic reflections upon the novelty, which were exemplified mostly with the live, dynamic and ever-renewing prospects of nature, were later extended to the variety and multitude of species in the *Spectator* essay no. 519:

Though there is a great deal of Pleasure in contemplating the Material World, by which I mean that System of Bodies into which Nature has so curiously wrought the Mass of dead Matter, with the several Relations which those Bodies bear to one another; there is still, methinks, something more wonderful and surprising in Contemplations on the World of Life, by which I mean all those Animals with which every Part of the Universe is furnished. The Material World is only the Shell of the Universe: The World of Life are its Inhabitants. If we consider those Parts of the Material World which lie the nearest to us [...], it is amazing to consider the Infinity of Animals with which it is stocked. Every part of Matter is peopled: Every green Leaf swarms with Inhabitants. [... There are] Myriads of living Creatures [everywhere, inside and on the surface of other animals, and] in the Marble it self, innumerable Cells and Cavities that are crouded with such imperceptible Inhabitants, as are too little for the naked Eye to discover. [...] [I]f we look into the more bulky Parts of Nature, we see the Seas, Lakes

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

¹⁶ Gracián's proto-aesthetic appreciation applied to the whole system or assembly of diverse species, and not to some select – attractive or rare – species: Gracián's approach was genuinely holistic. So it has nothing to do with what, for example, Stephen Kellert writes about the aesthetic value of the existence of wildlife: «Many plants and animals are physically attractive. Some rare animals in particular (such as the great white heron, mountain goat, or giant panda) have been recognized as possessing great beauty and other aesthetic qualities». S.R. Kellert, *Social and Perceptual Factors in the Preservation of Animal Species*, in B. G. Norton (ed. by) *The Preservation of Species: The Value of Biological Diversity*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1986, pp. 50–76, p. 53.

¹⁷ J. Addison and Others, *The Spectator*, vol. 3., D. F. Bond (ed. by), The Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1965, p. 542. (No. 412.)

and Rivers teeming with numberless Kinds of living Creatures: We find every Mountain and Marsh, Wilderness and Wood, plentifully stocked with Birds and Beasts...¹⁸

The contemplation of biodiversity in nature – either through the naked eye, or through microscope or telescope¹⁹ – seems to be an aesthetic experience of novelty which offers «a great deal of Pleasure», actually a greater, «more wonderful and surprising» than the pleasure from the objects and views of physical nature: this is probably a more intensive and richer version of the «innocent pleasure» (the *par excellence* aesthetic appreciation) which was earlier discussed in «The Pleasures of the Imagination» series. As we have seen above, the quality of the novelty can be seen as a patent link between Gracián’s man of nature and Addison’s «man of a polite imagination» in their proto-aesthetic or early aesthetic appreciation of nature.

In his seminal book of 1936, Arthur Lovejoy remarks that «Next to the word “Nature”, “the Great Chain of Being” was the sacred phrase of the eighteenth century, playing a part somewhat analogous to that of the blessed word “evolution” in the late nineteenth»²⁰. Addison also uses this phrase in this essay besides its synonyms like «the Scale of Beings» and the «System of Being». This popular phrase appeared mostly in authors who wrote theodicies in the late 17th and throughout the 18th centuries, in this context this phrase connected to the issue of the *plenitude of nature*. As Lovejoy clearly summarises it on commenting Edmund Law’s theory (Law was a fellow-Lockean, a generation junior to Addison): «It was [...] “necessary that the creature should fill the station wherein it was, or none at all.” [Edmund Law] If he were anywhere else, he would not be the same entity; and if he did not exist at all, there would be a gap in the series, and the perfection of the creation would thereby be destroyed»²¹. This is the broader context of this essay of Addison:

The exuberant and overflowing Goodness of the Supreme Being, whose Mercy extends to all his Works, is plainly seen [...] from his having made so very little Matter, at least what falls within our Knowledge, that does not Swarm with Life: Nor is his Goodness less seen in the Diversity, than in the Multitude of living Creatures. Had he only made one species of animals, none of the rest would have enjoyed the Happiness of Existence; he has, therefore, *specified* in his Creation every degree of Life, every Capacity of Being. The whole Chasm in Nature, from a Plant to a Man, is filled up with diverse Kinds of Creatures, rising one over another, by such a gentle and easie Ascent, that the little Transitions and Deviations from one species to another, are almost insensible.²²

Besides the holistic perspective and the pious tone, which is very characteristic of Addison’s aesthetic essays, I find his argument about the hypothesis that there is only one species in the Creation more interesting. He does not refer to the criterion of perfection to reject this hypothetical situation (although this would obviously leave many empty spaces, gaps and chasms in the great chain of being). Instead, he finds this idea unacceptable because uncreated species could not enjoy the «Happiness of Existence». This argument is not of his invention, but it is telling that he invokes it exclusively. In the «Pleasures of the Imagination» series, he put forward another hypothesis: what would happen if somebody were to be deprived of their own polite imagination, by means of which they can see the world «in another light», that is, can enjoy the divine beauty that «poured out upon the whole Creation»; being without this imagination would result in

¹⁸ J. Addison and Others, *The Spectator*, vol. 4., cit., pp. 345–346. (No. 519.)

¹⁹ In the same essay, Addison refers also to Bernard de Fontenelle’s very popular conversations of 1687 on the plurality of worlds in which every planet in the known universe is imagined as peopled with alien species.

²⁰ A.O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 2001, p. 184.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 216.

²² J. Addison and Others, *The Spectator*, vol. 4., cit., pp. 347–348. (No. 519.)

a joyless and insipid life, little better than death.²³ The issue of the variety and multitude of species is thus related to question of the amount of life and happiness in nature, or in the great chain of being; moreover, if the two theses are combined, we may say that the aesthetic appreciation of biodiversity, through the lens of polite imagination, offers the experience of a happier life, a life in which we share with all other living beings, and which is linked to the fullness of existential happiness.

In the later essays of the Imagination series, Addison applies his insights to gardens, architecture and especially literary pieces; he discusses how the aesthetic triad works in classical epics, how these can affect the imagination of the readers. To Addison, the readers can feel the sublime (or great) in Homer's *Iliad*, the beautiful in Virgil's *Aeneid*, and the novel or «strange» in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. In the latter we can see

how the Imagination may be affected by what is Strange. [Ovid] describes a Miracle in every Story, and always gives us the sight of some new Creature at the end of it. His Art consists chiefly in well-timing Description, before the first Shape is quite worn off, and the new one perfectly finish'd; so that he every where entertains us with something we never saw before, and shews Monster after Monster...²⁴

To turn back to nature as an entertaining author, biodiversity is an inexhaustible source of enjoyment with the incomprehensibly numerous «monsters» and their metamorphoses in the land, in the water and in the air. And the topic of metamorphosis may also lead us to our third author.

4. THE PRIMAL PLANT AS THE STRANGEST CREATURE

Although Goethe published his reports and letters about his Italian travels and sojourns just about 30 years later in two volumes, their writing predated his morphological studies on the metamorphosis of plants (*Die Metamorphose der Pflanzen*), and on the shape of the animals (*Versuch über die Gestalt der Tiere*) which came to light in 1790. His general position differs from that of our other two heroes, as he puts it clear in his *Toward a General Comparative Theory* of the early 1790s: «the progress of natural philosophy has been obstructed for many centuries by the conception that a living being is created for certain external purposes and that its form is so determined by an intentional primal force». Although he finds «neither advisable nor possible to refute [this belief] as a whole»²⁵, his approach to nature and the variety and abundance of species is different, he was primarily interested in how animals «fulfil their natural destiny», without external «purpose and intention»²⁶.

His experience of nature in Italy evidently stimulated and enhanced his old interests in botany and zoology. Because he found here, under a very different climate, a more abundant and more exotic vegetation, a greater profusion of species than earlier in Weimar and elsewhere. In April of 1787 he wrote the following oft-cited lines on the botanic garden of Villa Giulia – one of the first public parks in Europe²⁷ – in Palermo:

²³ J. Addison and Others, *The Spectator*, vol. 3., cit., p. 546. (No. 413.)

²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 565–566 (No. 417.)

²⁵ J. W. Goethe, *Toward a General Comparative Theory*, transl. by M. Bell, in M. Bell (ed. by) *The Essential Goethe*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, Oxford, 2016, pp. 937–938.

²⁶ «We will see the entire plant world, for example, as a vast sea which is as necessary to the existence of individual insects as the oceans and rivers are to the existence of individual fish, and we will observe that an enormous number of living creatures are born and nourished in this ocean of plants. Ultimately we will see the whole world of animals as a great element in which one species is created, or at least sustained, by and through another. We will no longer think of connections and relationships in terms of purpose and intention». *Ibid.*, 940.

²⁷ It is worth mentioning that Goethe could not still visit the famous Orto Botanico di Palermo, because its construction work on an area located directly next to the garden of Villa Giulia began only in 1789.

Here where, instead of being grown in pots or under glass as they are with us [in Germany], plants are allowed to grow freely in the open fresh air and fulfil their natural destiny, they become more intelligible. Seeing such a variety of new and renewed forms, my old fancy suddenly came back to mind: Among this multitude might I not discover the Primal Plant [*Urpflanze*]? There certainly must be one. Otherwise, how could I recognize that this or that form *was* a plant if all were not built upon the same basic model?²⁸

The commentators usually concentrate on his concept of «*Urpflanze*» here: it is a long-cherished notion of Goethe which, according to Lovejoy, probably originated from the naturalist Jean-Baptiste Robinet's concept of «*Urbild*» – a kind of archetypal image – which Robinet elaborated and propagated in his five-volume *De la nature* published in the 1760s.²⁹ The «Primal Plant» is evidently a version or a derivative of Goethe's mysterious notion *Urphänomen*. According to him, the archetypal phenomena are parts of (visible) nature, they exist in the same way as other living creatures; they are the embodied laws of nature, constitute the «true nature» to be contemplated.³⁰ For us now the phrase «variety of new and renewed forms» deserves more attention. It was the profusion of the botanic garden which stroke Goethe, and recalled in him the notion of «Primal Plant». So his visits in this botanic garden (like his earlier ones in other botanic and public gardens in Italy) were first and foremost an aesthetic experience, which led him to suppose and conceive a final end or an ancient shape for the infinitely abundant manifoldness. «*Urpflanze*» can also be interpreted «as a self-repeating sequence of metamorphoses»: from seed through leaf, flower and fruit to seed again: this circle is repeated «over the course of every plant's life»³¹. One can say that the «Primal Plant» hides in every plant in a little bit similar way as God is hiding in «the grand Theatre of Heaven and Earth», thus also in the variety of species, for Andrenio in Gracián's novel.

In his letter to Herder from Naples on 17 May, 1787, Goethe writes:

I must also tell you confidentially that I am very close to the secret of the reproduction and organization of plants, and that it is the simplest thing imaginable. This climate offers the best possible conditions for making observations. To the main question – where the germ is hidden – I am quite certain I have found the answer; to the others I already see a general solution, and only a few points have still to be formulated more precisely. The Primal Plant is going to be the strangest creature in the world, which Nature herself shall envy me. With this model and the key to it, it will be possible to go on for ever 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 shadowy phantoms of a vain imagination, but possess an inner necessity and truth. The same law will be applicable to all other living organism.³²

Thus the variety of species is the result of a huge combinatorial game of forms; the «Primal Plant» is the key by means of which we can invent new species as well, and these species could be logically possible and not

²⁸ J. W. Goethe, *Italian Journey*, transl. by W. H. Auden & E. Mayer, North Point Press, San Francisco, 1982, p. 251.

²⁹ Cf. A. O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being*, cit., p. 279.

³⁰ Cf. Bálint Somlyó, *Az ösfenómén mint a képi megismerés alapfogalma [The Archetypal Phenomenon as the Basic Concept of Pi-ctorial Cognition]*, in "Laokoón", 2020, <https://laokoon.hu/somlyo-balint-az-osfenomen-mint-a-kepi-megismeres-alapfogalma> – (accessed on 24 March, 2025).

³¹ E. Axer – R. Shields, *The Seed of an Idea, the Idea of a Seed: Goethe's Urpflanze in the 21st century*, 2022, <https://www.plantphilosophy.org.uk/plants-and-philosophy-in-the-present/the-seed-of-an-idea-the-idea-of-a-seed-goethes-urpflanze-in-the-21st-century/> – (accessed on 10 May, 2023). Goethe's metamorphosis (the basic concept of his *Morphologie*) describes the evolving interaction in time between the plant's or the animal's generic type and its environment. According to Eva Axer and Ross Shields, morphology represents Goethe's «vision of nature as a dynamic complex of organic and non-organic forces». Looking back from his mature morphological point of view, they find it quite improbable that he might expect to find the common ancestor of every plant in a particular plant in Palermo, rather «the garden's diversity itself brought Goethe closer to *Urpflanze*, by presenting him with similarities amid the manifold of botanical forms. In this sense, *any* botanical garden, considered as a whole, is a more or less adequate representation of the *Urpflanze*». *Ibid.*

³² J. W. Goethe, *Italian Journey*, cit., pp. 305–306.

merely chimerical monsters. The tight analogy between the productive process of nature and the inventive activity of the artist is conspicuous. As, in his influential commentary on Goethe's *Die Wahlverwandtschaften*, Walter Benjamin writes that Goethe, who by the concept of nature understands «at once the sphere of perceptible phenomena and that of intuitable archetypes», always seeks «the presence of “true” nature as *ur*-phenomenon in its appearances – something he presupposed in works of art», and «only in the domain of art do the *ur*-phenomena – as ideals – present themselves adequately to perception, whereas in science they are replaced by the idea, which is capable of illuminating the object of perception but never of transforming it in intuition. The *ur*-phenomena do not exist before art; they subsist within it»³³. Goethe tries to save all the human senses and intuitive faculty from the specified reason of modern sciences, and in this enterprise the aesthetic is deeply involved both through the instinctive emotive reactions to the profusion and variety of species, and through the «strangest creature of the world» which is also the key to the intuitive perception of biodiversity.

On his second visit in Rome, Goethe records that, while walking in gardens of Palermo, «it came to me in a flash that in the organ of the plant which we are accustomed to call the *leaf* lies the true Proteus who can hide or reveal himself in all vegetal forms. From first to last, the plant is nothing but leaf, which is so inseparable from the future germ that one cannot think of one without the other»³⁴. In this remark, years earlier than *Die Metamorphose*, Goethe wondered at the temporal aspect of variety in nature by noting the process of metamorphosis within the same species. Beside the diversity of species, there is a Proteus character, an archetypical internal dynamism, in every plant. Addison extended the scope of biodiversity to include species which can only be discovered through microscopes and telescopes, we would say that Goethe added a new temporal dimension to this with his reflections upon metamorphosis. It is not only the diversity of new forms that counts, but also the diversity of forms that are constantly and internally being renewed. Already in a letter to Charlotte von Stein dated 10 July, 1786, he writes that what «pleases me most is the life of the plants [*Pflanzenwesen*] that pursues me; and that is quite how a thing becomes one's own». He characterizes it with an unspeakable aesthetic pleasure: «I wish I could share the gaze [*Blick*] and the pleasure [*Freude*] with someone, but it is impossible. And it is not a dream, not a fantasy; it is a realisation of the essential form [*Gewahrwerden der wesentlichen Form*] with which nature is, as it were, only ever playing and bringing forth in a playful way the manifold life [*manigfaltige Leben*]»³⁵.

«Beauty is a primeval phenomenon, which itself never makes its appearance, but the reflection of which is visible in a thousand different utterances of the creative mind, and is as various as nature herself», as Goethe said to Eckermann in 1827.³⁶ The immense realm of the plants, as it were, came to Goethe as an intensive

³³ W. Benjamin, *Goethe's Elective Affinities*, transl. by Stanley Corngold, in M. Bullcok and M. W. Jennings (ed. by) *Selected Writings, Volume 1: 1913–1926*, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, London, 1996, pp. 314–315.

³⁴ J.W. Goethe, *Italian Journey*, cit., p. 363.

³⁵ J.W. Goethe, *Briefe an Charlotte Stein*, Bd. 2., <https://www.projekt-gutenberg.org/goethe/brstein2/chap053.html> – (accessed on 29 March, 2025). – It might lead us further to the topic of the organism itself, to its being which is «multifaceted in its exterior, so varied and inexhaustible in its interior, that we cannot find enough points of view nor develop in ourselves enough organs of perception to avoid killing it when we analyze it». Applying the principle «Beauty is perfection in combination with freedom» to living organisms, Goethe claims «if an animal is to satisfy even its most limited basic needs without difficulty, it must be perfectly organized», but «it may have enough strength and power left to initiate voluntary actions which are somewhat without purpose; in this case its exterior will also yield an impression of beauty». J.W. Goethe, *The Extent to Which the Idea «Beauty is Perfection in Combination with Freedom» May be Applied to Living Organisms*, transl. by M. Bell, in M. Bell (ed. by) *The Essential Goethe*, cit., p. 947.

³⁶ J.P. Eckermann, *Conversations of Goethe*, transl. by J. Oxenford, Digital Production by <http://www.hxa7241.org>, 2010, p. 173.

aesthetic experience and intuition. Instead of linking it to devotional and religious themes, as Gracián and Addison had done, Goethe gave the aesthetic experience of biodiversity a natural philosophical twist.

5. CLOSING REMARKS

We have seen that in the first one-and-half centuries of modern aesthetics, aesthetic appreciation concerned first and foremost nature (at least the objects/views of nature had a theoretical priority to those of art), and the variety and the multitude of species were essential ingredients of the proto-aesthetic and early aesthetic experience of nature. Gracián introduced the innocent gaze of the man of nature as a proto-aesthetic faculty, through which the variety and multitude of living beings can be seen and felt as the first of the aesthetic wonders of nature. Addison – mostly through the aesthetic category of novelty – extended the aesthetic experience of nature also to biodiversity in the framework of the plenitude of nature, and linked this topic to the happiness of existence. The new realm of «innocent pleasures» offers the possibility of a cheerful life – with beneficial moral and social consequences, too –, and the appreciation of the multitude and variety of living species makes us taste and see the fullness of existential happiness in the great chain of being. Goethe gave a natural philosophical dimension of the aesthetic experience of biodiversity: parallels are drawn between the creative activity of an artist and the forming power of nature in creating manifoldness. All these (proto-)aesthetic approaches to biodiversity (in that broad sense of the word as I use it here) put man in a new position in their relation to nature. In the allegorical figure of Andrenio, Gracián described the proto-aesthetic encounter with biodiversity as relying on the primordial innocence of human mind, and showed the possibility of the revival of this higher spiritual and moral state in new circumstances. Addison's men of a polite imagination are able to see the world «in another light», to feel life in a fuller and more intensive way than «the vulgar», including greater gratitude to the Creator and fuller cheerfulness of life. Goethe's aesthetic reflections on biodiversity are linked to the wholeness of the human mind, to his project to counter the impoverishing and reductive tendencies of modern natural sciences. In all these three cases, the man is at the centre of the universe, at least their aesthetically perceived and felt worlds are definitely anthropocentric. It might seem outdated by now. Here I would only refer to one of Slavoj Žižek's comments on Schelling; he says that although «Schelling's determination of man as the “being of the Centre”» and his conception of nature «as the mere background for man's ethical struggle» may seem old-fashioned today, for «Schelling it is the very fact that man is the “being of the Centre” which confers upon him the *proper responsibility and humility* – it is the ordinary materialist attitude of reducing man to an insignificant species on a small planet in a distant galaxy which effectively involves the subjective attitude of domination over nature and its ruthless exploitation»³⁷. An acentric aesthetics of nature would be both theoretically nonsensical and painfully amoral. Hence, it can be concluded that human responsibility towards biodiversity is at least not incompatible with those aesthetic attitudes the three selected authors represent, at the same time, it is also evident, that the aesthetic experience of biodiversity is not necessarily bound to the ethics of responsibility, nor can the latter be the final goal of this experience.

Today the science-based biodiversity is usually understood at three levels: genetic, species and ecosystem level. Of course, the experts must be right that biodiversity at the genetic level is inevitable for the preserva-

³⁷ S. Žižek, *The Indivisible Remainder: on Schelling and Related Matters*, Verso, London, New York, 2007, pp. 87-88, n70.

tion of the given species, so the variety of genes is beneficial, and it is worth preserving or even restoring if we know how we can. Our belief in the validity of this biological knowledge, however, can only support a moral obligation, and can cause a moral and intellectual satisfaction when we see our anticipations proved or our interventions succeeded. But this experience is not aesthetic, at least if we take *aisthesis* seriously. And, *mutatis mutandis*, the case with biodiversity is often similar at ecosystem level. In my historical examples, only the variety and multitude of species could be understood as biodiversity, and the aesthetic attention concerned only these cases. But it is not only because of the limits of the then natural scientific knowledge, but it comes from the nature of aesthetic experience. What should one sensuously perceive (without the aid of artificial devices) or imagine, if one wanted to experience the genetic manifoldness within a single species in order to aesthetically appreciate it? Setting aside the fact that the vast majority of aesthetic beholders of biodiversity is hardly well versed in biology and ecology, the problem is that the old and new insights of these sciences remain mostly conceptual and intellectual. The tangible, visible or at least easily imaginable richness of the species of living beings is more suitable for an aesthetic appreciation than the biodiversity at the other two levels: both genetic and ecosystemic approaches are inclined to rapidly go beyond the scope of the aesthetic (even if it is not inevitable in all cases). In their recent article, Jukka Mikkonen and Kaisa J. Raatikainen argue that «there is a mismatch between *apparent* and *real* biodiversity; that people’s direct observation and perception of biological variation – as in their aesthetic experiences of nature – is different from actual existing biodiversity, which is evaluated in scientific terms»³⁸. Although the authors emphasise that «the aesthetic and spiritual values of nature are important and need to be acknowledged»³⁹, one of the major theses of their informative and comprehensive article is that biodiversity cannot be effectively defended by referring to its aesthetic values: «from a biological point of view, aesthetic defenses for biodiversity [...] are insufficient, sometimes misleading, and potentially harmful. The aesthetic appreciation of nature is biased according to human perception, and as such violates the premise of biodiversity as consisting of all life on Earth»⁴⁰. But perhaps it is generally unfortunate to use aesthetic experience to defend or to promote attitudes and approaches which are recommended by scientific knowledge, to measure the aesthetic on the basis of sciences, even if they can temporarily have common fields or interests. That is, both the instrumentalist and cognitivist applications are misleading. Thus, it seems a misuse of the aesthetic to take it as a kind of bait to reach a wider audience, or as a method to spread sugar-coated scientific knowledge about biodiversity issues in the hope that aesthetically concerned people will change their moral attitude. Instead, first we as members of the only intelligent earthly species must incorporate or internalize scientific knowledge, for example, about the current crisis of the loss of biodiversity amongst other ecological disasters, and then, secondly, there will be always a challenge to feel and to experience *certain* aspects of it aesthetically in every particular encounter. The aesthetic is always a challenge to develop a personally lived complex relationship with the environment/object, not a suitable instrument to make complex issues smoother, easier or more consumable. Moreover, the relation to science-based knowledge can only be one ingredient of the aesthetic experience of biodiversity. «In the end, what is valuable is the diversity of species, ecosystems, landscapes as a whole – and the incredible number of perspectives humans can take on these, the room for imagination, and the possibility for one to feel connected with the web of life»⁴¹.

³⁸ J. Mikkonen – K. J. Raatikainen, *Aesthetics in Biodiversity Conservation*, in “The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism”, LXXXII/2, 2024, pp. 174-190, p. 175.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 186.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 185.

We can learn a lot about ourselves, about our affinities, sympathies, compatibilities, incompatibilities and even fears, about our changing place in the living web of other species when we are aesthetically dwelling in a natural environment of biodiversity. In the light of our intellectual historical inquiry⁴², we can see that the emerging modern aesthetics of the natural environment has been strongly interested in biodiversity especially at species level from the outset, and has exploited its various aspects.

⁴² In an intriguing article, Fabrizio Desideri goes much further back in time, to the *Urszene* of aesthetic experience, arguing that aesthetics and biodiversity are necessarily and intrinsically linked. To this, he introduces a new conception of aesthetics, beyond the psychological-subjectivist and hermeneutic-culturalist versions, which is always content-related and always involved in the environment in which the aesthetic is exercised by an embodied mind. Inspired by and going beyond Edward O. Wilson's biophilia hypothesis, Gordon H. Orians' Savannah hypothesis and Jay Appleton's theory of landscape, he claims that «Più che effetto e memoria del passato, in ultima istanza riducibile ad altre ragioni, l'attitudine estetica può insomma presentarsi sin dal suo emergere come un inaspettato effetto anticipante. E proprio con questa caratteristica può stringere un vincolo espressivo con il principio stesso della biodiversità». F. Desideri, *Hotspot. Estetica e biodiversità*, in "Re-Vista. Research for Landscape Architecture", IX/1–2, 2015, pp. 57-63, p. 61. He concludes that «Sciogliere e stringere nel *medium* del percepire: questa è la meta-funzione dell'attitudine estetica. Un'attitudine non più svincolata da contenuti e non più astratta dall'ambiente-mondo in cui si esercita. Così inteso, lo scenario ecosistemico della biodiversità quale proto-forma di una relazione estetica [...] può anche precisarsi come matrice di un apprezzamento che anticipa il giudizio estetico senza per questo configurarlo». *Ibid.*, 62. A discussion of how this evolutionary approach can relate to my intellectual historical interpretation is beyond the scope of this paper.

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