

# José Molina e la “scommessa” di Goethe

By Stefano Moriggi

## José Molina and Goethe’s “bet”

Yes, even the majestic Goethe happened to lose his temper. It occurred in Jena, in Schiller’s dwelling, the responsible for his fit of anger being the very landlord. Here’s is the chronicle of the events. Following a conference at the local scientific Society, the two thinkers started a conversation in which Goethe did not miss the chance to expose his theory on the metamorphosis of the plants to his distinguished interlocutor. He grabbed paper and pencil and after “some strokes of the pen a symbolic plant appeared before his eyes”. Schiller listened and observed with utmost attention, and then said: “But this is not an experience, it is an idea”. Goethe, livid and annoyed, replied: “I can be pleased to have ideas, without my knowing about it, and even see them with my own eyes”.

There is a mistake that one should not make, unless you want to cause the susceptibility of those – like José Molina – investigating nature through the dynamism of its shapes: subliming it all to an evanescent and imaginative “world of ideas”. In Goethe’s case, neither the fact that he was addressing an “expert on Kant” like Schiller – for whom the idea does not radically differ from the experience (on the contrary constitutes a condition of possibility) – was enough to defuse the hungry reaction towards the one who had not understood the ontological significance of a morphological (hence symbolic) approach to the natural investigation. Goethe’s paradoxical “bet”, in science as well as in art, was to “immortalize the swift moment” without annihilating its fleeting beauty; that is, representing the dynamicity of the becoming by means of symbolic shapes capable of seamlessly staging the metamorphosis of the identical. Yet, as the mathematician René Thom knew very well, “the only problem with the “continuous” is that as such, it cannot be discussed. [...] one needs to make some marks, to distinguish some points”. And this was Goethe’s intention when he enclosed in his sketch of a symbolic plant the eternity and the contingency of that ever-changing “labyrinth of shapes” that is nature. And, in this spirit, Molina has no problem in acknowledging the existence and identity (at least symbolic!) of

his “creatures”. In his work, the anatomical transfiguration translates the exasperated effort to morphologically capture the meaning of the human in its dynamic incarnation, between Goethe and Bacon. But between Goethe and Bacon, between shape and deformation, Molina sometimes seems to betray a melancholic nostalgia for a set of values, his creatures have become dramatically alienated from, in a horizon of grotesque desolation (or desperation?), of which their very physical features constitute the abnormal archetype.

Sure, the grotesque, from Hugo to Goya, is often presented as an aesthetic symptom to diagnose a moral degeneration. Nevertheless, if we are dealing with the investigation of the (human) nature, it would seem preferable to exorcize any temptation to overlap the prescriptive level with the descriptive one. It would be better to favour the aseptic detachment of the entomologist who, before the sight of the metamorphosis, contemplates and depicts the becoming of the shapes and the shapes of the becoming. Therefore, if, instead of cocoons and chrysalises, we are dealing with the constant rewriting of the way to be (and to define oneself as) human, that biology has defined and described in terms of (biologic and cultural) evolution, this is no good reason to allow the ethical anxiety prevail on aesthetic clarity. Capturing, in the contingency of a shape, the flow of the becoming does not mean trapping it in the reassuring rigor of (and need for) a norm to cling on to, as a model to be stigmatized. Let’s not forget that there is a “bet” at stake! “If the swift moment I entreat: / Tarry a while! You are so fair! / Then forge the shackles to my feet, / Then I will gladly perish there! / Then let them toll the passing-bell, / Then of your servitude be free, / The clock may stop, / Its hands fall still, / And time be over then for me! (Faust I, vv. 1699-1706).

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