

SALVATORE TEDESCO

*META-IDENTITÄT / UNSTABLE IDENTITIES:
TOWARDS A PLASTIC MORPHOLOGY*

In the course of his investigation into the conditions of “making literature” in our time, in a confrontation that from time to time he turned to the alchemical principle of *mutatio mutationis* which crosses the pages of Elias Canetti [Sebald 1972, 280], to the shamanism of Herbert Achternbusch [Sebald 1983], to the animal tales of Kafka and to the «Attempt at a metamorphosis» [Sebald 1986, 195] which finds expression in them, and also to the *totemic mimesis* that characterize the psychopathological poetry of Ernst Herbeck [Sebald 1992/2006a], Sebald has repeatedly and circumstantially referred to Rudolf Bilz’s psychological theories and paleoanthropological studies [1940; 1962/1981; 1967; 1971/1973; 1971/1974].

Sebald’s morphological gaze intends to develop literary images almost in a “stratigraphic” sense or as an «interlinear version» [Sebald 1986, 197],¹ recognizing in the sequence of evanescent forms, refractory to any taxonomy [Sebald 1996/2006b, 185], which characterize the writing of our time, a profoundly ambivalent sign, symptom on the one hand of the progressive loss and deprivation suffered by life, anticipation on the other hand of the possible overcoming of that same event of defeats.

This is a metamorphic principle exemplary at work, according to Sebald, in Kafka’s animal tales, in which the progressive installation of the human or mechanical element in the animal life mobilize and make the boundary between the forms evanescent, revealing the whole history of living forms such as the attempt «to counteract the fundamental tendency towards entropy by implementing more and more elaborate systems» [Sebald 1986, 198], and thus relativizing the human position

¹ All the quotations in this paper, except those from Sebald 1990 and Malabou 2009/2012, are my translation.

and its supposed privilege (in this light the *Report to an Academy* appears as «commentary on the precarious situation of humans as it appears from a physiologically different state» [Sebald 1986, 196]).

But there is perhaps more, and it is precisely the dynamic matrix of that “plastic morphology” that I would like to try to develop in these notes. In fact, the reader of Kafka’s tales cannot escape, first of all, that the sequence of events narrated corresponds to the intrinsically paradoxical articulation of an attempt at liberation traced back to its own physiological and sensorimotor foundations: «By following the dog on his excursions, we, the readers, begin to understand that his erratic actions – and analogously our need to act, which obviously can never be appeased – correspond less to a metaphysical need than to constituting an attempt to get out of the physical jail of our kind» [Sebald 1986, 195].

On the other hand, it will be observed that this effort to break free is morphologically configured as «attempted metamorphosis initiated with the decision to self-destruction» [Sebald 1986, 195], where evidently for Kafka and Sebald the element of the “decision” counts not so much as the expression of some *intentionality* but rather insofar as it itself provides *the initial motor impact* of the morphological event.

The destruction of the «psychological and physiological requirements of his own existence» [Sebald 1986, 195] thus becomes the paradoxical prerequisite for the investigations conducted by the animal that has “disengaged” from its biological species, but at the same time becomes («because of its specific constitution» [Sebald 1986, 194]) the condition of Kafka’s narration, and the premise for the reception by the reader, called precisely to continue, so to speak, the same operation of plastic dissolution of his own identity as the deepest and most ambivalent point of a «natural history experiment» [Sebald 1986, 195] whose saving power is manifested only in destruction [Masini 1984/2010, 161-170].

In articulating together this morphological dynamic and this “natural history experiment”, we said, Sebald refers to the thought of the paleoanthropologist and psychopathologist Rudolf Bilz and to the reflection he developed over the course of several decades on identity, hominisation, metamorphosis.

Profoundly and durably influenced by the biotheoretic thought of Jakob von Uexküll and direct pupil of Viktor von Weizsäcker in Hei-

delberg in the late 1920s [Peters 2003, 33], in that constitutive phase of anthropological medicine which constituted a moment of profound interaction between biological knowledge and Freudian psychoanalysis, Rudolf Bilz understands the formation of human identity as a conflictual place in which the tensions that cross the relationship between the organism and its vital environment come to manifest, in which the semiotics of organic symptoms finds expression in a real *scenic semantics* [Bilz 1940, 37-42]. In short, there is a profound interaction, a fundamental homology of function, between the conflicts that pass through the personality and determine its constitution and the relational game that is established towards the outside. The body is the site of this battle.

Rudolf Bilz titled *Pars pro toto* in 1940 the most mature result of his research, in which precisely a “synecdoche” relationship is established on the level of psychophysical unity between organic functions and the configuration of affections in the human soul. The place where these dynamics unfold is what Bilz [1940, 58] calls the «*scenarium vitale*» of the human being. In this perspective, the crisis, the forced restructuring which the inner and relational universe of the living being undergoes in disease, becomes a fundamental methodological interpretative key.

The scene of crisis and change, what Viktor von Weizsäcker [1926/1987a, 25] called «a kind of methodical primal scene», now takes the place where previously there was trust in the transcendental unity of an “I” that could be at the basis of a subject’s very relationship with a world, confidence in the description of a system of logical and “*erkenntnistheoretisch*” assumptions that preside over human knowledge and action, and together with this theoretical attitude even the possibility of defining safely a genealogy, an organic genesis of subjectivity.

Approaching a *Stufenlehre*, a theory of the degrees of psychic life that – in a very significant way – finds its explicit grafting point in Freud’s psychoanalysis, Weizsäcker [1926/1987b, 73] proposes to begin the analysis first by considering the vital constraints (*vitale Bindungen*) of the person; this is where Weizsäcker’s reinterpretation of the drive (*Triebe*) analysis proposed by Freud is rooted. It is an analysis that, in Weizsäcker’s work, is primarily concerned with a decisive methodological and topological aspect, constituted by the reversal of the traditional “hierarchy” between drives and contents of consciousness: It is

«the drive that gives certain contents to consciousness, and the sense of consciousness becomes comprehensible through the drive» [Weizsäcker 1926/1987b, 73]. What emerges unequivocally through this reversal is a double assumption: on the one hand «the discovery [...] that even our consciousness is not autonomous, it is not “mistress in her house”» [Weizsäcker 1926/1987b, 77], and as a consequence of this on the other hand – and this above all characterizes Freud’s Weizsäckerian recovery – the shift of emphasis towards the *Bindungen*, the “constraints”, we could say “being bound” of the living being to others living beings and the environment. In the following, not surprisingly, Weizsäcker will describe the dynamics of this level speaking of a «symbiotic existential layer» [Weizsäcker 1926/1987b, 88].

Plasticity of drives and constraints of the living being refer to each other. Phenomenologically understood in its *relational* and therefore inevitably *dynamic* and *plastic* essence, the bond between the human beings, even before being defined in the context of some gnoseology or epistemology, is an *emotional-expressive* bond [Jacobi 2014].

The centrality of the body traversed by the conflict pushes us to redefine identity in a dialogical and metamorphic sense, in its becoming other and being open to the other. For Weizsäcker, it is precisely the “biographical method” of medical anthropology that guides us towards the image of a multiple identity; for Bilz [1940, 252] our own body is the place of a “*Meta-Identität*”, plural and metamorphic, in which conflict and crisis designate the deep caesura that passes through the human being, constituting his particular resource.

In contrast to the determinism of the sense physiology and of the nineteenth-century psychophysical approach, in Weizsäcker’s vision the plasticity of organic nature finds expression in its ability to substitute functions lost as a result of trauma and disease, restoring and reconfiguring the unity of the living being through a functional change (*Funktionswandel*) that Weizsäcker conceives as a principle of interpretation of biological events in their qualitative connotation and in their development in spatial and temporal relationships and which affects both the sensory functions and those properties of the nervous system that his neurological research leads him to highlight [summarized Weizsäcker 1940/1997].

In Bilz's [1940] psychopathological perspective, the restructuring of the sensory functions and of the spatial-sensory order that they preside is associated not only with the plasticity of the *Affekte*, that is to say instincts and drives, and, in short, of the entire human affective world, but also implies an homologous metamorphic propensity for the reciprocal and motivated replacement of formal configurations (*Gestaltwandel*), as precisely what is given to study through the figures that present themselves on the scene that occurs in obsessive-compulsive neurosis.

Bilz [1940, 253-258; also Bilz 1971/1973, 1971/1974; see Peters 2003, 86-88] will propose to study these functional and formal connections starting from the phenomenological consideration of their sensorimotor aspect, calling them *Identische Exekutive*. Bilz theorises the existence of *biologische Radikale*, that is, of innate dispositions to certain "biologically relevant" experiences, actions and reactions, which in the course of human evolution, precisely by virtue of the biomorphological disposition to functional change, would have given rise to behavioural modules that can be activated for the resolution of problems, which would gradually be managed on a conscious level. Thus develops an inner spiritual world in which *Identische Exekutive* – I would translate "identical executive models" – act according to a level that is structurally homologous to the biologically founded "*urszenisch*" vital one. Between the different levels there is an «execution-mimic identity» [Bilz 1940, 253]. These are therefore levels characterized by the repetition of their ancestral foundation and yet endowed with a plastic ability to transform and build an autonomous inner world.

Meta-identity is therefore the relational lived body, the way in which it experiences an intimately multiple vital scenario in ever-changing imaginative forms and functional investments.

Bilz's paleoanthropological research [1971/1973; 1971/1974] will only project this spatialisation of somato-psychic dynamics into an evolutionary scenario, identifying for that "original scene" and "scenic semantics" a sort of founding event, an "ancestral evolutionary scenario" for the construction of compensatory mythologems.

In my view, neither the theoretical stability of Bilz's operation nor the legitimacy of this sort of narrative retranslation of the methodical space of the crisis and functional change described by Weizsäcker is here the main

point of the matter; we are more interested in examining its dynamics on a purely morphological level, that is, rather on the methodical level of the description of the plural identity than on the genetic one of a paleo-history.

Viewed from an evolutionary perspective, the human being is for Bilz [1971/1974, 278] the result of a «disaster of unimaginable scale»; having lost the original predetermined harmony proper to its ancestors, the human being seeks a compensatory path in the creation of “mythologemes” capable of founding new conditions of harmonization. Having lost harmony with reality, having lost coherence with the environment/*Umwelt* that characterizes animal life (the lesson of the already mentioned Uexküll is very strong here), the human being reinvents himself as a “poet (*Dichter*)”, or more exactly «forger of subject-centric fantastic associations» [Bilz 1971/1974, 278].

Mythologemes are nothing more than these “narrations”, these verbal configurations aimed at “crystallizing” in reality as compensatory orders resulting from a centering on subjectivity that emerges in a striking way in the conditions of delirium typical of psychopathologies, but which actually make body with the identity or meta-identity organization of the human being as such.

Corriger la fortune, Bilz will say with a famous figure of Lessing (Minna von Barnhelm, IV, 2); the human being is a cheater (*Falschspieler*), a delusional animal that definitively lost the original health of the animal builds a fictional universe of meanings in which the same emotional misery of the human being finds expression, compensation and nourishment at the same time. It is decisive that in this way the human being is able to represent himself a perfection whose degrees far exceed what we are given to experience: «there is a trend in us towards the over-optimal» [Bilz 1971/1974, 280].

In this sense, the articulation of a system of mythologemes is a sort of adaptive response of our complex emotional balance to a situation that presents itself without viable exit routes (*Ausweglosigkeit*). It is a profoundly ambivalent adaptive response, because precisely those figures who are thus called to guarantee human life exposed to the greatest risk in a substitute way nail it on the other hand to the system of meanings thus produced: «if the subject dies in a situation of hopelessness, it dies from the meaning (*an der Bedeutung*)» [Bilz 1967, 244].

Here is the twofold nature of mythopoietic constructions, moreover captured with extraordinary precision by Franz Kafka [1920] in a passage which will be remembered by Hans Blumenberg [1979, 9]: «They [the Greeks] could not think the decisive divine far enough away from them, the whole world of the gods was only a means to keep the decisive thing away from the earthly body, to have air to the human breath».

Recognizing in this situation one of the characteristic moments of the process of becoming human, Bilz has devoted the greatest care to investigate this situation of “Hopelessness” both in its sensorimotor components and in its psychopathological manifestations.

Still here, and eminently, the interpretative model proposed by Bilz refers to the theoretical coordinates that we have tried to delineate, and therefore to a biological-relational interpretation of the sense-motor spectrum of the human being, deeply influenced by the lessons of Uexküll and Weizsäcker and, coherently with the latter, it pays particular attention to the plural dynamics that traverse organic forms and their functional systems.

If in fact from a physiological point of view fear (*Angst*) is always an emergency reaction characterized by the release of high levels of adrenaline, Bilz says here referring to the fundamental researches of Walter B. Cannon [1915], the coordination between the same physiological reaction and motor expressions can occur in different ways, in relation to the different meanings that the biological subject experientially binds to it: «Experience, connected with a subjective “interpretation”, that is with a “meaning” [*Bedeutung*], decides which motor expression is manifested in the given situation» [Bilz 1967, 244]. It is hardly necessary to observe that here the concept of “*Bedeutung*” is explicitly assumed in the sense of Uexküll [1940], therefore as a relational investment between an organism and a specific element of its environment.

Physiological stimulation, relational meaning and motor response are therefore in a complex and mobile interaction; the peculiarity of the human situation lies precisely in a *specialization towards the extreme*. Precisely this makes the human being, as Hans Blumenberg [2006, 565] will observe, «an extreme fear being», and precisely because «he “specializes” in ways out of extreme situations, the threshold of absolute “hopelessness” is extremely high for him». Hence the complex

sequence of Kafka's *Hungerkünstler*, and those who populate modern literature from Adalbert Stifter to Thomas Bernhard, the subject of Sebald's investigations.

Bilz [1940, 214] would say that the absence of escape routes, crucial therefore in constituting the sensorimotor scheme and the imagination of the human being, is crucial in the creation of this double "feeling" («*hautästhetisch und seelisch*», Bilz [1940, 214]). The ancestral scene of finding himself in the savannah landscape is crucial for Bilz, where the escape route towards the top, towards the top of the trees, practiced by the phylogenetic ancestors of man, is no longer available. Bilz [1971/1974, 291] defines exactly this as the «paleoanthropological resp. pitheanthropological disaster». Abandoned the apesian paradise of the primeval forest, the human being is constituted in experimenting «the existence in the treelessness» [Bilz 1971/1974, 291].

The impossibility of an upward escape route forces the human being to search for it in a hallucinatory way in the creation of mythologemes, which guarantee in the elaboration of a linguistic-narrative order that stability and duration that does not find correspondence in experience.

Of particular relevance, both in Bilz's perspective and in the recovery that Sebald will make of it, is the fact that such a security strategy is sought through the elaboration of an order of becoming and of the discourse that goes hand in hand with the domestication of animals: «*akinesis* in the sense of a disciplined persistence on site» [Bilz 1967, 246].

At the same time, the space of this mythopoietic event tells us of a radical human exposure to the contingency of experience, such a radical exposure that it is not content to reside hallucinatory in itself, but to open itself precisely to human meta-identity, to the duplicity of feeling and to the bond of the living beings, and therefore to that form of the understanding of the interconnection between things that says their distance and thus "measures" their unrepeatable uniqueness.

The human meta-identity is then the dialogic and metamorphic space of construction of an identity in the crisis, which does not take refuge in its hallucinatory denial.

The animal tales of Kafka, indeed in the words of Sebald [1986] the *Evolutionsgeschichten* of Kafka, show us all the fragility of "becoming a human being", and precisely for this reason, rather than offering us

refuge in an illusory revocation of the mythopoietic processes, or in their progressive rationalistic overcoming, they point towards an inexhaustible horizon of research, on the basis of the postulate «that we still have to search for solutions where there doesn't seem to be any [...]. Not the possibility, the impossibility is the primary quality of our existence» [Sebald 1986, 199].

Thrown «into the labyrinth of our treeless hopelessness» [Bilz 1971/1974, 291], the human being builds his way through the labyrinth. In a note that unfortunately did not find an adequate theoretical development, Bilz mentions Karoli Kerényi's *Labyrinth-Studien* [1950]. The labyrinth is the figure of incessant research in *circumambulatio*, an incessant elaboration that gradually settles into formal configurations and ever new motor propensities.

At least two of these figures appear for our purposes with particular heuristic relief.

I refer first of all to the dance-labyrinth, to the figure in which the dancers, connected to each other with a rope, are dragged together into the *geranos*, the “dance of the cranes” according to the strange name with which this practice has spread. «All the labyrinth research», notes Kerényi [1950, 37], «had to get started on the dance». The rope leads the dancers first inside and then again outside: «The direction remains the same: at the center of the spiral, the dancer turns back continuing a movement that from the beginning revolved around an invisible center. From that moment, however, the direction was no longer that of death, but that of birth [...]; dance presents prison, but also liberation, alludes to death, but also together to life-beyond-death» [Kerényi 1950, 39-40].

Kerényi [1950, 40] reports the opinions of those philologists according to which the strange reference to the dance of cranes has a metaphorical value and a late and secondary origin, but observes: «However, let us think for a moment more on the theme of the rope. Its use seemed justified by the difficulty of executing the labyrinth figure; but isn't it true that even the most complex of dance figures are all the easier the greater the freedom of movement of the dancers? A dance of birds presupposes the possibility of freely hovering in the air». Here is the central joint.

Kerényi [1950, 41] therefore refers to a psychopathological experience of a patient who presented a case of sleepwalking with ambulatory

automation, in a situation of lucid memory. The *circumambulatio* led the patient to experience a phenomenon of “levitation”: «Those who experience it feel the impulse to rise from the ground, almost as if a strong wind hit it; it is necessary to stand firm and somehow anchor to the ground [...]. The patient was not absolutely crazy; she did not get lost, she did not “lose the thread”, and throughout the process she acted in a state of double conscience. In order not to fly away and not lose contact with this world, she clung now to the fence of the garden, now to a holly hedge». And so, Kerényi wonders to conclude: «Didn’t the rope held by the dancers from Delos and southern Italy respond to the same purpose? Or instead did it react to the two needs, that of executing the figure with precision and at the same time keeping firm? Did the *geranos* dancers also experience free flight in such a violent way that they were forced to hold each other’s hand in order to remain anchored to reality? The intensity of their experience should not be underestimated».

But still the experience linked to that sensation of levitation is connected to the production of another figure, on which Kerényi [1950, 42] still draws attention: «At the end of this *circumambulatio* she found a giant *ammonite* in the grass, and she was incredibly attracted and fascinated by it. She remained motionless to look at her, as if enchanted, without being able to take her eyes off; she had the distinct feeling that that object was exactly what she had “sought”. In ammonites one encounters the pure form of the spiral: the original form of the labyrinth».

Geranos and *ammonite*. In short, in the metamorphic event a method of research makes its way, in the use of the labyrinth finds expression a method of the homological relationship of forms and functions.

Yet the figure of *levitation*, the eminently Sebaldian and Nabokovian feeling of seeing the world through the eye of the crane [Sebald 1996/2006b, 188], tells us something about which the representative circle of the labyrinth designated by Kerényi reveals an internal limit that refers to an investigation supplement.

There is, so to speak, an external limit with respect to the representative circle of the labyrinth, the *geranos* dance and levitation, and this is precisely what Kerényi indicates in his study: to immerse oneself in the dark caves of death and fly away in life – as takes place in the choir of the women of the *Hippolytus* of Euripides, and above all as seen in

the leap of Sappho from the cliff of Lefkada depicted in the underground *Basilica di Porta Maggiore* in Rome, to whose mysterious meaning Kerényi [1950, 45] refers.



At the same time, however, the practice of dance with the rope and the sleepwalking experience of the patient identify, so to speak, an internal limit of the representative circle, in accordance with that observation that in the experience of levitation lived in the practice of *circumambulatio* it is necessary to hold firmly anchored to the ground. This is precisely how the “two needs” of which Kerényi speaks [1950, 42] find expression and representation, that is the need «of executing the figure with precision and [that] of keeping oneself at the same time», thus lifting and anchoring in free flight to reality, precisely that serious burden of earthly weight, that radical contingency of the human being thrown into the absence of escape routes.

In the light of what we are seeing, the strategy of Herbert Achternbusch’s shamanism reconstructed by Sebald appears to have an almost disarming linearity: «Herbert Achternbusch has actually only ever told

one story in all of his books and films» [Sebald 1983, 75]; that is, it is the story of the ritual repetition of the experience of dying [Sebald 1983, 76], which the shaman goes through in a sort of autistic monologue [Sebald 1990, 180], from time to time identifying himself with human and animal ancestors. But here, «transformation into a dead ancestor can also represent an escape from one's own existence [...]. Taking on the shape of the ancestors also represents a magical ritual of self-protection» [Sebald 1990, 181]; countless myths, Sebald adds, tell of the transformation as a way to escape those who hunt us: «Achternbusch's unstable identities reflect this strategy [...]. With every metamorphosis one starts a new life; it is incredibly easy, in this state of mind, to open up escape routes via flights of the imagination».

Therefore, faced with Bilz's diagnosis on "becoming human", the real blaze in which the morphological event is consumed in unstable identities represents the expression of a radical mistrust in the path of progress undertaken by humanity: «the fear that we are moving further and further in the wrong direction and soon will no longer be able to find the traces of our own experience» [Sebald 1990, 177]. Almost in an "obsessive-compulsive" liquidation of the vital *scenarium* of the biographical methodology of Weizsäcker and Bilz, Achternbusch's answer «is to invest all the fragments of his past that he can still get hold of with an excess of symbolic meaning – like totem pieces, they must testify to his desire not to lose anything».

Achternbusch's shamanic "response" to this primordial experience (cyclic transformations, anticipation and ritual repetition of the experience of death, animal metamorphosis and exploration of living forms and their events) thus becomes an example of the imaginative circle of an "aesthetics of resistance" made precisely by profoundly dual metamorphoses, abysmal anticipations, unexpected experiences of levitation, unhinging of narrative and linguistic links, in a constant process of disarticulation and rearticulation of the poetic language, according to what, moreover, Rudolf Bilz [1940, 252] theorized as the unstoppable exercise of a *bricolage of thought*.

No transition leads from the cyclical transformations and animal metamorphoses of Achternbusch to the *Versuch der Metamorphose* of the *Forschungen eines Hundes*, which Sebald [1986] tells us about in

the last of his essays on Kafka. The cyclical nature and the detailed possibility of a return are excluded here: the metamorphic experiment (*Versuch*) is introduced by self-destruction, by the conscious elimination of the psychological and physiological assumptions of animal existence. In this sense, it is an experiment in the natural history of form, an experiment of plastic destruction of form conceived at the same time as escape from the bodily prison of the species and irruption in a context «in which a life already condemned might still be able to continue» [Sebald 1986, 195].

Never perhaps Sebald's and Kafka's perspective of research has shown itself as pure, never perhaps the reflection on the contingency of the human being exposed in his *Ausweglosigkeit* has been pushed until it reveals itself, as here, in its substance of investigation into the form of human life in our time.

To conceive such a radical exposure to the factual nature of life, to its unpredictable contingency, and at the same time to outline a morphology of this contingent becoming, it would perhaps be necessary, as Catherine Malabou suggests [2009/2012, 17], «to think a mutation that engages both form and being, a new form that is literally a form of being».

A radical metamorphosis, Malabou continues, is conceivable as «the fabrication of a new person, a novel form of life, without anything in common with a preceding form». As Sebald [1986, 200] concludes: «What remains after this withdrawal treatment is the sheer restlessness of thinking, as is demonstrated in the art practiced by Kafka».

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Keywords

Morphology; Identity; Plasticity; Anthropology; Mythologemes

Abstract

The essay aims to investigate some developments in W.G. Sebald's poetics, explaining the foundations of a morphology starting from the relationship with the theories of Viktor von Weizsäcker and Rudolf Bilz. The anthropological model elaborated by Rudolf Bilz, between the study of the origin of mythologemes and the investigation of unstable identities, allows us to investigate the presence in Sebald's work of some

decisive authors of modernity. In this way the proposal of a plastic morphology is outlined in its relationships with an unstable and multiple concept of identity, and in the very original resumption by Sebald of some mythological themes that finds expression in it.

Salvatore Tedesco
Università di Palermo
Dipartimento di Scienze Umanistiche
E-mail: salvatore.tedesco@unipa.it