

# Man and Animal

## The Evolutionary Aesthetics of Tito Vignoli (1824-1914)

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### 1. *The Post-Darwinian Man between Humanities and Natural Sciences*

About fifteen years ago Micla Petrelli (1998), introducing the reprint of *Estetica*, originally published by Hoepli in 1894 and written by the crystallographer and professor in Aesthetics Mario Pilo, outlined the Italian positivist aesthetics of the late nineteenth century. The scenario was animated by cross figures moving with ease on the boundary between human and natural sciences, like the anthropologist Paolo Mantegazza, the physiologist Mariano Patrizi, the criminologist Cesare Lombroso, the former professor of natural sciences Mario Pilo and the writer Arturo Graf. These authors studied and tried to decipher, from different perspectives and disciplines, with the help of the new positivist sciences, problems such as genius in the arts, artistic and natural beauty, physiology of feelings like pain, fear and pleasure, the role of perception and behavior of feelings between physiology, experimental psychology, psychophysics and the theory of evolution.

Evolutionists as Charles Darwin and Ernst Haeckel, experimental psychologists as Gustav Theodor Fechner, physiologists as Angelo Mosso, anthropologists as Paolo Mantegazza appeared then in the essays of literary historians, art critics, philosophers. Meanwhile, themes that until that moment had affected only writers, artists and philosophers now came to the attention of the scientists, called to decipher the meaning and usefulness of beauty and emotions in nature and in man, or the formation of taste in the different human cultures, thus working in a complex patchwork of disciplinary contributions.

In Italy, as in other European countries, writers and poets such as Antonio Fogazzaro and Giovanni Pascoli looked at the cultural perspective of the new evolutionary vision of man, soaked with evolutionary language. As noted by Francesco De Sanctis, professor of

comparative literature at the University of Naples, in the famous conference // *darwinismo nell'arte*, held in Rome on the 11 March 1883:

Se Darwin fosse stato solo un naturalista, la sua influenza sarebbe rimasta in quella cerchia speciale di studi. Ma Darwin non fu solo lo storico, fu il filosofo della natura, e dai fatti e dalle leggi naturali cavò tutta una teoria intorno ai problemi più importanti della nostra esistenza, ai quali l'umanità non può rimanere indifferente. [...] Ci sono uomini che possono ignorare i libri, ed anche il nome di Darwin, ma, loro malgrado, vivono in quell'ambiente sentono i suoi influssi. (De Sanctis [1952]: 315-317)

Even Gabriele D'Annunzio wrote in the article dated 4th November 1887 *Per una festa della scienza* – published in the newspaper “Tribuna” and dedicated to the physiologist Jacobus Moleschott's first lecture at the University of Rome – about the similar glorious destiny of physiology and novel with a Darwinian language, testifying the deep interpolations between different cultural horizons:

Chi volesse parlar darwinianamente direbbe che tanto nelle scienze quanto ne' diversi generi di arte, avviene una selezione naturale con la sopravvivenza dell'organismo più adatto. La Fisiologia è destinata a sopravvivere, di fronte alle altre scienze; poiché essa è principalmente intesa allo studio della vita. Così, nell'arte, il Romanzo. (D'Annunzio [1996]: 945)

In the background of the intricate context – which still awaits to be studied, especially by connecting disciplinary skills that are now generally separate – finds a place Tito Vignoli (1824-1914)<sup>1</sup>, a scholar with a wide range of interests, whose work covers many themes. His work is the result of a fruitful contamination between philosophy, history of religion, linguistics, ethnography, anthropology, psychology, palethnology, zoology and physiology. As shown by the composition of his library (Canadelli [2010], [2011]), he looked at Vico, Hippolyte Taine, Vincenzo Gioberti, Herbert Spencer, Ernest Renan, Charles Darwin, Wilhelm Wundt, Max Müller.

Among the many positions held in the cultural and educational institutions in Milan, Vignoli taught psychology and anthropology at the Accademia scientifico-letteraria and directed the Museo civico di storia naturale from 1893 to 1911. His contribution is conceived on a plan that could be called philosophical, meaning a psychological and anthropological reflection on the nature of man and his intelligence in relation to the rest of the animal kingdom. He started a reflection in the light of the new post-

<sup>1</sup> On Vignoli see Canadelli (2013) and Badaloni (1990), De Liguori (1998a) (2000), Landucci (1996), Magnano San Lio (2008). For further informations on Vignoli's archive see also the website of Aspi-Archivio storico della psicologia italiana, [www.aspi.unimib.it](http://www.aspi.unimib.it)

Darwinian view of man that confronted, among many other topics, also with the universe of aesthetics and art, as evidenced by the arguments of some of his courses on the genesis of art, and some minor writings: *I tre fattori naturali dell'estetica* appeared in 1881 on "Rendiconti del Reale Istituto lombardo di scienze e lettere"; *Die Aesthetik in der Evolutionstheorie* published in the German magazine "Auf der Höhe" in 1882, which renewed the essay dedicated to the three natural factors of aesthetics; *Del vero nell'arte*, published in 1889 on "Rendiconti del Reale Istituto lombardo di scienze e lettere" and in 1892 on "Il Pensiero italiano". The content of these works was part of the theoretical framework expressed by Vignoli in his most well-known and most successful book, *Mito e scienza*.

## 2. *The Myth as an Universal Form of Intelligence*

*Mito e scienza* came out in 1879, in the International Scientific Library of the Fratelli Dumolard publishing house. The book was translated into German in 1880 and into English in 1882, which guaranteed it a substantial circulation in Europe. These pages were a significant example of mid-nineteenth century existing contamination between various sciences, in the light of the new vision of man introduced by the Darwinian theory. Vignoli summed up there decades of studies in the field of ethnography, history, philosophy, history of religions, archeology, comparative linguistics, art history, anthropology, physiology, psychology and more generally the history of culture. The discourse took up where it was left off in the book published two years earlier, *Della legge fondamentale dell'intelligenza nel regno animale. Saggio di psicologia comparata*. Vignoli could in fact start a reflection on human culture only after the demonstration of the gradual evolution of man from animals, both mentally and physically.

At stake there was much more than ethnographic knowledge, which anyhow Vignoli possessed and of which he gave a display, in line with the contemporary production. The book dealt with the theme of man's original relationship with the world, its constitutive animal origins and the different ways of human knowledge in the light of the important theoretical contribution of Darwin. *Mito e scienza* completed Vignoli's project on comparative psychology with the study of the relationship between a primitive form of intelligence specific to both animal and man, that is the source of errors and superstitions – the *myth* – and an objective thinking specific to man alone – the *science*.

As stated by Vignoli himself in the initial *Avvertenza*, *Mito e scienza* resumed what he taught in two anthropology courses held at the Accademia scientifico-letteraria from 1874 to 1879 dedicated to the *Origine e l'evoluzione dei miti* and to the *Genesi dell'arte*

*umana*. The book – which merged the psychological investigation of man with the extensive historical and ethnographic coverage of the most diverse civilizations – was the last stone of a building already sketched in his first article, *Saggio di una dottrina razionale del progresso*, published in 1863 in the journal "Il Politecnico".

In the book published in 1879, the detailed analysis of individual beliefs and mythologies, arts and religions, was not an end in itself, but functional to illuminate the dark exercise of thought:

La genesi del mito, il suo svolgimento, la sua specificazione e integrazione delle sue rappresentazioni, come le diverse fonti intrinseche ed estrinseche donde procede, ci mettono più profondamente entro i segreti meandri dei fatti psichici; ci rivelano i nessi dei fatti di coscienza e loro antecedenti, col mondo e con le condizioni normali e anormali fisiologiche nostre; e mostrano qual dramma complesso si agiti nella alterna reciprocità fra noi e le cose entro noi stessi, e quali siano le leggi che governano tutta questa varia e molteplice creazione di forme, d'immagini, d'idee, e dell'artificiale mondo di fantasmi che ne deriva. (Vignoli [1879]: 33)

In Vignoli's vision, the myth embraced the most diverse manifestations of intelligence. His purpose was to discover the origins of all the myths of humanity, the universal form of the myth and its roots, regardless of the culture of origin and of the individual characteristics in which the particular myth was manifested. He thought that this was the new psychological element that distinguished his research – which he defined as *transcendental* – from the other ones conducted at the time.

So the myth was not a hiccup, a passing phase in the long run of human civilization, but a necessary and spontaneous function of the intelligence; the myth could not be confined among the remains of a buried past, belonging to a primitive humanity now extinct. As a universal form of intelligence common to humans and animals, the myth accompanied the life of every civilization and every individual: it manifested itself in the untaught lower classes, but also in those affluent and educated, among scientists and artists, with more strength in the elderly, in children, in the illiterates and in the mentally ill. Its ineradicable action could certainly be countered, especially through scientific thinking, but the central role assigned to the myth made the pondering of *Mito e scienza* far from obvious.

After accepting the definition of myth as a primitive and congenital impulse to project itself in things and to give a subjective and animated form to the world, Vignoli hurried to judge insufficient this type of analysis. To say that the human mind was led to attribute to things his own nature or that man animated the universe according to his passions was a true finding that did not explain, however, the ultimate and deep reasons

of the myth. The mythologists should not stop at the analysis of isolated beliefs and superstitions, like most ethnographers, anthropologists, philosophers and linguists of those years have in fact done – see for example Max Müller or Edward Burnett Tylor; they should understand the universal source of all myths instead. It was not enough then to gather as much data and informations on history and human cultures; it was necessary to delve into the psychological and physiological complexity of the human mind. This meant to resume the discussion on the mode of operation of animal intelligence, from which man descended.

Claiming his membership in the evolutionary movement, Vignoli kept repeating that between animals and humans there is an evolutionary link of kinship, since the animal in man never ceases:

Che se questo è vero, com'è verissimo, trattando noi della genesi del mito e quindi della sua origine più semplicissima, ci argomenteremo di scoprire (certo con ardimento nuovo, ma non disforme dalla dottrina dell'evoluzione) se mai il germe primo di queste rappresentazioni nei suoi elementi essenziali non si trovasse *già* nel regno animale anche prima che nella forma feticista e antropomorfica si evolvano nell'uomo. Ricerca questa ardua ma necessaria, poiché la dottrina bene intesa della evoluzione mi ci costringe, come la logica generale della natura. (Vignoli [1879]: 23)

To understand the various manifestations of human culture, it was therefore necessary to move back to the animal kingdom. In this context, Vignoli defined myth as a spontaneous and necessary function of the mind, a constitutive psychological form, an *a priori*, innate and universal, which made possible the knowledge in general. Man shared this constitutive form with the rest of the animal kingdom; from it depended also the scientific activity, even though the science, unlike the myth, was aiming ultimately to reach the notion of objective reality. Myth and science were therefore children of the same intellectual act, like two rivers that originated from the same source and ran parallel, meeting and parting along the way. The very same act of personification which was the cause of error and superstition was also a necessary precondition for the advent of science. In the face of a reality perceived as alien and inhospitable, myth and science elaborated a system of causes and responses: the myth gave rise to superstitions, beliefs and mythologies, consistent even if incorrect; the science, which arose only later on, elevated itself to objectively understand the reality, but was unable to eliminate the action of the myth.

### 3. *The Evolution of the Myth: from Fetishism to Art and Aesthetics*

Vignoli placed the identification of the three moments of apprehension at the origin of the myth: phenomenon, subject, cause. The tendency to enliven and animate things sprang from the physical and mental condition of the animal, or from the vivid impressions that struck its senses, forcing it to an immediate response and to an attribution of causes. In an attempt to orientate themselves, animal and man started from the common mechanism of apprehension. A living subject was projected in the external phenomenon, and it acted as the intentional cause of the phenomenon itself. This process of transformation of the phenomenon in subject and cause represented an innate and constitutive way of the relationship with the world, which allowed humans and animals to create a horizon of meaning, giving a consistent and reassuring form to a reality perceived as alien and inhospitable.

Given the premises, to grasp the universal form of the myth Vignoli could only begin exploring the animal universe, whose psychic life remained confined to the mythical stage. Unable to see the objects that surround it as different and independent from the self, the animal spends the existence in a continuous flow of emotions, urges, desires and suspicions. Devoid of the concept of objective reality, it lives in a drama in which every thing – a stone, a plant, the wind, a noise – appears as living and intentionally friend or foe, beneficial or detrimental to its survival.

From the process of personification derived also all superstitions, mythologies, religions, scientific errors, beliefs in fetishes, in demons, in spirits, in idols that since the mists of time had accompanied the journey of humanity. Even in "more evolved" societies, people – on a daily basis and in normal situations – kept to act in accordance with the methods of animal psychology, dominated by the myth. A sudden fear was enough to let man discover himself in the act of personify what was actually inanimate. Man was immersed in a "panic", dramatic, living, intentional world, that only with difficulty he could turn away and make objective.

In the sixth chapter of *Mito e scienza* Vignoli called «entification» the spontaneous act at the base of the myth. The entification of perceptions, emotions, feelings, internal representations, ideas and concepts was present at different levels. Man was firmly convinced that the entified perceptions existed as active and independent things. Between the emotional metaphor in which was consumed the animal life and the objective world of science there was a long and arduous evolutionary process of "disembodiment", a process that Vignoli retraced in its stages.

The immediate and transient personification in animals, at first vague and indeterminate also in humans, gave rise to the belief in the fetish, an external object or an inside idol that generated trepidation or hope, fear or joy, respect or worship in men. Vignoli placed at this stage the multiple range of cults, religions and superstitions of the so-called "primitive" peoples and of the most diverse civilizations, including animism and totemism, of which he provided numerous examples in the seventh chapter of *Mito e scienza*.

Due to the tendency towards unity that characterizes human intelligence, from the singular fetish one could switch to the formation of more general fantastic types or, in the language of Vico, to the "mythical universals". This is a prerequisite for the coming of polytheism, and – by virtue of the synthetic form of the mind – of monotheism, first of all Christianity.

Man personified not only the forces and phenomena of nature, transforming them into anthropomorphic entities, but entified also abstract concepts in physical, moral or intellectual concepts, as did Greek philosophy and especially Plato, in a process of progressive approach to the rational system of science. The scientific myth began precisely from the entification of logical principles and abstract ideas. As myth turned from material into ideal and the individual myths were replaced by ideas, and those by laws, science emerged gradually.

Where the myth embodied, science came up to disembody. The experimental method had marked an immense progress, it made possible to look at every phenomenon as an objective expression of rational laws and not as a manifestation of good or bad souls.

In *Mito e scienza* not only religion and science, but also the arts were traced back to a mythical mechanism, pushing man to objectify the image in a drawing, a sculpture, a monument. In "primitive" cultures, the artist and his audience projected secret powers and superstitious meanings in the artistic work, similar to what was found in children and in "savage" populations. The works of art were fetishes, amulets and talismans which could positively or negatively influence on the spirits that dispensed benefits or punishments to those who worshiped them. In the statue of a deity the primitive admired not only the beauty, but also the god itself, who could punish or save him; in every image he loved the spirit that was embodied in it; in the portraits of the deceased he saw the loved ones. At this stage the image was alive and magical, and could act on reality. An affront or an insult against it implied the destruction of what was represented in it.

Thus, for Vignoli the primitive worshipping of the images was based on fetish and on spiritualist and idolatrous incarnation of the effigy, ultimately descending from the operation of animal perception. In this regard, he emphasized again the tenacity of the myth, asking the reader of the second half of the nineteenth century:

Chi dinanzi alle tele, alle sculture dei grandi artisti antichi e moderni, sia pure coltissimo e fornito di finissimo gusto del bello, mentre spiritualmente ed esteticamente gode di quelle opere stupende (se vuol sorprendere anche l'intimo senso che l'agita), non vivifica, non anima, non personifica quelle immagini e cose? e rapito dalla bellezza e verità delle espressioni e dei rilievi non si commove senza addarsene, e non ne risente le passioni come se fossero persone e cose reali? (Vignoli [1879]: 256)

Vignoli extended the argument to music, singing and dance, the arts that primitive mankind used in religious ceremonies and in magical rituals to influence events and people. To act on nature, the magician recited and sang magic words, while the music accompanied exorcisms and spells in the belief that it could cure diseases. As the images, also words became the personification of good or evil supernatural agents and as such they covered a mediating function for man, who used them to dominate the forces of nature before the advent of science. Vignoli concluded that in the arts aesthetic concerns had risen at a later time, with the evolution and the loss of the superstitious and symbolic element which however did not ever disappear definitively, staying for example in the use of words.

The chapter ended with a study of phenomena such as dreams, perceptual illusions, neuroses, hallucinations, delirium, madness, dementia. These were more or less frequent situations in which the subject – in a time when attention and rationality have faded – was again ready to believe in the reality of his internal illusory images. Such images were unreal or resurrected from the past, based on the perceptual process of attribution of causes to phenomena. The final pages of *Mito e scienza* are good at capturing how the psychological studies on man and on his cognitive abilities – also in relation to the animal kingdom – were closely related to ethnographic studies. The mythical tendency of intelligence allowed to explain in a unified way the complex world of animal and human psyche, in the light of the theory of evolution. It was in this theoretical framework that Vignoli placed the problems analyzed by a fresh discipline such as aesthetics and by an "evolutionary" vision of the artistic activity.

These topics were covered in the aforementioned essays, such as the one on the three natural factors of aesthetics (form, emotion, invention), in which he announced the intention to dedicate a whole volume to these issues: a volume that actually never



saw the light. Vignoli had dealt with art at the end of the century, as a member of the Consiglio direttivo della Scuola superiore d'arte applicata all'industria and the Commissione conservatrice dei monumenti e degli oggetti d'arte e di antichità for the province of Milan. He wanted to investigate the area of aesthetics – with regard to the perception and sense of beauty – from an experimental and inductive point of view. In the context of an evolutionary aesthetics, he connected once again man to other animals, with the aim of understanding the distinctive features of man:

Il mio scopo non è quello di chiarire quale sia l'essenza del bello in sé, secondo il modo trascendentale di considerarlo in alcune scuole, che io però apprezzo e rispetto; e neppure di definire le norme onde egli venga metodicamente effettuato nelle opere d'arte. Ma sì invece di avvisare alle condizioni necessarie oggettive e soggettive, affatto naturali perché questo sentimento sorga nell'animo nostro: tento di ricercare scientificamente, cioè secondo i canoni del metodo induttivo e sperimentale, quali siano i fattori essenziali di una tale emozione, non separando l'uomo dalle altre specie di animali, anzi dalla comparazione di queste rispetto a un tal fatto fisio-psichico traendo argomento per determinare più sicuramente la natura speciale di un tal sentimento che nell'uomo si manifesta. (Vignoli [1881]: 426)

Vignoli tried to understand what margin of creative freedom remained to the artist by tracing the limits imposed by the laws of nature and human perception. The form was the objective factor of the aesthetic perception. The symmetry in architecture works allowed him to trace it back to the animal world and to outline an evolution from the simplest creations like rough caves to the most complex temples. The cave of the first men just carved out from animality did not answer to a principle of beauty, it was rather modeled out on the pattern of bird nests. Its shape was dictated primarily by functions of shelter and defense; the same was true for the shape of prehistoric arrows and bows, whose symmetry depended on their use – to pierce into the body and kill. And it was true also for vases and furniture, in which the concern for ornamentation took over only later on. Vignoli also discussed the perception of color and sound in the arts, referring to authors such as Hermann von Helmholtz. He agreed with him on the fact that physiological and optic scientific researches of the time were connected to the highest topics of art, illuminating them with a new light.

The two remaining aesthetics factors were subjective. One concerned the sphere of emotions, which were common to humans and animals and were related to the selfless display of beauty. Vignoli stated that even among animals there was a selfless feeling of beauty; he retraced the classic examples of the use of color and sound, for example in insects or birds, citing the work of Ludwig Büchner among others. The last factor was more specific to the human world of the arts and set it apart from animal aesthetics: it

was the invention, the free choice of size, disposition and ornaments. In Vignoli's opinion, it was the imagination to characterize the art of beauty or aesthetics. He reconstructed the stages of evolution of this trend from the prehistoric populations to the so-called "primitive" and "civilized" cultures.

In the other article devoted to these issues, *Del vero nell'arte*, Vignoli pondered again on the theme of beauty, focusing on contemporary art, «quale riproduttrice esatta della realtà delle forme, dei sentimenti particolari, delle azioni personali o sociali, conforme al canone di ciò che si chiama verismo» (1889: 353). He cited and discussed numerous cases of art history, the theories by Kant, Fechner, John Ruskin, the evolutionist school of Darwin and Spencer, the definition of beauty by Jean-Marie Guyau, and he focused again on the freedom and creative imagination of the artist. He concluded that «l'arte è una funzione nativa fisio-psichica, che ha leggi fondamentali di genesi, di esplicamento, di esercizio e di effetti, come ciascun'altra funzione intellettuale ed organica» (1889: 482). The distinguishing feature of art was then freedom.

#### 4. *The Circulation of Vignoli's Theory of the Myth*

The originality of the work on the myth by Vignoli was relayed in the twentieth century by a recognized scholar like Ernst Cassirer, who rightly saw in it a psychological investigation on the ability toward the knowledge of the human beings. In the second volume on mythical thought and in the third volume on the phenomenology of knowledge of the *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen*, Cassirer pointed out that Vignoli – within the limits of an empiricist tendency and a positivist epistemology – had the merit to go back to a logical formal unity and to a law of the intelligence that avoided a mere quantitative and comparative survey based on the accumulation of ethnographic, historical and religious data; an issue otherwise so typical of positivist anthropology. Cassirer was struck by the not merely progressive conception of the relationship between myth and science depicted by Vignoli. In his opinion, the Italian anthropologist had recognized to the myth its own transcendental principle, a special developmental law, which linked man to his animal roots<sup>2</sup>.

The translations in German in 1880 (Brockhaus, Leipzig) and in English in 1882 (Kegan Paul Trench, London) helped *Mito e scienza* to cross national borders. At its first release, the book earned a review on the prestigious "Journal des Savants", describing it as «une

<sup>2</sup> See Cassirer (1964): 31. In the third volume, the German philosopher looked back once again at the biological conception of myth developed by Vignoli, see Cassirer (1966): 100-102.

étude psychologique et philosophique sur le mythe et sur les conditions mentales dans lesquelles il prend naissance et se développe» (An. [1879]: 724). In 1881, shortly after the publication of the German translation, the historian of religion Hermann Usener wrote an extensive and detailed report on the work in the “*Deutsche Literaturzeitung*”. While mentioning the debt that Vignoli had towards Vico, Usener preferred to place *Mito e scienza* among the studies of cultural history which had commenced after Darwin; nevertheless, he criticized the interpretation of myth as personification (1881). Even the anonymous reviewer of the “*Popular Science Monthly*” emphasized the genuinely Darwinian point of view adopted by the author of the essay, alerting the reader: «It is not a book of old fairy tales nor of the mythological legends of different peoples, but it is a compact disquisition on the origin and nature of the common mythical element manifested by all grades of intelligence» (An. [1882]: 270).

While the “*Archivio per l’antropologia e l’etnografia*”, founded by Paolo Mantegazza, criticized its setting and metaphysical language (Mantegazza 1880), *Mito e scienza* acted as a driving force for Vignoli, who thanks to this essay was asked to collaborate with some important magazines of the time, such as the German “*Archiv für Religionswissenschaft*”<sup>3</sup>. He also started a correspondence with prominent figures of the European culture in the second half of the nineteenth century, as the French historian Alfred Maury<sup>4</sup> – one of the founders of the *École des Hautes Études* in Paris, author of the 1865 volume *Le sommeil et les rêves* (which made him known for his pioneering research on the interpretation of dreams before Freud) – or the Austrian writer Leopold von Sacher-Masoch. Vignoli entertained a substantial correspondence with the author of the renowned novel *Venus in Furs* (1870), focusing primarily on his collaboration with “*Auf der Höhe*”; the magazine was founded by Masoch and printed in Leipzig between October 1881 and September 1885. In February 1882<sup>5</sup>, Vignoli published there the article *Die Aesthetik in der Evolutionslehre*, in which the author focused on the aesthetic side.

Part of the fame Vignoli enjoys today is due to the fact that he was appreciated by Aby Warburg, although it is not easy to assess the exact influence that the Italian philosopher exerted on the founder of iconology. It is however certain that this proximity has contributed to the recent rediscovery of his work, in particular *Mito e*

<sup>3</sup> See Museo civico di storia naturale di Milano (MSNM), *Fondo Vignoli*, b. 1, letter by Paul Siebeck to Vignoli, Freiburg, February 1898.

<sup>4</sup> MSNM, *Fondo Vignoli*, b. 1, letter by Maury to Vignoli, Paris, 8 October 1879.

<sup>5</sup> MSNM, *Fondo Vignoli*, b. 1, letter by Masoch to Vignoli, Leipzig, 10 May 1882.

*scienza*, which was recently reissued in Italian and in English<sup>6</sup>. Warburg's confrontation with the work of Vignoli is testified by the German copy of the volume, annotated by the scholar himself and preserved at the Warburg Institute in London. On the annotations, Warburg emphasized the words «statische» and «dynamische Belebung», in reference to the static and dynamic animation operated by animals, along with some notes dating back to 1890, when Warburg commented Vignoli's theories on the mechanism of the personification underlying the myth (Villhauer [2002]: 17-19; Papapetros [2011]: 94-95).

With no intention to overstate Vignoli's contribution to Warburg's thought, *Mito e scienza* was surely among the evolutionary readings in which ripened Warburg's early meditations – along with works such as Darwin's *The Expressions of the Emotions in Man and Animals*. According to Ernst Gombrich, the German historian of culture would in fact come close to *Mito e scienza* as he followed the lessons on mythology by Usener at the University of Bonn, in the winter semester 1886-87<sup>7</sup>.

The proximity of Warburg's ideas with those of Vignoli also emerged in his lecture *Das Schlangenritual*, held at the clinic of the psychiatrist Ludwig Binswanger in Kreuzlingen, on April 21st, 1923. Here Warburg resumed some youth themes – including one that came close to Vignoli's thought – while retraced the memories on the trip among the Pueblo Indians of New Mexico in 1895-96: in fact he thought that magical practice and science – developed only in a second moment – responded to the same survival needs with different tools. Before the advent of scientific thought, man – out of fear – tried to exorcise his feelings with magic, populating the world of active souls; a world that he could then influence and dominate through rituals and dances. This concept closely resembled Vignoli's explanation of the myth as the first, erroneous and imperfect attempt by man to know and master the outside world.

Beyond more or less direct matches, the two thinkers were brought together by the topics they both held dear. Widening Vignoli's point of view, there are questions that also marked Warburg's thought and that of other cultural historians of the time: the relationship between the magical practice and scientific thought, between myth and rationality, the problem of the survival of past cultures in the subsequent ones, of the circulation of cultural traits over time and space, of the adaptation and recurrence under

<sup>6</sup> See the recent editions by Dodo Press (2009), BiblioLife (2008), Echo Library (2007), Kessinger Publishing (2003). In 2010 it was also published a reprint of the Italian edition of *Mito e scienza*, see Vignoli (2010).

<sup>7</sup> See Gombrich (2003): 34. See also Agamben (1984); Dal Lago (1984); Didi-Huberman (2006): 381-397; Sassi (1983); Zanetti (1985).

a new guise of traditions that were believed extinct.

In the context of the late nineteenth century – beyond the interesting relationship with the founder of iconology – the work of Vignoli was presented as a philosophical and psychological inquiry on the ability to know of human beings in the anthropological framework drawn from the theory of evolution of Darwin. Vignoli privileged a holistic point of view attempting to create dialogue between humanities and natural sciences, to bring man back to his animal roots. In this sense his reflection fits in the debate over the relationship between natural evolution and cultural evolution – nature and nurture: a debate also regarding aesthetics that still liven up evolutionary studies with different characters and accents, in a territory, then as now, at the border between philosophy, psychology, anthropology, and biology.

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