

Medals and Shells: On Morphology and History, Once Again

Carlo Ginzburg

For decades I have been ruminating on the relationship between morphology and history. Recently, I realized the inadequacy of my approach to that issue. I started a new chain of reflections, which I would like to offer to Arnold Davidson as a sign of gratitude for his friendship and generosity.

1

But, first of all, a brief introduction is needed to explain how my obsession with morphology began. The event that initiated my trajectory as a historian took place in 1963 at the State Archive of Venice (I have told this story several times, each time from a different angle). I was looking for witchcraft trials in the vast inquisition archive that is preserved *ai Frari*, in the former Franciscan convent where the Venice archive is now located. Unexpectedly, I came across a 1591 record of answers given by a young cowherd named Menichino of Latisana to an inquisitor interrogating him. “Are you a *benandante*?” the inquisitor asked (a word I had never seen before). Menichino first answered evasively and then explained that he was; being born in a caul (that is, wrapped in the amniotic sack) he was compelled to fight in spirit with other *benandanti* three times a year in the field of Josaphat against witches and wizards for the fertility of the crops. The *benandanti* used fennel branches as weapons; the witches, sorghum sticks. “Fighting in spirit against witches is

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not my choice,” Menichino explained to the (presumably stunned) inquisitor. Some years before, another *benandante* named Giambattista Tamburino had told him: “When you have to come, you will come.” Menichino replied: “You will not be able to force me.” His friend insisted: “You will have to come anyway.” “And a year after these conversations,” Menichino went on, “I dreamed that I was in Josaphat’s field.”¹

As soon as I read those words I was reminded of the Siberian shamans and their ecstatic performances. I have analyzed elsewhere how this analogy had crossed my mind.² Menichino’s confession was the spark that ignited my first book, *I benandanti* (1966). The book focused on a series of Inquisition trials that took place in Friuli, on the northeastern border of Italy. In the introduction, I wrote that I had “not dealt with the question of the relationship which undoubtedly existed between benandanti and shamans.”³

“Undoubtedly existed”: a shot in the dark, as my evidence was merely morphological. I justified my decision to ignore that relationship by referring to the distinction between the two kinds of comparative approach articulated by Marc Bloch in the introduction to *The Royal Touch* (1924): historical comparison and ethnological comparison. James Frazer’s *The Golden Bough* (1890), for Bloch, exemplified the latter. But in *The Night Battles* I committed myself to the former.

2

But the challenge raised by the *benandanti* was still with me, tempting me. Ten years later I found myself fully immersed in a project that ultimately became *Storia notturna* (1989). For some years I had been roaming in the dark, assembling scattered evidence of various kinds from various places and times, unable to understand what I was doing or which question I was trying to answer. Then, an illumination came to me from a passage of Ludwig

1. Quoted in Ginzburg, *The Night Battles: Witchcraft and Agrarian Cults in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, trans. John and Anne Tedeschi (Baltimore, 1992), p. 75; trans. mod.

2. See Ginzburg, “Witches and Shamans,” trans. Stuart Hood, *New Left Review* 20 (July–Aug. 1993): 75–85 and “Travelling in Spirit: From Friuli to Siberia,” in Marjorie Mandelstam Balzer, Jan Bremmer, and Ginzburg, *Horizons of Shamanism: A Triangular Approach to the History and Anthropology of Ecstatic Techniques*, ed. Peter Jackson (Stockholm 2016), pp. 35–51.

3. Ginzburg, *The Night Battles*, p. xxi; trans. mod.

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Wittgenstein's "Remarks on Frazer's *Golden Bough*" (1931): "Historical explanation, the explanation as an hypothesis of development, is only *one* way of assembling the data—of their synopsis. It is just as possible to see the data in their mutual relation to one another and to embrace them in a general picture without putting it in the form of an hypothesis about temporal development."⁴

Here Frazer was rejected once again: not from the point of view of history (as Bloch had rejected him) but from the point of view of a morphology shaped by a "secret law"—as Wittgenstein wrote, quoting a line from Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's elegy *The Metamorphosis of Plants* (1790) (quoted in "R," p. 133). Like Molière's Monsieur Jourdain, I had been practicing morphology without knowing it, driven by two books explicitly inspired by Goethe's morphology: Vladimir Propp's *Morphology of the Folktale* (1928) and André Jolles's *Simple Forms* (1930).

I realized that the analogies between *benandanti* and shamans that had impressed me so deeply could not be addressed in historical terms. They raised questions that were, from the point of view of the historical profession, inadmissible. But the search for "connecting links" emphasized by Wittgenstein could be used (I thought) as a tool for rescuing, albeit conjecturally, lost historical connections ("R," p. 133). Thus I arrived at *morphologia ancilla historiae* (morphology as an auxiliary tool for history). In a footnote to *Ecstasies* I tried to put my approach in a nutshell: "Certain questions formulated by Frazer can be asked again without accepting his replies (my Frazer had read Wittgenstein)."⁵

In a generous review of my book, Wendy Doniger wittily commented: "Like a shaman, [Ginzburg] collects the bones of Sir James George Frazer, . . . covers him with the skin of the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein and brings him to life again."⁶

3

These words reemerged when I started to work on a postface to the forthcoming new edition of *Storia notturna*. The opportunity to rethink the relationship between morphology and history—a topic that had been hotly

4. Ludwig Wittgenstein, "Remarks on Frazer's *Golden Bough*," trans. John Beversluis, in *Philosophical Occasions, 1912–1951*, trans. Beversluis et al., ed. James C. Klagge and Alfred Nordmann (Indianapolis, 1993), p. 131; hereafter abbreviated "R."

5. Ginzburg, *Ecstasies: Deciphering the Witches's Sabbath*, trans. Raymond Rosenthal (Chicago, 1991), p. 204 n. 76.

6. Wendy Doniger, "Sympathy for the Devil," review of *Ecstasies* by Ginzburg, *New York Times Book Review* (14 July 1991), p. 26. The passage is also an epigraph in Davide Ermacora, "Invariant Cultural Forms in Carlo Ginzburg's *Ecstasies: A Thirty-Year Retrospective*," *Historia Religionum* 9 (2017): 69.

debated by the critics of my book—led me to read again, forty years later, a group of texts that had impressed me deeply at the beginning of my research. One of them was a well-known lecture delivered in New York by Ernst Cassirer. In a rubric labelled “morphological idealism,” Cassirer analyzed at length the respective approaches of Goethe and Georges Cuvier—in fact, opposing them: “Cuvier advocated a static view of organic nature; Goethe, a genetic or dynamic view.”⁷

In the past, I realized, I had not paid any attention whatsoever to Cuvier’s static morphology. Cuvier had been for me, first of all, a reader of clues—the paleontologist who boasted that he was able to reconstruct the skeleton of an animal on the basis of a single bone: “a more certain proof,” he wrote, “than all Zadig’s tracks”⁸ (an allusion to Voltaire’s *Zadig*, a famous link in the long history of “serendipity”).⁹ A reconsideration of Cuvier’s static morphology became more urgent when I came across a passage in Peter Steiner’s *Russian Formalism* (1984) that deals with Propp’s *Morphology of the Folktale* (1928). Notwithstanding the quotations from Goethe at the opening of each chapter, Propp’s model, extracted from a variety of folktales, was in fact (Steiner insightfully remarked) closer to Cuvier’s static morphology.¹⁰ Following this track, I discovered that the explicit homage to Goethe’s morphology in the introduction to André Jolles’s *Simple Forms* (1929) was based on a truncated quotation. Goethe had opposed a fixed, static concept like *Gestalt* to a dynamic concept like *Bildung*; Jolles had ignored the latter.¹¹ This double discovery generated a retrospective reflection on my own work. The Friulian case study that I had analyzed in my first book, I realized, could be labelled dynamic, as it described how the *benandanti*, pushed from outside (that is, by the inquisitors), slowly turned from counterwitches into witches.

7. Ernst A. Cassirer, “Structuralism in Modern Linguistics,” *Word* 1, no. 2 (1945): 106.

8. Quoted in Ginzburg, “Clues: Roots of an Evidential Paradigm,” in *Clues, Myths, and the Historical Method*, trans. Tedeschi and Tedeschi (Baltimore, 2013), p. 106.

9. See Robert K. Merton and Elinor Barber, *The Travels and Adventures of Serendipity* (Princeton, N.J., 2004).

10. See Peter Steiner, *Russian Formalism. A Metapoetics* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1984), pp. 90–96, esp. p. 96.

11. See André Jolles, *Simple Forms*, trans. Peter J. Schwartz (New York, 2017), p. 5. On this point Jolles followed Wilhelm Troll’s introduction to his edition of *Goethes Morphologischen Schriften* (1926). On the importance of this edition, see Horst Oppel, *Morphologische Literaturwissenschaft: Goethes Ansicht und Methode* (Mainz/Rhein, 1947), p. 13. Troll’s distorted reading is pointed out (with no reference to Jolles) by Eva Geulen, “Nachlese: Simmels Goethe-Buch und Benjamins Wahlverwandschaften-Aufsatz,” in *Morphologie und Moderne: Goethes “anschauliche Denken” in den Geistes- und Kulturwissenschaften seit 1800*, ed. by Jonas Maatsch (Boston, 2014), pp. 195–218, esp. p. 205 n. 21. See also David E. Wellbery, “Form und Idee: Skizze eines Begriffsfeldes um 1800,” in *Morphologie und Moderne*, pp. 17–42, esp. p. 35, reproducing a note by Goethe in which a series of concepts (including *Gestalt* and *Bildung*) are listed and opposed.

The morphological connections that I had tried to reconstruct in *Ecstasies*, on the other hand, were static. In other words, I had been practicing not only morphology but some kind of Cuvierian morphology without realizing it.

4

Historians should try to sterilize their instruments in order to control their implications. But reading is a very complex (and, in my view, still under-theorized) activity. Book, articles, and documents are multilayered objects, and we can be driven by some of their features unknowingly. As soon as I realized the long-term, indirect impact of Cuvier's work on my own research, a new field of inquiry opened up for me. I immersed myself in Cuvier's hugely impressive work. I read and reread the famous "Discours préliminaire," placed at the beginning of his *Recherches sur les ossements fossils de quadrupèdes*, in which Cuvier describes his own scientific project:

As a new species of antiquarian, I have had to learn to decipher and restore these monuments [the fossil bones of four-legged animals], and to recognize and reassemble in their original order the scattered and mutilated fragments of which they are composed; to reconstruct the ancient beings to which these fragments belonged; to reproduce them in their proportions and characters; and finally to compare them to those that live today at the earth's surface. This is an almost unknown art. . . . If [enlightened men] take an interest in following, in the infancy of our [own] species, the almost erased traces of so many extinct nations . . . , they will doubtless find it also in gathering, in the darkness of earth's infancy, the traces of revolutions previous to the existence of every nation.¹²

5

Cuvier's self-definition as "a new species of antiquarian" was both true and misleading. Cuvier was a profoundly innovative scientist, but the comparison between his own work as a paleontologist and the antiquarian's research was far from new. When Cuvier mentioned "the antiquities of nature,"¹³ he was echoing Buffon's "archives du monde" (the world's archives).¹⁴ But even before this, Robert Hooke—in his *Lectures and Discourses of Earth-*

12. Quoted in Martin J. S. Rudwick, *Georges Cuvier, Fossil Bones, and Geological Catastrophes: New Translations and Interpretations of Primary Texts* (Chicago, 1997), pp. 183–185; hereafter abbreviated GC.

13. Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 34.

14. Buffon, "Les époques de la nature," vol. 1 of *Histoire naturelle, générale et particulière* (Paris, 1780), p. 1. A rather dismissive judgment on Buffon can be detected in Cuvier's "Eloge

quakes, and Subterraneous Eruptions delivered to the Royal Society between 1664 and 1699 and published in 1705 after his death—repeatedly emphasized the analogy between fossils and human artifacts:

No Coin can so well inform an Antiquary that there has been such or such a place subject to such a Prince, as these [shells] will certify a Natural Antiquary, that such and such places have been under the Water, . . . that there have been such and such preceding Alterations and Changes of the superficial Parts of the Earth. . . . And these written in a more legible Character than the Hieroglyphicks of the ancient *Egyptians*, and on more lasting Monuments than those of their vast Pyramids and Obelisks.¹⁵

These [shells] are the greatest and most lasting Monuments of Antiquity, which, in all probability, will far antedate all the most ancient Monuments of the World, even the very Pyramids, Obelisks, Mummies, Hieroglyphicks, and Coins, and will afford more information in Natural History, than those other put altogether will in Civil.¹⁶

Hooke considered shells as monuments more ancient than pyramids and more reliable in terms of historical evidence—a superiority that implied the contiguity of the two histories, natural and civil, insofar as they both shared a set of cognitive practices developed by antiquarians. Take, for example, John Woodward's *An Essay towards a Natural History of the Earth, and Terrestrial Bodies, Especially Minerals* (1695).¹⁷ Woodward used shells and other fossils as relics from a remote past to emphasize the truthfulness of the Mosaic narrative about the deluge, rejecting the opinion that those shells were *lusus naturae* (natural phenomena due to mere chance).¹⁸ But Woodward extensively

Historique de Daubenton," in vol. 1 of *Recueil des éloges historiques lus dans les séances publiques de l'Institut Royal de France* (Strasbourg, 1819), p. 68.

15. Robert Hooke, *Lectures and Discourses of Earthquakes and Subterraneous Eruptions* (New York, 1978), p. 321. See also Ellen Tan Drake, "Hooke's Ideas of the Terraqueous Globe and a Theory of Evolution," in *Robert Hooke Tercentennial Studies*, ed. Michael Cooper and Michael Hunter (Burlington, Vt., 2006), pp. 135–49 and *Restless Genius: Robert Hooke and His Earthly Thoughts* (New York, 1996).

16. Hooke, *Lectures and Discourses of Earthquakes and Subterraneous Eruptions*, p. 335. For more on the importance of this passage, see Horst Bredekamp, *The Lure of Antiquity and the Cult of the Machine: The Kunstammer and the Evolution of Nature, Art, and Technology*, trans. Allison Brown (Princeton, N.J., 1995), p. 78.

17. See John Woodward, *An Essay towards a Natural History of the Earth, and Terrestrial Bodies, Especially Minerals* (London, 1723).

18. Woodward, interestingly enough, was accused of having plagiarized Neapolitan painter Agostino Scilla's *La vana speculazione disingannata del senso* (Empty Speculation Disproven by Senses, 1680); see Paolo Rossi, *Dark Abyss of Time: The History of Earth and the History of Nations from Hooke to Vico* (Chicago, 1984). Paolo Rossi, paradoxically, ignores the antiquarian dimension of the debate.

wrote on different topics as well, such as the authenticity of a Roman shield from his own collection, an object that is today on display at the British Museum and is considered to be a French Renaissance artifact.¹⁹

6

Joseph M. Levine dealt with Woodward's "shield" in detail, but as far as I know nobody (including Levine) has explored the significance of the intricate connection in the framework of antiquarianism between medals and shells, civil and natural history, so vividly exemplified by Woodward's case.²⁰ The historiographical implications of this point are far-reaching. In his great essay "Ancient History and the Antiquarian" (1950), which rescued a discredited intellectual tradition from oblivion, Arnaldo Momigliano mentioned the astronomer Francesco Bianchini and the doctor Jacques Spon, remarking that they "brought something of the scientific method of direct observation into historical research."²¹ Both fossils and geology are absent from Momigliano's argument. This silence—in the light of the close, persistent relationship between antiquarianism and natural history—is surprising. I would explain it, tentatively, as the lasting impression presumably made upon Momigliano by Benedetto Croce's "Nature as History without a History Written By Us: History and Prehistory" (1939). In those dense, aggressive pages, Croce severed any link between civil and natural history, opposing Giambattista Vico's "bestioni" to "imaginary, beastly and mechanical origins of the human kind": a self-evident, scornful allusion to Charles Darwin.²²

7

In the vast scholarly debate on antiquarianism ignited by Momigliano's essay, the connection between natural history and civil history has not been taken into account—with one exception: Peter Miller's work on Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz's posthumously published *Protogaea* (1749).²³ The title was Leibniz's, but the editor, Christian Ludwig Scheid, added a long and telling subtitle: *Protogaea, sive de prima facie telluris seu antiquissimae historiae vestigiis in ipsis naturae monumentis dissertatio* (*Protogaea: A Dissertation on the Early*

19. See Joseph M. Levine, *Dr. Woodward's Shield: History, Science, and Satire in Augustan England*, (Ithaca, N.Y., 1991), pp. 33–34.

20. See *ibid.*

21. Arnaldo Momigliano, "Ancient History and the Antiquarian," *Journal of the Warburg Courtauld Institutes* 13, no. 3–4 (1950): 300; hereafter abbreviated "AH."

22. Benedetto Croce, "La natura come storia senza storia da noi scritta: Storia e preistoria," *La Critica* 37 (1939): 146.

23. See Peter N. Miller, *History and Its Objects: Antiquarianism and Material Culture since 1500* (Ithaca, N. Y., 2017), pp. 68–72. The issue is not mentioned in *Momigliano and Antiquarianism: Foundations of the Modern Cultural Sciences*, ed. Miller (Toronto, 2007).

Aspect of Earth, as Well as on the Traces of Most Ancient History Found in the Very Monuments of Nature). In his long introduction, Scheid, a jurist, asked a rhetorical question: shouldn't the reliability (*fides*) that is rightly ascribed to paintings, coins, and sculptures by historians of antiquity also extend to shells and, most especially, to fossil fish collected in museums?²⁴

Scheid was referring to the *Wunderkammern*: the physical embodiment of the broad definition of antiquarianism that I am here arguing for. Momigliano perceived this connection, although he did not develop it. He remarked: "The antiquary was a connoisseur and an enthusiast; his world was static, his ideal was the collection" ("AH," p. 311).

8

I will come back to the connoisseur later. As far as the collection is concerned, I will focus once again on a work by Woodward: a short tract entitled *Brief Instructions for Making Observations in All Parts of the World: As Also for Collecting, Preserving, and Sending over Natural Things, Being an Attempt to Settle an Universal Correspondence for the Advancement of Knowledge both Natural and Civil* (1696).²⁵ Those instructions, which included practical suggestions on the ways of building up appropriate instruments, were addressed to sailors and travellers. They were asked, on the one hand, to take detailed records of latitude, weather, ebbs, and floods and, on the other, to collect shells, corals, minerals of all kind, plants, and animals—and more. An appendix followed, "relating to the Natives of *Guinea, Monomotapa*, and other the less known parts of *Africa: of the East, and West Indies: Tartary, Greenland*, or any other remote, and uncivilized, or Pagan Countries" (B, p. 8). Travellers were asked to observe the "*features, shapes, and proportions*" and the "*Tempers, Genius, Inclinations, Virtues and Vices*" of those populations; to "enquire into their *Traditions* concerning the *Creation of the World, the universal Deluge, the People* from whom they are *descended*, and the *Country* from which they *Originally came*." And they were asked to look "into their *Notions* touching the *Supreme God, Angels*, or other inferior *Ministers: . . . their Customs and Usages at the birth of Children*, and in the *education of youth: their Ceremonies at Marriages, at Funerals*, and whether they *burn, or bury their Dead*" (B, p. 9), and to "get an Account of

24. See Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, *Summi polyhistoris Godefridi Guilielmi Leibnitii Prologaea: sive de prima facie telluris seu antiquissimae historiae vestigiis in ipsis naturae monumentis dissertatio*, ed. Christian Ludwig Scheidt (Göttingen 1749), pp. xii–xiii.

25. See Woodward, *Brief Instructions for Making Observations in All Parts of the World: As Also for Collecting, Preserving, and Sending over Natural Things, Being an Attempt to Settle an Universal Correspondence for the Advancement of Knowledge both Natural and Civil* (London, 1696); hereafter abbreviated B.

their *Laws*, and *Civil Government*, their *Language*, their *Learning*: their *Letters*,” and so on and so forth (*B*, p. 9–10). “To be brief,” Woodward concluded, to “make enquiry into all their *Customs* and *Usages*, both *Religious*, *Civil*, and *Military*” (*B*, p. 10).

This appendix today looks like a full-fledged program of anthropological research, advanced within the framework of British colonial expansion. But to avoid any anachronism we should also point out that Woodward’s instructions were part of an antiquarian project that covered both natural and civil history—and that the latter included the history of uncivilized populations as well. Antiquarianism had many offsprings; anthropology was one of them.²⁶

9

Cuvier knew some English but presumably had access to the French translation of Woodward’s *An Essay towards a Natural History of the Earth* (1695).²⁷ We can imagine Cuvier reacting to a passage like the following, in which Woodward commented on the effects of the universal deluge: “Here was, we see, a mighty *Revolution*: and *that* too attended with *Accidents* very strange and amazing: the most horrible and portentous *Catastrophe* that *Nature* ever yet saw”²⁸ (“Tout cela montre qu’il y eût une terrible Révolution, suivie de plusieurs accidents fort étranges, et de la plus funeste catastrophe que la nature eût jamais vû”).²⁹

As I have said, Woodward identified that “mighty *Revolution*: . . . the most horrible and portentous *Catastrophe* that *Nature* ever yet saw” with the deluge. But the adverb “ever yet,” translated into French as “jamais,” paved the way for what has been labeled the Cuvierian compromise. Cuvier did not explicitly reject the Biblical narrative but tacitly diluted the uniqueness of the universal deluge by multiplying it. The prehistorical past, Cuvier argued, had been fragmented by a long series of revolutions. Obviously, for a man of his generation (born in 1769, Cuvier died in 1832) the word “*Revolution*” implied an immediate link between civil and natural history. But the

26. See Momigliano, “Prospettiva 1967 della storia greca,” in *Quarto contributo alla storia degli studi classici e del mondo antico* (Rome, 1969), p. 51.

27. See Woodward, *Specimen Geographiae Physicae quo agitur de terra, et corporibus terrestribus speciatim mineralibus, nec non mari, fluminibus et fontibus, accedit Diluvii universalis effectuumque ejus in terra descriptio*, trans. Johann Jacob Scheuchzer (Tiguri 1704) and *Géographie Physique, ou essay sur l’histoire naturelle de la terre*, trans. M. Noguez (Paris, 1735). See also Goerges Cuvier, *Mémoires sur le Baron Georges Cuvier* (Paris, 1833), p. 283. Cuvier was unable to speak English but could read it.

28. Woodward, *An Essay towards a Natural History of the Earth*, p. 93.

29. Woodward, *Géographie Physique*, pp. 49–50.

self-labelled “new species of antiquarian” introduced a crucial distinction between them:

Let us now examine what takes place on earth today; let us analyze the causes that still operate at its surface and determine the possible extent of their effects. This part of the [natural] history of the earth is all the more important, since it has long been thought possible to explain earlier revolutions by these present causes, just as past events in political history are easily explained when one knows well the passions and intrigues of our times. But we shall see that unhappily this is not so in physical history. The thread of operations is broken; nature has changed course, and none of the agents she employs today would have been sufficient to produce her former works. [GC, p. 193]

For Cuvier, “catastrophism” (that is, the multiplicity of revolutions) and the rejection of evolution (put forward, for instance, by his contemporary Lamarck) were two sides of the same approach. Rejecting vague comparisons between fossils and living animals, Cuvier objected:

Fortunately, comparative anatomy possessed a principle that, when well developed, was capable of making these obstacles vanish. It was that of the correlation of forms in organized beings, by means of which each kind of being could be recognized, at a pinch, from any fragment of any of its parts.

Every organized being forms a whole, a unique and closed system, in which all the parts correspond mutually, and contribute to the same definitive action by a reciprocal reaction. [GC, p. 217]

What allowed Cuvier, then, to connect a single bone to an organism, on a basis “more certain . . . than all Zadig’s tracks,” was a static kind of morphology. We may add that it was a static, synchronic kind of morphology. The word *synchronic* immediately evokes Ferdinand de Saussure’s *oeuvre*.

10

The amazing analogy between Cuvier’s and Saussure’s approaches to, respectively, paleontology and linguistics has been pointed out by Guy Jucquois. Cuvier (Jucquois wrote) was familiar to Saussure’s intellectual environment, which included so many distinguished naturalists.³⁰ But a more

30. Guy Jucquois, “L’imaginaire en linguistique,” in *Bono homini donum: Essays in Historical Linguistics, in Memory of J. Alexander Kerns*, ed. Yoël L. Arbeitsmann and Allan R. Bomhard (Philadelphia, 1981), pp. 159–78, esp. p. 165. The importance of Cuvier’s work for comparative linguistics has been pointed out, in general terms, by Winfred P. Lehmann,

analytic demonstration can be provided, focusing on Adolphe Pictet, a polymath from Geneva who was very close to the Saussure family. Both the title and the subtitle of Pictet's book are telling: *Les origines indo-européennes ou les Aryas primitifs: Essai de paléontologie linguistique* (1859–63).³¹ Pictet's contemporaries did not miss the Cuvierian overtones of a "linguistics paleontology" that tried to use words as fossils, aiming to resurrect the environment—natural, cultural and social—in which the original Indo-European population, the Aryans, lived and worked.³² Saussure, who was prodigiously precocious, read Pictet's book when he was not yet fourteen. Deeply impressed, the young boy wrote an essay on Indo-European vocalism that he submitted to Pictet. Retrospectively, Saussure dismissed his early attempt as "childish."³³ But the three articles dedicated to the second edition of Pictet's book, which Saussure published in the *Journal de Genève* in 1878 (he was then twenty-three), deserve to be taken seriously. They are usually ignored by the Saussure scholarship, probably embarrassed by the protoracist aura surrounding Pictet's figure. Needless to say, the word *race* had multiple meanings in the nineteenth century, exemplified by the distinction between linguistic and anthropological races put forward by Ernest Renan.³⁴ But the identity between population and language was at the very heart of Pictet's project. Relying upon the old antiquarian metaphor, he mentioned the possibility of using fossil words as medals, as a clue pointing to a lost external reality—thus subscribing to the core of Pictet's project.

In his mature age, Saussure rejected all of this, starting from the identification between ethnic and linguistic phenomena. To define the relationship between them, he advanced the distancing neologism "ethnisme" in his *Cours de linguistique générale*.³⁵ But the *Cours*, starting from the notion of the arbitrariness of the sign, focused on language and its complexities.

This trajectory is well known, but it includes an episode that many Saussure scholars regarded as disturbing. I refer to the draft of a letter written in

Theoretical Bases of Indo-European Linguistics (New York 1993), p. 297. Cassirer regarded Cuvier as a forerunner of linguistic structuralism. For Cassirer's quotation of Antoine Meillet's remark on language as a system "où tout se tient," see Cassirer, "Structuralism in Modern Linguistics," pp. 107–108.

31. See Maurice Olender, *Les Langues du paradis: Aryens et Sémites: un couple providential* (Paris 1989), pp. 127–41. The list of books owned by Saussure, today at the Bibliothèque Universitaire de Genève, includes several works by Pictet, including two editions of *Origines*; see Daniele Gambarara, "La bibliothèque de Ferdinand de Saussure," *Bulletin du Musée d'Art et d'Histoire* 20 (1976): 355.

32. See the letter addressed by the zoologist Jean Louis Armand de Quatrefages de Bréau to Pictet in Olender, *Les langues du Paradis*, p. 134 n. 17.

33. Quoted in John E. Joseph, *Saussure* (New York, 2012), p. 153; hereafter abbreviated S.

34. See Ernest Renan, *Histoire générale et système comparé des langues Sémitiques* (Paris, 1855).

35. Ferdinand de Saussure, *Cours de linguistique générale* (Paris, 1916).

Saussure's hand, between November and December 1894, at the beginning of the Dreyfus affair, and addressed to Edouard Drumont, the director of the anti-Semitic journal *La libre parole*. The draft (apparently the related letter was never published) had an explicit anti-Semitic tone, qualifying the Jews as "parasites" and "usurers," and referring to a specific passage of Drumont's best seller *La France juive* (1886) (quoted in S, p. 415).

It has been suggested (with no basis whatsoever) that Saussure wrote the draft under his father's dictation (his father was a notorious racist). One might assume that Saussure was at that time still under the impact of Pictet's intellectual commitment to "the ancient Aryans . . . [,] our first ancestors."³⁶ Four years later, in 1898, Saussure declared himself "Dreyfusiste convaincu" (a committed partisan of Dreyfus) (quoted in S, p. 416). But the anti-Semitic draft included a piece of information—Saussure's familiarity with Drumont's *La France juive*—which may be relevant for the history of linguistics. It has been noted that the dictum usually associated with Saussure—that language is a system in which everything is connected—does not appear in Saussure's writings, either published or unpublished.³⁷ It is actually a misreading of Antoine Meillet's "phonétiques de chaque idiome forment un système où tout se tient," which presumably echoes the lectures delivered by his teacher, Saussure, in 1881–91.³⁸ At that time, as it has been noted, the expression "un système où tout se tient" was already a commonplace.³⁹ But it may be interesting to note that the same expression can be found in two books by Drumont: *La fin d'un monde: étude psychologique et sociale* (1889) and *La dernière bataille: Nouvelle étude psychologique et sociale* (1890). In both cases, the context is anti-Semitic, although the latter passage corrects the former: "The Jews . . . have built up a system in which everything is connected [*où tout se tient*], that embraces the whole country";⁴⁰ "Unfortunately for the Jews, society is a complex organism in which everything is connected [*où tout se tient*]."⁴¹

Saussure may have picked up this formula, reworking it in a completely different—purely linguistic—context. But behind Saussure's emphasis on synchrony one can detect a distant, distinct echo of Cuvier's static morphology, punctuated by innumerable revolutions.

36. Adolphe Pictet, *Les origines indo-européennes, ou les Aryas Primitifs: Essai de paléontologie Linguistique* (Paris, 1877), p. 380.

37. See E. F. K. Koerner, "Noch einmal on the History of Language as a 'Système où tout se tient,'" *Cahiers Ferdinand Saussure* 51 (1998): 203.

38. Antoine Meillet, "Les lois de langage," *Revue internationale de sociologie* 1 (July–Aug. 1893), p. 318.

39. See Koerner, "Noch einmal on the History of Language as a 'Système où tout se tient.'"

40. Edward Drumont, *La fin d'un monde: étude psychologique et sociale* (Paris, 1889), p. 79.

41. Drumont, *La dernière bataille: Nouvelle étude psychologique et sociale* (Paris, 1890), p. xvi.

11

“Where the historian is reluctant to tread lest he may offend against the proper chronological sequence, the antiquarian is ready to introduce himself. Classification can dispense with chronology” (“AH,” p. 311). In rereading, once again, Momigliano’s “Ancient History and the Antiquarian,” I was struck by this passage, for several reasons: first of all, by its use of the present tense (“the antiquarian is ready”). If I am not mistaken, Momigliano was already suggesting the persistent value of the antiquarian approach—a point which he explicitly made only some years later.⁴² Through his remark I became retrospectively aware of the trajectory that I had been following in my book *Ecstasies* to circumvent the puzzling, tempting analogies that I had discovered between Friulian *benandanti* and Siberian shamans: “Classification [in other words, morphology] can dispense with chronology.”

But, as I said, I regarded morphology as a preliminary stage in my research—ultimately, as a tool for history. On this issue I had been inspired by a different model: the connoisseur, the art historian, and their relationship. The connoisseur (let’s say, Giovanni Morelli) identifies morphological resemblances that are certainly valuable in themselves, but that can also lead to a historical reconstruction. In the case (exceptional, although far from unique) of Roberto Longhi, the connoisseur and the art historian converge, although Longhi constantly refrained from recognizing his intellectual indebtedness towards Morelli.

In my book *Ecstasies* I tried to translate the morphological configurations that I had been reconstructing into a historical sequence, in a section I entitled “Eurasian Conjectures.”⁴³ But only recently have I discovered that the path from paleontology to connoisseurship had already been covered by François Xavier Burtin (1743–1818).⁴⁴ Trained as a physician, Burtin became interested in the study of fossils. In *Réponse à la question de physique proposée par la Société de Teyler, sur les révolutions et l’âge du globe terrestre* (1790), he argued that the surface of the terrestrial globe had been reshaped by a “general revolution,” much more ancient and devastating than Noah’s deluge, followed by many other revolutions.⁴⁵ Cuvier certainly read this

42. See Momigliano, “Prospettiva 1967 della storia greca,” p. 51.

43. See Ginzburg, *Ecstasies*, pp. 207–25.

44. See F. V. Goethals, “Burtin,” *Lectures relatives à l’histoire des sciences, des arts, de lettres, de moeurs, et de la politique en Belgique et dans les pays limitrophes*, 4 vols. (Brussels, 1837), 1:274–80. See also François de Callatay, “La vie rocambolesque et le cabinet d’étude de François-Xavier Burtin (1743–1818),” *La vie des Musées* 20 (2006): 87–93. On Burtin’s biography see also *Lettre de M. le Curé de * à F. X. Burtin*, Bibliothèque nationale de France, M 32178, and *Réponse de Messire François Xavier Burtin à la lettre pastorale du curé de **** (1787), Bibliothèque nationale de France, M 32179.

45. See François Xavier Burtin, “Réponse à la question de physique proposée par la Société de Teyler, sur les révolutions et l’âge du globe terrestre,” in *Verhandelungen*,

work, as well as the gorgeously illustrated folio in which, some years before (1784), Burtin had provided an analytic description of the fossils discovered in the region around Brussels.⁴⁶ Starting from the analogies between some of those fossils and the skeletons of animals living in the torrid zone, Burtin argued that a profound climatic change had taken place in a distant past; therefore the present state of the globe could not be identical with the one that emerged from the deluge.⁴⁷ Burtin dismissed the fear that one might offend religion by asking questions of nature as “ridiculous.”⁴⁸ Rejecting rigid classifications, Burtin wrote: “in nature everything is connected; in her paintings all is nuanced, all is blended, there are no sharp transitions.”⁴⁹

These words betray Burtin’s other passion—painting. A collector and a connoisseur, Burtin published a *Traité théorique et pratique des connoissances qui sont nécessaires à tout Amateur des Tableaux* (1808), translated and abridged into English as *Treatise on the Knowledge Necessary to Amateurs in Pictures* (1845).⁵⁰ In those two volumes, partially devoted to his own collection, Burtin displayed the experience he had gained from travelling across Europe, filtered through his vast knowledge of the literature about art. Burtin’s remarkable insight is witnessed by his reflections on “the different manners of the masters.”⁵¹ The word “manner,” he wrote,

uitgegeeven door Teyler’s tweede genootschap, 26 vols. (Haarlem 1790), 8:3–242. Hubert Thomas referred to it as “ouvrage aujourd’hui méconnu” (Hubert Thomas, preface to Cuvier, *Discours sur les révolutions de la surface du globe* [Paris 1985], p. 11) (many thanks are due to Martin Rueff, who pointed out this book to me). See Rudwick, *Bursting the Limits of Time: The Reconstruction of Geohistory in the Age of Revolution* (Chicago, 2005), pp. 194–203.

46. See Burtin, *Oryctographie de Bruxelles ou description des fossiles tant naturels qu’accidentels découverts jusqu’à ce jour dans les environs de cette ville* (Brussels, 1784).

47. Jean-Claude Delamétherie, a colleague of Cuvier, quoted this analysis, with a reference to Burtin, in Jean-Claude Delamétherie, *Leçons de géologie données au Collège de France*, 3 vols. (Paris, 1816), 3:285.

48. Burtin, *Oryctographie de Bruxelles*, p. 69. “[I] professait en matière de religion le scepticisme le plus absolu,” wrote Goethals, in an overtly hostile portrait (Goethals, “Burtin,” 1:278).

49. Burtin, *Oryctographie de Bruxelles*, p. 63.

50. See Oliver Kase, *Mit Worten sehen lernen: Bildbeschreibung im 18th Jahrhundert*, (Petersberg 2010), pp. 266–70. Burtin’s treatise had been strongly criticized by Fiorillo, review of *Traité théorique et pratique des connoissances qui sont nécessaires à tout Amateur des Tableaux* by Burtin, *Göttingische Gelehrte Anzeigen* 19 (1809): 177–84 and 20 (1809): 185–94. See also Alfred Walz, “Das Zeitalter des aufgeklärten Absolutismus (1735–1806),” in *Das Herzog Anton Ulrich-Museum und seine Sammlungen, 1578, 1754, 2004*, ed. Jochen Luckhardt (Munich 2004), pp. 163–65. I will say more on Burtin in another context.

51. Burtin, *Treatise on the Knowledge Necessary to Amateurs in Pictures*, trans. Robert White (London, 1845), p. 57. See also Burtin, *Traité théorique et pratique des connoissances qui sont nécessaires à tout Amateur des* (Brussels, 1808), 1:266. Those scholars who are rediscovering the importance of Burtin’s treatise have not yet commented upon those pages.

includes what are called his style and handling; that is, the *ideal* part, and the *mechanical* part. . . . The mechanical part especially becomes in painting, just as in writing, the most certain means of recognising the author, and the least liable to error. For although both may vary at pleasure the nature of their subjects, the one cannot in like manner alter his style, his orthography, and especially his handwriting; nor can the other change his colouring, his *empasto*, and his touch. In either case these are the results of habit, of which we cannot divest ourselves as we would.⁵²

Burtin was certainly familiar with the letter Luigi Crespi, the eighteenth-century painter and art historian, addressed to Monsignor Bottari, reprinted in the *Raccolta di lettere sulla pittura scultura e architettura* edited by the latter (1754–1773). Crespi remarked that a good copyist will be able to reproduce the *idea*, the arrangement of a painting, “in a word . . . everything we label *composition*: but otherwise he will never be able to copy the author without betraying himself in some traits, above all in the sections that usually are executed carelessly, like the ground, the background, and so forth.”⁵³

This letter by Crespi has been identified as the generating cell of the method that was put forward, more than a century later, by Morelli.⁵⁴ But in the trajectory connecting Crespi to Morelli a missing link, hitherto ignored, ought to be added. Morelli, before becoming a collector and a connoisseur, studied comparative anatomy in Cuvier’s works and literally echoed Burtin’s *Traité* without mentioning it: “quasi ogni pittore ha certe maniere abituali ch’egli mette in mostra e che gli sfuggono senza che egli se ne accorga” (nearly every painter has manners that are the result of habit, which he displays without being able to control them).⁵⁵

52. Burtin, *Treatise on the Knowledge Necessary to Amateurs in Pictures*, pp. 168–69. On the parallel between writer and painter, see Burtin, “Manière de reconnoître et d’apprécier les copies,” in *Traité théorique et pratique*, 1:100–14, esp. pp. 113–14.

53. Luigi Crespi, letter to Giovanni Gaetano Bottari, 25 Sept. 1751, in Bottari, *Raccolta di lettere sulla pittura, scultura ed architettura scritte da’ più celebri professori che in dette art fiorirono dal secolo*, 7 vols. (Milan, 1822), 4:261. (The letter deals with a painting on copper by Palma il Vecchio.) Burtin mentioned Bottari in *Traité théorique et pratique*, 2:159.

54. See Jaynie Anderson, “Connoisseurship,” in *The Dictionary of Art*, ed. Jane Turner, 34 vols. (New York, 1996), 7:713–15.

55. Giovanni Morelli, *Della pittura italiana: studii storico-critici*, ed. Anderson (Milan, 1991), p. 87. The same passage is quoted in Anderson, *I taccuini manoscritti di Giovanni Morelli* (Milan, 2000), defining “moderna interpretazione caricaturale” of Morelli’s method as the “Freudian” interpretation worked out, on the basis of a marginal element, by Edgar Wind and myself (p. 29). For a different (and much more convincing) evaluation, see Jaynie Anderson’s argument that Morelli’s method, “derived from that of the French comparative anatomist Georges Cuvier and from German *Naturphilosophie* as practised by Goethe and

The “mechanical,” involuntary manner, identified by Burtin as “the most certain means of recognising the author, and the least liable to error,” opened up a trajectory leading to Morelli’s earlobes and nails.

12

In these retrospective reflections I repeatedly mention what I did not know and what I was not aware of. Burtin and his writings were unknown to me; my knowledge of Cuvier’s work was absolutely inadequate. Both of them (and, along with them, many others) unknowingly oriented, through manifold filters, my own research. All this is banal. But research reproduces, on a reduced scale and in a simplified form, like an experiment, an experience that is shared by everybody: to enter a world that we have not chosen, mostly unknown to us, in which acting *also* (I will not say *above all*) means being acted upon.⁵⁶

Friedrich Schelling,” had been “anticipated” by Crespi’s letter to Bottari (Anderson, “Connoisseurship,” pp. 714–15).

56. These pages aim to correct the absence of Cuvier in a previous presentation of mine on Morelli’s work—an absence that was rightly criticized by Anderson.