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## **Signifying Goethe's Semiotic Words, Sounds, and Colours in My Aesthetic and Visual World**

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### **Prelude**

Semiotics explains the process of encoding and decoding. Decoding interprets and evaluates the meaning of relevant signs. Signs are systems of related conventions for correlating signifier and signified in specific domains. Saussure (1959) claims that “a sign is both a sound-image and a concept,” and divides it into the signifier (sound-image) and the signified (concept). The relationship between these two is arbitrary. In this context, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe is a Signifier to establish part of my cultural identity.

The term “aesthetic” has been a contributor to my moral and spiritual life. I have been seeking words, sounds and colours with passion and in meditation through Goethe. He has all the qualities I am looking for. First, his words (literature) enable me to establish my aesthetic life and visual communication. Second, his sounds (music) encourage me to visualize these selected words. Third, his colours (art) complete my selected words and sounds. But, they cannot affect me if passion and meditation have no place.

Numerous people supported me. (Words/literature) Wordsworth, Hardy, Heine, Hesse, Mann, Tolstoy, Hemingway. (Sounds/music) Beethoven, Mozart, Elgar, Bruch, Rachmaninoff, Bach. (Colours/art) Gogh, Monet, Matisse, Munch, Nolde, Kandinsky. Interestingly, many of them learned from Goethe consciously or unconsciously. That is my other argument for turning back to him. Then, where can I find passion and meditation? It is a cathedral with its noble Gothic shape and its blue stained glass where the Divine Light blesses me with purity, tranquillity, translucence and splendour. There, I am ready to face Goethe.

Keywords: Goethe, The Sorrows of young Werther, Words-Sounds-Colours, Semiotic Signifier, Cathedral

### **My Encounter with Goethe**

Throughout history, love has affected human beings' aesthetic behaviours and visual activities. The Bible's 1 Corinthians Chapter 13 emphasizes God's love; people say "love is a splendid thing!" I am not exceptional. Before this illusion became obvious, my adolescence led me to believe that happiness was dependent on a man. Confucianism taught me to search for my prince without compromise.

However, due to the cultural conflict between the East and the West during my studies abroad, I studied theology and embraced Christianity. After ten years of struggle, I felt God's love and was no longer a wanderer. The meaning of life is to make others happy with my talents. I wished to show my gratitude to God, but his existence was too abstract for me to realize this. Instead, I chose a person who brought me to God. It was Goethe, a forgotten human being!

To illustrate my first encounter with Goethe, I cannot help but explain the academic atmosphere in South Korea. Goethe was a symbol of intellectualism and sensitivity through his "Faust" and "The Sorrows of young Werther." Two groups emerged. Philosophical students spent days and nights in libraries studying "Faust" as a model of intellectualism. Their discussion was about Mephisto and the Eternal Beauties. Sensitive students wondered about love and life in every aspect. Their cult was Werther. To make matters worse, many young lovers were forced to choose between death and arranged marriages with their parents. Moreover, when a man could not get the woman, he threatened her with suicide.

Although my desire to be intellectual and sensitive pushed me to admire Goethe without inhibitions, I had to leave him in the other sky. My longing for sensitivity did not allow it, and Wordsworth and Hesse were his compensation. Strangely, the more I read about Hesse, the more I remembered Goethe. I felt like a fugitive. Finally, after ten years of living in Scandinavia, I finally read a Korean translation of "Faust." Despite its limited comprehension, it made me feel complete my duty. After another ten years, I yielded to my predestination. In the cathedral, Goethe's words, sounds, and colours echoed in me. Through/with/in him, I could pay tribute to God.



Fig. 1. Johann H. W. Tischbein, Goethe in the Roman Campagna, 1787. Oil on canvas, 164 x 206 cm, the Städel Museum, Frankfurt

## 1. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832)

Goethe is recognized as the greatest German writer (fig. 1). In the Romantic period (late 18C-early 19C), Goethe embodied the concerns of his generation through the legacies of Rousseau, Kant, the French Revolution, and Shakespeare. His stature derives not only from his literary achievements as a lyric poet/novelist/dramatist but also from his scientific and critical theories of literature and of art.

Born to a rich family in Frankfurt am Main, Goethe started studying in Leipzig, but his studies in Strasbourg marked a turning point as a poet. The city was the birthplace of new German literature, and Strasbourg Cathedral was considered German Gothic. This motivation was Goethe's encounter

with Herder, who imparted enthusiasm for Celtic poetry and the work of Ossian (AD 3). Herder's teaching was of decisive importance for Goethe's preparation for the "Sturm und Drang" movement with Schiller. The liberating impact was the power and freedom of the folk song poems he wrote for his beloved Friederike. His ballads and love poems were a novel standard for the genre in Germany, many of which were arranged by Beethoven and Schubert. In 1775, the ducal court of Karl August in Saxe-Weimar invited Goethe to hold high positions.

Goethe's last thirty years of his life were Germany's cultural monument. Pilgrims came from across the world to visit him. He created the small town of Weimar as a cultural centre for decades after his death. In the turbulence of 19th-century German politics, Goethe's presence, literary stature, and rejection of his political position paved the way for his influence as an influential writer of the European tradition. His works are "The Sorrows of Young Werther", "Iphigenie in Taurus", "Torquato Tasso", "Roman Elegies", "Hermann and Dorothea", "Faust", "Wilhelm Meister's Travels", and "Elective Affinities".

## **2. Goethe and Words (Literature)**

I have allergies to words. When I am surrounded by beautiful words, my being expands; hearing wrong words robs me of my motivation to endure since words convey happiness and misery. With words, I can associate all experiences with a visual world. My spiritual words are tranquility, translucence, splendour, twilight, eternity, and longing. Besides Goethe, Wordsworth and Hesse are key signifiers.

When I hear "my heart leaps," I remember my English teacher, who read Wordsworth's "Daffodils" in the high school classroom. At that time, I saw the movie "A Splendour in the Grass" whose sentence was taken from Wordsworth's poem. Since then, the word "splendour" has been my shade, forcing me to discover this. After 30 years, at a Wordsworth poetry seminar in his home Lake District, England, the sentence was read by his descendant. It was from the "Ode." This story illustrates how the word "splendour" has affected my aesthetics and visual world. When I encounter this word, I become emotional with longing. I remember my handsome English teacher and chatty school friends. I could set a panorama of nature through the sky, clouds, trees, pastures, and waves.

Hermann Hesse fascinates me, and his novel "Das Jugend ist schön" (The Youth is Beautiful) takes me on a journey of platonic love. However, the words had such power over me that I had to

stop at a certain point due to my exaggerated imagination and association with Goethe. Hesse's "Glass Bead Game" won him a Nobel literature prize and was based on Goethe's "Wilhelm Meister Apprentice". Thomas Mann's "Lotte in Weimar" was inspired by "The Sorrows of Young Werther". His "Death in Venice" was based on 72-year-old Goethe's passion for 17-year-old Ulrike in Marienbad.

## **2.1. The Sorrows of Young Werther**

In 1771, Goethe completed his legal studies in Strasbourg and returned to Frankfurt to begin working. On the advice of his father, he travelled to Wetzlar where the Supreme Court was situated. Goethe stayed there from May to September 1772 and made the acquaintance of Kestner, secretary to the Hanoverian legation. At a ball, he met and fell in love with Charlotte Buff, who (Goethe did not know it at the time) was engaged to Kestner.

Charlotte's mother died the previous year, so she looked after the big family. Although Charlotte was aware of Goethe's feelings, she valued his company, controlling his emotional liability. Goethe departed suddenly without a farewell but returned to Wetzlar on a brief visit in November when the recent suicide of Jerusalem was on the topic. He received an account of Jerusalem's suicide from Kestner. Jerusalem was secretary to the Brunswick legation and was forbidden to attend official gatherings. Moreover, he was in love with a married woman; his unrequited feelings led him to kill himself with a pistol, which he had borrowed from Kestner in October.

In late 1772, Goethe met Maximiliane von La Roche in Koblenz and was attracted to her. A year later, she was married. Despite the experience of recurring love for a married woman, "The Sorrows of young Werther" is about Goethe's relationship with Charlotte and the death of Jerusalem.

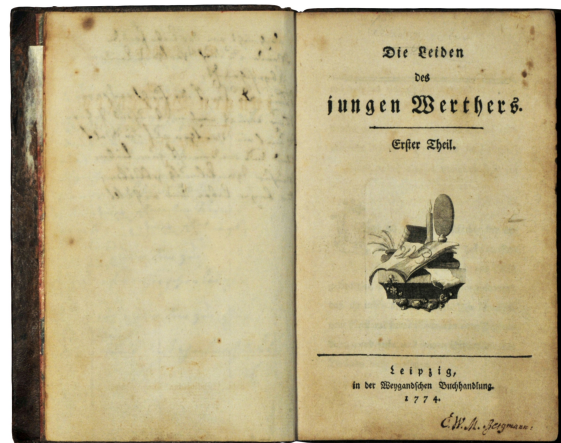


Fig. 2. “The Sorrows of young Werther” (“Die Leiden des jungen Werthers”), first edition, 1774  
(Image: Wikipedia: Foto H.-P.Haack)

The novel, which Goethe finished in four weeks and published in 1774, established Goethe as a European celebrity overnight (fig. 2). It was a bestseller in Germany and captured the imagination of European readers. On Goethe's visit to Napoleon at Erfurt in October 1808, it emerged that the Emperor had read the book seven times and brought it with him to his battlefields.

In this paradigmatic novel of 18th-century sensibility, Werther traces in a series of letters the course of his love for Lotte who is engaged to a young official. Misled by Lotte's warm friendship and his intense imagination from reading Homer and Ossian, Werther gradually loses touch with the world. He ceases to narrate and dies. This event occurred between May 1771 and December 1772.

Why was the novel unique from other existing novels in Germany? Two aspects can be argued. First, a guide at Goethe House in Frankfurt told me that Werther's suicide was a sensation in the 18th century in Germany. Suicide was a religious taboo and a crime, but Werther stood for freedom because his death could only save his broken soul from nature and his love for Lotte. Werther suffered in his relationship with Lotte as he did with nature and God. He had to return to nature, where he found protection from God. God is nature, and nature is God. It is Pantheism. Second, Werther's epistolary and literary novels display his experience and sensibility. In German literature, the epistolary novel was a revolution, but Werther's ebbs and flows of deep sensitivity to nature and Lotte were suited to the narrative letter style.

## Werther and Nature

The letter of 10 May (1771) speaks of Werther's closeness to nature's abundance at its zenith.

Eine wunderbare Heiterkeit hat meine ganze Seele eingenommen, gleich den süßen Frühlingsmorgen, die ich mit ganzem Herzen genieße. Ich bin allein und freue mich meines Lebens in dieser Gegend, die für solche Seelen geschaffen ist wie die meine. Ich bin so glücklich, mein Bester, so ganz in dem Gefühle von ruhigem Dasein versunken, dass meine Kunst darunter leidet.

A wondrous serenity has taken possession of all my soul, like the sweet spring mornings which I enjoy with all my heart. I am alone and I rejoice in my life in this region which is meant for such souls as mine. I am so happy, of best of friends, so immersed in a feeling of tranquil existence that my art suffers because of it... When the lovely valley breathes its mists around me and the high sun rests on the impenetrable darkness of my forest and only solitary rays of light steal into the inner sanctuary, and I then lie in the tall grass by tumbling river and being closer to the earth, I find that thousand manifold grasses catch my eye;...the All-loving One who holds us and keeps us hovering in eternal bliss;... I succumb to the might of the splendour of these phenomena.

### **Werther and Lotte**

In the scene where Werther saw Lotte for the first time, she was distributing slices of bread and butter surrounded by children. This domesticity keeps Werther's mind and imagination: he loves her for the simple, practical world of home that is denied to him. There are two decisive moments with Lotte when the literature of the cult book brings them closer together. In the letter of 16 June (1771), Werther recounts the moment when they stand by the window and look out on a landscape refreshed by a recent thunderstorm.

She looked towards heaven and then at me, I saw her eyes fill with tears, she laid her hand on mine and said: "Klopstock." I immediately recalled the splendid ode which was in her thoughts, and sank into a torrent of feeling which she had poured out over me with this password. I could bear it no longer, I bent over her hand and kissed it, shedding the most blissful tears.

The passion between Werther and Lotte is apparent at the moment of reading. He sent German translated text of "Ossian" to Lotte, who invited him to read it for her.

(Ossian – Colma) Est is Nacht! - Ich bin allein, verloren auf dem stürmischen Hügel. Der Wind saust im Gebirge... Tritt, o Mond, aus deinen Wolken, erscheinet, Sterne der Nacht! Leite mich irgend ein Strahl zu dem Orte, wo meine Liebe ruht von den Beschwerden der Jagd, sein Borgen neben ihm abgespannt, seine Hunde schobend um ihn! Aber hier mus ich sitzen allein auf dem Felsen des verwachsenen Stroms. Der Strom und der Sturm saust, ich höre nicht die Stimme meines Geliebten.

The novel explores both the dialectic of irritating self-consciousness and the desperately-willed sincerity of feeling. It expresses unbearable human deprivation as an unavoidable aspect of man's experience. As an expression of that tragedy, it has no equals in the epistolary novel of the 18th century in European literature (Swales 1987).

### **3. Goethe and Sounds (Music)**

Words can be transcended through sounds. I experience sounds as tranquilizers or agitators to reflect my aesthetic experiences. Without harmony in sounds, I get pain. I have a unique habit of defending myself. Whenever I come across a person I hesitate to associate with, music acts as a weapon. I ask him about his musical knowledge to make him feel nervous. Occasionally, my strategy turns into tragedy. During high school, a musician was my prince, due to a novel where music was dealt with by a woman writer. I imagined I could accompany the musician everywhere to enjoy his music. When my dream almost came true, I found he was occupied with himself. I left London's music hall on a misty night with a mixture of emotions.

Nevertheless, music was my saviour: Beethoven's "Emperor", Mozart's "Clarinet Concerto", Elgar's "Enigma Variation", Rachmaninov's "Theme on Paganini's Variation", Bruch's "Scottish Fantasy" and Bach's "Concerto for two Violins". My visit to Tchaikovsky's house/museum in Klin, a suburb of Moscow testifies to this. The museum director welcomed us with "Pathetique" in a large concert hall. After a while, I heard a groan. My Russian guide was weeping. My agony drove me to



leave her alone in the all and sat on a bench that Tchaikovsky had marked with a number in his garden. After a while, she thanked me, confessing her dream of listening to Tchaikovsky's music in his home. She was a true Russian patriot.

Goethe learned to play the piano in his childhood, but he was the foremost writer who influenced composers such as Schubert, Beethoven, Brahms, Gounod, and so on. Schubert's "Heidenröslein" (Wildrose, fig. 3) was known to all Germans. Goethe wrote this poem in his later life, remembering the romantic moment with his first Friederike in 1770 at Sessenheim. He was sorry for deserting her like a boy cutting a rose.



Fig. 3, Franz Schubert, "Heidenröslein" ("Wildrose"), D.257 (Op.3, No.3)

Compared with Schubert's enthusiasm for Goethe's poems, Goethe regarded Schubert's music compositions as complex and difficult to play, intense and personal, and dramatic towards an inevitable climax. Goethe favoured simple accompaniments, folk-like and dispassionate music with strophic settings. Beethoven was also inspired by Goethe's lyrics and wanted to write music for his "Faust," which never came to be. "Faust" could contribute to the music-literary canon just as Beethoven introduced the human voice in his symphony. Goethe used music to express inner states of being, indicating spiritual and metaphysical transformation between the individual soul and the universe. When Bettina von Arnim visited Beethoven in Vienna in 1810, he said that Goethe's poems contained the "secret of harmony":

Goethe's poems have great power over me, not only through their content, but also through their rhythm. This language, which seems designed by spirits for a higher order and which carries

already the secret of harmony within itself, excites and exalts me to write music. (Spaethling 1987: 50)

For Brahms, Goethe's poems were exquisite. Beethoven and Brahms felt that each of his verses had innate harmony as if they were born with music within them. Goethe's verses consist of gentle echoes reverberating between nature and the human soul, between the poet and the realm of ultimate peace.

Wie herrlich leuchtet/ Mir die Natur!/ Wie glänzt die Sonne!/ Wie lacht die Flur!  
(How splendid is the brightness/ of Nature around me!/ How the sun shines,/ how the fields laugh!)

Nevertheless, Mozart's music contains the elements that could fulfil Goethe's philosophical, scientific, and personal requirements for art: clear structures, specificity of diction, and controlled language. Goethe and Mozart share the same ground of meditation and reconciliation that nurtures humanism. They speak as one. Goethe's admiration for Mozart appeared in his conversation with Eckermann on February 14, 1831.

Really, however, a phenomenon like that of Mozart remains an inexplicable prodigy. But how would the Divinity find everywhere opportunity to do wonders, if He did not sometimes try His powers on extraordinary individuals, at whom we stand astonished and cannot understand whence they come? (Eckermann 1935: 382)

Mozart probably would have composed the music for "Faust." Goethe and Mozart were close contemporaries. Goethe was born in 1749 in Frankfurt; Mozart in 1756 in Salzburg. Despite their close age and geographical proximity, the two never corresponded. In 1763, the fourteen-year-old Goethe saw the seven-year-old Mozart's performance as a "Wunderkind" in Frankfurt.

#### **4. Goethe and Colours (Art)**

Words and sounds are expressed through colours. Colours allow me to re-arm my identity, revealing my future. Colours are my medicine too. Whenever I want to stay slim, I hypnotize myself with the magic of food colours to stop eating. For my stomach pain, I use the chakra healing system. In melancholy, blue is my master. Because of this colour sensitivity, I could escape from people who wore unmatched colours.

Several artists taught me colours. As my schoolmates loved Van Gogh, I followed them in solidarity. Much later, I was awakened by him on a night journey from London to Amsterdam. At the Modern Museum of Art in New York, a whole room accommodates Monet's "Waterlily," which may represent a lotus and signify Buddhism among its believers. Besides my favourite spiritual violet colour, I love Matisse's vibrant yellow, Munch's hypochondriac blue, Nolde's sun-setting red, and Kandinsky's yellow-blues.

Goethe spent five years finishing his "Farbenlehre" (Theory of Colours) after Schiller's death. It consists of three parts: an exposition of his colour theory, a polemic against the Newtonian theory that white light is a mixture of colours, and a collection of materials on the history of colour theory from antiquity to Goethe's time. Goethe's opposition to Newton begins with the Aristotelian notion of "cool" and "warm" colours (blues and reds); blues represent a lightening of black; reds are a darkening of white. Goethe's idea is poetically expressed: "colours are the deeds and sufferings of light."

Although his theory was not accepted by physicists, Goethe's insight into the perception of colour was influential on the physical-psychological aspect throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries. It was his reliance on the eye as a tool to study colour phenomena for everyone (Gage 1999). The light was homogenous and created colour when disturbed by darkness. A mysterious process of augmentation combines yellow and blue to form a third colour, red, called "Purpur."

If when the sky is grey let the observer find a window where the dark intersection of the crossbars stands in contrast to the sky. If he fixes his eyes on the horizontal wooden bar, then tilts his head forward and begins to squint up at it, he will soon see a beautiful yellow-red fringe at the bottom of the bar and a fine light blue one above the bar. (Miller 1995: 232)

Turner was concerned with the interrelation of light and colour. Around 1820, he attempted to fit the scheme of three primary colours (red/yellow/blue) with alternative solutions. One was the red of

dawn and sunset, and the yellow of morning. Colours in a tonal order reflect Aristotelian and Newtonian ideas. In the early 1840s, Turner read Eastlake's translation of Goethe's colour theory. One passage that struck him was the table of polarities in which Goethe had shown how colour was characteristic: plus/minus, yellow/blue, action/negation, light/shadow, force/weakness, etc.

Goethe's polarities suggest a sense of the moral force of colour. He distinguished allegorical, symbolic and mystical colour: "the meaning of the sign must be first communicated to us before we know what it is to signify," as colours had a mediated effect on the mind and feelings.



Fig. 4. Vincent Van Gogh, "Bedroom in Arles" (first version), 1888, oil on canvas, 72.4 x 91.3 cm, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (image: Google Arts & Culture)

By the middle of the century, Goethe's name was linked with Delacroix, due to their common interest in after-images. Goethe's moral harmonies of colour were central to Van Gogh and Gauguin. Matisse describes the sun filtering through the leaf pattern in the yellow/green/blue glazed window as an example of his sensitivity to psychological effects. This is in the Vence Chapel he decorated in 1950 with drawings and stained glass. There is no red; Matisse experienced a negative after-image. Goethe's principles reappeared after 1900 in the circle of the German Expressionists. Kandinsky's (1977) access to the Theosophist Rudolph Steiner was a psychological drama in his abstraction of spiritual art. The group of Colour Fields in the USA adopted Goethe's theory as a Bauhaus teaching method.

## 5. Goethe and the Cathedral

Goethe discovered his German identity in the Gothic Strasburg Cathedral in his autobiography “Poem and Truth” (1812).

As I discovered that this building had been founded in an old German city and was extended in a truly German period, and since the name of the master I found on the modest gravestone had similarly a German ring and origin, I found the merit of this building a challenge, and dared to change the hitherto disparaging term ‘Gothic style of building’, so as to vindicate our nation with the title ‘German Architecture’. (Gage 1980: 117)



Fig. 5. Drawing A', c. 1260. One of the oldest surviving architectural drawings of the cathedral  
(image: <https://lewebpedagogique.com/hida/?p=31655>)

Concerning stained glass, pseudo-Dionysius, an obscure monk from Constantinople in the sixth century produced two treatises, “The Heavenly Names” and “The Celestial Hierarchies,” which dealt with the composition of heaven and angels. They were the inspiration of theologians in the Middle Ages, teaching the concept of light as the reflection of the material world and the illumination of the heavens. The quality of visibility, “Claritas,” was understood in terms of the scholastic philosophy of the 13th century. Through transparency, translucence and multiple reflections, the cathedral was designed to uplift the spirit as well as the eye. The Byzantines had

always considered that the eye was the noblest organ of sense in the human body. The visual universe was of the utmost importance in the act of knowing God (Reytines 1990). This thought led to the invention of Gothic architecture in the middle of the 12th century by Abbot Suger of the Abbey of Saint-Denis, outside Paris.

Cathedrals were built with the conviction that believers, by entering them, would encounter a life of higher significance with joy, beauty, and satisfaction. Stained glass was an integral part of the building and was appropriate for an all-encompassing assurance of vision and revelation in the cathedral. Two models of expression followed in the late 12th century: (1) an atmosphere of intense gloom in the cathedral, and (2) a dramatic vivification of human senses as people enter. Among the three factors (colour, drawing, and interval) that make up stained glass, colour can be classified as either lyrical or constructional. Using the harmony of colours, a lyrical approach invites humans into an imaginary realm through art. Colour conveys its personality with an affinity for its neighbours. There is a sense of unity throughout.

What shall we begin? There is no beginning. Start where you arrive. Stop before what entices you. And work! You will enter little by little into the entirety. Method will be born in proportion to your interest; elements which your attention at first separates in order to analyse them, will unite to compose the whole. In the calm exile of work, we first learn patience, which in turn teaches energy, and energy gives us eternal youth made of self-collectedness and enthusiasm... If we could but understand Gothic art, we should be irresistibly led back to the truth. (Rodin 1966: 9; cited by Cowen 1979: 16)

## **Epilogue**

Despite a connection with Christianity in his youth, Goethe was a Pantheist. He believed in God in nature, as seen by Werther. He had seven love affairs (Friederike, Charlotte, Lilli, von Stein, Christiane, Marianne, and Ulrike). Each time he met this woman, he dedicated a poem to her. Women were his nourishment. However, Goethe told Eckermann that he only had fourteen happy days during his eighty years of life. The fact that Goethe never found true happiness through his beloved women seemed to support my hypothesis. In the prelude, I mentioned finding happiness



and love through a man. In this regard, Goethe and I share some similarities, whatever differences may exist.

As proclaimed, a cathedral is a place for unifying words, sounds and colours and settling them into a concrete plan. I find purity, tranquillity, translucence and splendour and am ready to communicate with Goethe through God's mediation. At the beginning, Goethe is preoccupied with his world; I am preoccupied with mine. Time flows and Goethe is in me with his words, sounds and colours by the magic Divine light of blue stained glass. Goethe takes flight with me into infinity. We are no longer strangers. I, however, am in a hurry to bid farewell to God and Goethe in order to complete my aesthetic and visual world.



Fig. 6. The author's "Goethe in Me," Computer graphics, Syracuse 2000

As Goethe observed about plant life, everything undergoes a metamorphosis. Everything in the cosmos evolves with Divine Reason from creation until the end of time. Nature and all life follow this rule. People who work against nature consume their way to oblivion. Goethe's ability to signify three different stages in my life - an idea, a plan, and its realization - has shaped me. I am still signified. Goethe's words are a starting point, his sounds are a middle point, and his colours are the last point (fig. 6). An inseparable Trinity! With Goethe in me, I embark on a journey where his intellectual and emotional words, colours, and sounds will continue to impact on my aesthetic and visual world. "From the beginning, there was a word."

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