

T H R E E

Nymphs

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| It is quite true they are all females, but they don't piss.

—Boccaccio

I

In the first months of 2003 the Los Angeles Getty Museum showed a video exhibit by Bill Viola entitled *Passions*. During a stay at the Getty Research Institute, Viola had worked on the expression of passions, a theme codified by Charles Le Brun in the seventeenth century and taken up again in the nineteenth century by Duchenne de Boulogne and by Charles Darwin on a scientific and experimental basis. The videos presented at the exhibition were the results of this period of research. At first sight, the images on the screen appeared to be still, but, after a few seconds, they started to become animate, almost imperceptibly. The spectator then realized that the images had always been in movement and that it was only the extreme slowdown that, by dilating the temporal moment, had made them appear immobile. This effect explains the impression of at once familiarity and strangeness [*estraneazione*] that the images stirred up. It was as if one entered the room of a museum and the old masters' canvas miraculously started to move.

At this point, the spectator familiar with art history would have recognized in the three extenuated figures of *Emergence* Masolino's *Pietà*; in the

astounded quintet of *Astonished, Christ Mocked (The Crowning with Thorns)* by Bosch; and in the weeping couple of the *Dolorosa*, the diptych attributed to Dieric Bouts of the National Gallery of London. However, what was decisive each time was not so much the transposition of the figure into a modern setting, as the setting in motion of the iconographic theme. Under the incredulous eyes of the spectator, the *musée imaginaire* becomes the *musée cinématographique*.

Because the event that they present can last up to twenty minutes, these videos require a type of attention to which we are no longer accustomed. If, as Benjamin has shown, the reproduction of the work of art is content with a distracted viewer, Viola's videos instead force the spectator to wait—and to pay attention—for an unusually long time. The spectator who arrived at the end—as one used to do at the movies as a child—would feel obliged to re-watch the video from the beginning. In this way the immobile iconographic theme is turned into history. This appears in an exemplary fashion in *Greetings*, a video exhibited at the *Venice Biennale* in 1995. Here the spectator could see the female figures that appear entwined in Pontormo's *Visitazione* as slowly moving toward each other and ultimately recompose the iconographic theme of the canvas of Carmignano.

At this point, the spectator realizes with surprise that what caught his attention is not just the animation of images that he was used to considering immobile. It is, rather, a transformation that concerns the very nature of those images. When, in the end, the iconographic theme has been re-composed and the images seem to come to rest, they have actually charged themselves with time, almost to the point of exploding. Precisely this kairological saturation imbues them with a sort of tremor that constitutes their particular aura. Every instant, every image virtually anticipates its future development and remembers its former gestures. If one had to define the specific achievement of Viola's videos with a formula, one could say that they insert not the images in time but time in the images. And because the real paradigm of life in the modern era is not movement but time, this means that there is a life of images that it is our task to understand. As the author himself states in an interview published in the catalogue: "the essence of the visual medium is time . . . images live within us. At this moment we each have an extensive visual world inside of us . . . We are living databases of images—collectors of images—and these images do not stop transforming and growing once they get inside us."¹

II

How can an image charge itself with time? How are time and images related? Around the middle of the fifteenth century, Domenico da Piacenza composed his essay *Dela arte di ballare et danzare* (1460) (*On the Art of Dancing and Conducting Dance*). Domenico—or rather Domenichino, as his friends and disciples called him—was the most famous choreographer of his time, a master of dance at the Sforza court in Milan and at the Gonzaga court in Ferrara. Although at the beginning of his book, quoting Aristotle, he insists on the dignity of dance, which requires “as much intellect and effort one can find,” Domenico’s treatise is situated on a middle ground between a didactic handbook and an esoteric compendium derived from the oral tradition passed down from teacher to student. Domenico lists six fundamental elements of the art: measure, memory, agility, manner, measure of the ground, and “phantasmata.” This last element—in truth, the absolutely central one—is defined as follows:

I say that whoever wants to learn this art, needs to dance through phantasmata; note that phantasmata are a kind of corporeal swiftness that is controlled by the understanding of the measure. . . . This necessitates that at each *tempo* you appear as if you had seen Medusa’s head, as the poet says; after having performed the movement, you should appear entirely made of stone in that instant and in the next you should put on wings like a falcon moved by hunger, according to the above rule, that is to say, employing measure, memory, manner with measure of ground and air.²

Domenico calls “phantasm” (*fantasma*) a sudden arrest between two movements that virtually contracts within its internal tension the measure and the memory of the entire choreographic series.

Dance historians have wondered about the origin of this “dancing through phantasmata,” “a simile with which,” according to his disciples, the teacher meant to convey “many things that one cannot tell.” It seems certain that this doctrine derives from the Aristotelian theory of memory, condensed in the brief essay *On Memory and Recollection*, which had a determinant influence for medieval and Renaissance psychology. Here the philosopher, by tightly binding time, memory, and imagination together, affirmed that “only the beings that perceive time can remember, and they do so with the same faculty with which they perceive time,” that is, with imagination. Indeed, memory is impossible without an image (*phantasma*),

which is an affect, a *pathos* of sensation or of thought. In this sense, the mnemonic image is always charged with an energy capable of moving and disturbing the body:

That this condition affects the body, and that recollection is the search for an image in a corporeal organ, is proved by the fact that many persons are made very restless when they cannot recall a thing, and when quite inhibiting their thought, and no longer trying to remember, they do recollect nevertheless, as is especially true of the melancholic. For such persons are most moved by images. The reason why recollection does not lie within our power is this: just as a person who has thrown an object can no longer bring it to rest, so too one who recollects and goes in search of a thing, sets a corporeal something in motion, in which the desired experience resides.³

Therefore, for Domenichino dancing is essentially an operation conducted on memory, a composition of phantasms within a temporally and spatially ordered series. The true locus of the dancer is not the body and its movement, but rather in the image as a “Medusa’s head,” as a pause that is not immobile but instead simultaneously charged with memory and dynamic energy. This means, however, that the essence of dance is no longer movement but time.

III

It is not improbable that Aby Warburg knew the treatise by Domenico (and his pupil, Antonio da Cornazano) when he prepared his study *Theater Costumes for the 1589 Intermedi* during his sojourn in Florence. Certainly nothing resembles his vision of the image as *Pathosformel* more than the “phantasmata” that contracts within itself in an abrupt stop the energy of movement and memory. The resemblance also extends to the spectral, stereotypical fixity that seems to accord as much with Domenico’s “phantasmatic shadow” (in the words of Antonio da Cornazano, who misunderstands his teacher) as with Warburg’s *Pathosformel*. The concept of the *Pathosformel* appears for the first time in the 1905 essay *Dürer and Italian Antiquity*, which traces back the iconographic theme of one of Dürer’s etchings to the “pathetic gestural language” of ancient art. Warburg gives evidence for such a connection by retracing a *Pathosformel* in a Greek vase-painting, in an etching by Mantegna, and in the xylographs of a Venetian incunabulum. First of all, it is important to pay attention to the term itself: Warburg does not write,

as he could have, *Pathosform*, but *Pathosformel*—*pathos formula*—thus emphasizing the stereotypical and repetitive aspect of the imaginal theme with which the artist had to grapple in order to give expression to “life in movement” (*bewegtes Leben*). Perhaps the best way to understand its meaning is to compare it with the usage of the term “formula” in Milman Parry’s studies on Homer’s formulaic style, published in Paris during the same years that Warburg was at work on his *Mnemosyne Atlas*. The young American philologist had renewed the field of Homeric philology by showing how the oral composition technique of the *Iliad* and of the *Odyssey* was based on a vast but finite repertoire of verbal combinations (the famous Homeric epithets: “the swift-footed Achilles,” “Hector flashing helmet,” “Odysseus of many turns,” etc.). These formulae are rhythmically configured so that they can be adapted to portions of the verse; they are themselves composed of interchangeable metrical elements that allowed the poet to vary syntax without changing metrical structure. Albert Lord and Gregory Nagy have shown that formulae are not just semantic filler destined to occupy a metrical slot, but that, to the contrary, the meter probably derives from the formula traditionally passed down. Along the same lines, the formulaic composition entails the impossibility of distinguishing between creation and performance, between original and repetition. In Lord’s words: “an oral poem is not composed for but in performance.”⁴ This means that formulae, exactly like Warburg’s *Pathosformeln*, are hybrids of matter and form, of creation and performance, of first-timeness [*primavolità*] and repetition.

Let us consider the *Pathosformel* “Ninfa” to which the forty-sixth plate of the *Mnemosyne Atlas* is devoted. The plate contains twenty-six photographs, starting from a seventh-century Longobard relief to a fresco by Ghirlandaio in S. Maria Novella (this latter portrays the female figure that Warburg jokingly called “Miss Quickbring” and that, in an exchange about the nymph, Jolles characterizes as “the object of my dreams that turns each time into an enchanting nightmare”).⁵ The same table also contains figures from Raffaello’s water carrier to a Tuscan peasant woman photographed by Warburg in Settignano. Where is the nymph? In which one of the table’s twenty-six apparitions does it reside? To search among them for an archetype or an original from which the others have derived would amount to misreading the *Atlas*. None of the images is the original; none is simply a copy. In the same sense, the nymph is neither passionate matter to which the artist must give a new form, nor a mold into which he must press his emotional materials. The nymph is an indiscernible blend of originariness and repetition,

of form and matter. But a being whose form punctually coincides with its matter and whose origin is indissoluble from its becoming is what we call time, which Kant, on the same basis, defined in terms of self-affection. *Pathosformeln* are made of time: they are crystals of historical memory, crystals that are “phantasmalized” (in Domenico da Piacenza’s sense), and around which time writes its choreography.

IV

In November 1972 Nathan Lerner, a Chicago photographer and designer, opened the door of the room at 851 Webster Avenue in which his tenant, Henry Darger, had lived for forty years. Darger, who had left the room a few days earlier to move to an assisted-living home, was a quiet but certainly bizarre man. He had supported himself until that moment washing dishes in a hospital, always on the verge of poverty; his neighbors sometimes had heard him talking by himself imitating a feminine voice (a little girl?). He would go out rarely, and in the course of his strolls he had been seen rummaging in the trash like a bum. In the summer, when the temperature in Chicago turns sultry all of a sudden, he used to sit on the outside steps, staring into the void (this is how his only recent picture portrays him). But when, in the company of a young student, Lerner entered the room, he found an unexpected scene before him. It had not been easy to find his way through the piles of all kinds of objects (balls of string, empty bismuth bottles, newspaper clippings), but heaped up in a corner on an old chest, there were about fifteen hand-bound typed volumes that contained a sort of romance, almost thirty-thousand pages long, eloquently entitled *In the Realms of the Unreal*.⁶ As the front cover explains, it tells the story of seven little girls (the Vivian girls) who lead a revolt against cruel adults (the Glandolinians) who enslave, torture, strangle, and eviscerate the girls. It was even more surprising to discover that the solitary tenant was also a painter who for forty years had patiently illustrated his novel in dozens and dozens of watercolor canvas and paper panels, at times almost ten feet tall. In them the naked girls, who usually have a little male organ, wander in self-absorption or play among flowers and marvelous winged creatures (the Blengiglomean serpents) in idyllic landscapes; these images alternate with sadistic scenes of inconceivable violence in which the bodies of the little girls are tied, beaten, strangled, and, in the end, opened in order to carve out the bloody viscera.

What interests us the most is Darger's ingenious compositional procedure. Since he could not paint and even less draw, he would cut images of little girls from comics or newspapers and copy them on tracing paper. If the image was too small, he would photograph it and have it magnified to suit his purpose. In this way, the artist ultimately had at his disposal a formulaic and gestural repertoire (serial variations of one *Pathosformel* that we can call *nympha dargeriana*) that he can freely combine in his big panels by means of collage or tracing. Darger thus offers the extreme case of an artistic composition solely made of *Pathosformeln*, one that produces an extraordinary effect of modernity.

But the analogy with Warburg is even more essential. The critics who have commented on Darger have underlined the pathological aspects of his personality, which presumably had never overcome infantile traumas and which undoubtedly exhibited autistic traits. However, it is much more interesting to inquire into Darger's relationship to his *Pathosformeln*. Certainly he lived for forty years totally immersed in his imaginary world. Like every true artist, he did not want to construct the image of a body, but a body for the image. His work, like his life, is a battlefield whose objective is the *Pathosformel*: "the Dargerian nymph." The nymph was enslaved by evil adults (often represented as professors with caps and gowns). The images that constitute our memory tend incessantly to rigidify into specters in the course of their (collective and individual) historical transmission: the task is hence to bring them back to life. Images are alive, but because they are made of time and memory their life is always already *Nachleben*, after-life; it is always already threatened and in the process of taking on a spectral form. To free images from their spectral destiny is the task that both Darger and Warburg—at the border of an essential psychic danger—entrust to their work: one to his endless novel, the other to his nameless science.

V

Warburg's research is contemporaneous with the birth of cinema. At first sight what the two phenomena seem to have in common is the problem of the representation of movement. But Warburg's interest in the representation of the body in movement—the *bewegtes Leben* that finds its canonical example in the nymph—was not so much motivated by technico-scientific or aesthetic reasons as by his obsession with what one could call "the life of images." This theme (whose relations to cinema are yet to be investigated)

delineates a current that is not of secondary importance in the thought and the poetics (and perhaps in the politics) of the beginning of the twentieth century—from Klages to Benjamin, from Futurism to Focillon. From this perspective, the proximity of Warburg's research to the birth of cinema acquires a new significance. In both cases the effort is to catch a kinetic potentiality that is already present in the image—whether as an isolated film still or a mnestic *Pathosformel*—and that has to do with what Warburg defined with the term *Nachleben*, posthumous life (or after-life).

It is well known that the origin of the precursors to cinema (Plateau's phenakistoscope, Stampfer's zoetrope, or Paris's thaumatrope) was the discovery of the persistence of the retinal image. As we read in the explanatory brochure of the thaumatrope,

it has been now experimentally proven that the image received by the mind in this way persists for about one eighth of a second after the image has been removed . . . the thaumatrope is based on this optical principle: the impression left on the retina by the image drawn on paper is not erased before the image painted on the other side has reached the eye. The consequence is that you will see the two images at the same time.

The viewer looking upon a disk of moving paper with a bird drawn on one side and a cage on the other would see the bird entering the cage because of the fusion of the two retinal images separated in time.

It can be affirmed that Warburg's discovery consists of the fact that, alongside the physiological *Nachleben* (the persistence of retinal images), there also exists a historical *Nachleben* of images based on the persistence of a mnestic charge that constitutes them as “dynamograms.” He is the first one to have noticed that the images passed down by historical memory (Klages and Jung are interested instead in meta-historical archetypes) are not inert and inanimate but possess a special and diminished life that he calls, indeed, posthumous life, after-life. And just as the phenakistoscope—and just as later, in a different way, cinema—must succeed in catching the retinal after-life in order to set the images in motion, so the historian must be able to grasp the posthumous life of *Pathosformeln*, in order to restore to them the energy and temporality they once contained. The after-life of images is not in fact a given but requires an operation: this is the task of the historical subject (just as it can be said that the discovery of the persistence of retinal images calls for the cinema, which is able to transform it into movement). By way of this operation, the past—the images passed down

from preceding generations—that seemed closed up and inaccessible is reset in motion for us and becomes possible again.

VI

Starting from the mid-1930s, while at work on his Paris book and then on his study of Baudelaire, Benjamin elaborates the concept of dialectical image (*dialektisches Bild*) that was to provide the pivot for his theory of historical knowledge. Perhaps in no other text is Benjamin so close to giving a definition of the concept as he does in a fragment of the *Arcades Project* (N,3,1). Here he distinguishes the dialectical image from the “essences” of Husserl’s phenomenology. While the latter are known independently from every factual given, dialectical images are defined by their historical index, that which refers them to the present. And while for Husserl intentionality remains the presupposition for phenomenology, in the dialectical image truth appears historically as “death of the *intentio*.” This means that Benjamin assigns to dialectical images a dignity comparable to that of the *eide* in phenomenology and to that of ideas in Plato: philosophy deals with the recognition and construction of such images. Benjamin’s theory contemplates neither essences nor objects but images. However, for Benjamin it is decisive that images be defined through a dialectical movement caught in the moment of its standstill (*Stillstand*): “It is not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present its light on what is past; rather, image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now (*Jetzt*) to form a constellation. In other words, image is dialectics at a standstill” (*Stillstand* does not indicate simply arrest but a threshold between immobility and movement).⁷ In another fragment, Benjamin quotes a passage by Focillon in which classical style is defined:

A brief, perfectly balanced instant of complete possession of forms . . . a pure, quick delight, like the *akmé* of the Greeks, so delicate that the pointer of the scale scarcely trembles. I look at this scale not to see whether the pointer will presently dip down again, or even come to a moment of absolute rest. I look at it instead to see, within the miracle of that hesitant immobility, the slight, inappreciable tremor that indicates life.⁸

As in Domenico da Piacenza’s “dancing through phantasmata,” the life of images consists neither of simple immobility nor of the subsequent return to motion but of a pause highly charged with tension between the two.

“Thinking involves not the flow of thoughts, but their arrest as well. Where thinking suddenly stops in a configuration pregnant with tensions,” we read in the seventeenth thesis on the philosophy of history, “it gives that configuration a shock, by which it crystallizes into a monad.”⁹

The exchange of letters with Adorno in the summer of 1935 clarifies the sense in which the extremes of this polar tension are to be understood. Adorno defines the concept of dialectical image starting from Benjamin’s notion of allegory in the *Trauerspielbuch*, which speaks of a “hollowing out of meaning” carried out in objects by the allegorical intention.

With the vitiation of their use value, the alienated things are hollowed out and, as ciphers, they draw in meanings. Subjectivity takes possession of them insofar as it invests them with intentions of desire and fear. And insofar as defunct things stand in as images of subjective intentions, these latter present themselves as immemorial and eternal. Dialectical images are constellated between alienated things and incoming and disappearing meaning, are instantiated in the moment of indifference between death and meaning.¹⁰

Copying this passage onto his note cards, Benjamin comments: “with regard to these reflections, it should be kept in mind that, in the nineteenth century, the number of ‘hollowed-out’ things increases at a rate and on a scale that was previously unknown, for technical progress is continually withdrawing newly introduced objects from circulation.”¹¹ Where meaning is suspended, dialectical images appear. The dialectical image is, in other words, an unresolved oscillation between estrangement and a new event of meaning. Similar to the emblematic intention, the dialectical image holds its object suspended in a semantic void. Hence its ambiguity, criticized by Adorno (“the ambiguity must absolutely not be left as it is”).¹² Adorno, who is ultimately attempting to bring the dialectic back to its Hegelian matrix, does not seem to understand that for Benjamin the crux is not a movement that by way of mediation leads to the *Aufhebung* of contradiction, but the very moment of standstill—a stalling in which the middle-point is exposed like a zone of indifference between the two opposite terms. As such it is necessarily ambiguous. The *Dialektik im Stillstand* of which Benjamin speaks implies a dialectic whose mechanism is not logical (as in Hegel) but analogical and paradigmatic (as in Plato). According to Enzo Melandri’s acute intuition, its formula is “neither A nor B,” and the opposition it implies is not dichotomous and substantial but bipolar and tensive: the two terms are neither removed from nor recomposed in unity but kept in an immobile

coexistence charged with tensions.¹³ This means, in truth, that not only is dialectic not separable from the objects it negates, but also that the objects lose their identity and transform into the two poles of a single dialectical tension that reaches its highest manifestation in the state of immobility, like dancing “through phantasmata.”

In the history of philosophy this “dialectic at a standstill” has an illustrious archetype. It is a passage in the *Posterior Analytics* in which Aristotle compares the sudden arrest of thought that produces the universal to a fleeing army in which a single soldier abruptly stops, followed by another and then another, until the initial unity is reconstituted. In this instance, the universal is reached not inductively but analogically in the particular, by way of its arrest. The multiplicity of the soldiers (that is to say, of thoughts and perceptions) in disorderly flight is suddenly perceived as a unity in the same way that Benjamin described the sudden arrest of thought in a constellation—in an image deriving from Mallarmé’s *Coup de dés* in which the written page is elevated to the power of the starry sky and, at the same time, to the graphic tension of the *réclame*. For Benjamin this constellation is dialectical and intensive, that is to say, capable of placing an instant from the past in relation to the present.

In a 1937 etching the great art historian Focillon, who had inherited a passion for prints from his father, seems to have wanted to freeze this suspended restlessness of thought in an image. The etching represents an acrobat hanging from his trapeze, swinging back and forth over the illuminated arena of a circus. At the bottom right the author wrote its title: *La dialectique*.

VII

The influence exercised on young Warburg by Friedrich Theodor Vischer’s essay on the symbol is well known.¹⁴ According to Vischer, the proper space of the symbol is situated between the obscurity of mythical-religious consciousness, which more or less immediately identifies image (*Bild*) and meaning (*Bedeutung, Inhalt*), and the clarity of reason, which keeps them distinct at every point. “We call symbolic,” writes Vischer, “a once believed mythical element, not objectively believed, yet with the lively backward transposition of a belief that is assumed and taken up as freely aesthetic—not an empty but rather a meaningful phantasmic image (*sinnvolles Schein-*

bild)” (306). Thus, between mythical-religious and rational consciousness, one must introduce

now a second fundamental form that lies in the middle between free and unfree, light and dark, in order first to let the entirely free and light to result as a third element. . . . The *middle* [*die Mitte*]: we can also designate what concerns us now as a peculiar *twilight* [*Zwielicht*]. It is the involuntary and nevertheless free—unconscious and in a certain sense still conscious—natural animation [*Naturbeseelung*], the granting act through which we subject our soul and its moods to the inanimate. (307)

Vischer calls *vorbehaltende* (suspending) this intermediate state in which the viewer no longer believes in the mythical-religious power of images yet, nonetheless, continues to be somehow connected to them, keeping them suspended between the efficacious icon and the purely conceptual sign.

The influence that these ideas were to exercise on Warburg is evident. The encounter with images (the *Pathosformeln*) happens in this neither conscious nor unconscious, neither free nor unfree zone in which, nevertheless, human consciousness and freedom are at play. The human is thus decided in this no-man’s-land between myth and reason, in the ambiguous twilight in which the living being accepts a confrontation with the inanimate images transmitted by historical memory in order to bring them back to life. Like Benjamin’s dialectical images and Vischer’s symbol, the *Pathosformeln*, which Warburg compares to dynamograms full of energy, are received in a state of “unpolarized latent ambivalence” (*unpolarisierte latente Ambivalenz*) and only in this way—in the encounter with a living individual—can they obtain polarity and life.¹⁵ The act of creation in which the individual—the artist or the poet, but also the scholar and even every human being—confronts images takes place in this central zone between two opposite poles of the human (Vischer calls it “the middle” [*die Mitte*], and Warburg never tires of warning that “the problem lies in the middle” [*das Problem liegt in der Mitte*]).¹⁶ We could define it as a zone of “creative indifference,” with reference to an image from Salomon Friedländer that Benjamin liked to quote.¹⁷ The center in question here is not geometrical but dialectical: it is not the middle-point separating two segments on a line but the passage of a polar oscillation through it. Like Domenico da Piacenza’s “phantasmata,” this center is the immobile image of a being in transition [*di un essere di passaggio*]. This also means, however, that the operation Warburg entrusts

to his *Mnemosyne Atlas* is exactly the opposite of what is usually understood to belong under the rubric of “historical memory”: according to Carchia’s insightful formula, “historical memory ends up revealing itself, in the space of memory, as an authentic collapse of meaning, the place of its very failure [*mancamento*].”¹⁸

The atlas is a sort of depolarization and repolarization station—Warburg speaks of “disconnected dynamograms” (*abgeschnürte Dynamogramme*)—in which the images from the past that lost their meaning and now survive as nightmares or specters are kept suspended in the shadows where the historical subject, between waking and sleep, engages with them in order to bring them back to life, but also, sooner or later, to awaken from them.¹⁹

Among the sketches retrieved by Didi-Huberman from the excavations of Warburg’s manuscripts, besides various schemes of pendular oscillations, there is a pen drawing showing an acrobat walking on a plank kept in precarious equilibrium by two other figures.²⁰ The acrobat, designated by the letter *K*, is perhaps the cipher of the artist (*Künstler*) suspended between images and their content (elsewhere Warburg talks about a “pendular movement between the position of causes as images and as signs”).²¹ The image may also be intended as the cipher of the scholar who (as Warburg writes about Burkhardt) acts like “a necromancer, who is fully conscious; thus he conjures up specters which quite seriously threaten him.”²²

VIII

“Who is the nymph; where does she come from?” Jolles asked Warburg in their 1900 Florence exchange regarding the female figure in movement painted by Ghirlandaio in the Tornabuoni chapel (108). Warburg’s response sounds peremptory, at least superficially: “As a real being of flesh and blood she may have been a freed slave from Tartary . . . but in her true essence she is an elemental spirit (*Elementargeist*), a pagan goddess in exile. . . .” (124). The second part of the definition (a pagan goddess in exile), upon which scholarly attention has mostly lingered, inscribes the nymph in the most proper context of Warburg’s research on the *Nachleben* of the pagan gods. It has not been noted, however, that the first part of the definition (the term *Elementargeist*) signals an esoteric branch in the genealogy of the nymph, a lineage that, although hidden, could not possibly be unknown to both Warburg and Jolles. For the term perspicuously refers to the Romantic tradition that, through La Motte Fouqué’s *Undine*, stems from Paracelsus’s

essay *De nymphis, sylphis, pygmeis et salamandris et caeteris spiritibus*.²³ In this derivation, at the crossroads among different cultural traditions, the nymph names the object par excellence of amorous passion (which she certainly was for Warburg: “I should like to be joyfully whirled away with her,” he writes to Jolles).²⁴

Let us now consider the essay written by Paracelsus directly recalled by Warburg. Here the nymph is inscribed in Paracelsus’s doctrine of the elemental spirits (or spiritual creatures), each of whom is connected to one of the four elements: the nymph (or undine) to water, sylphs to air, pygmies (or gnomes) to earth, and salamanders to fire. What defines those spirits, and the nymph in particular, is that even if they resemble humans in every respect, they were not fathered by Adam but belong to a second branch of creation: “they are more like men than like beasts, but are neither.”²⁵ There exists, according to Paracelsus, a “twofold flesh”: one coarse and earthly, springing from Adam, the other subtle and spiritual, from a non-Adamic ancestry (227). (This doctrine, implying a special creation for some creatures, seems the exact counterpart of La Peyrère’s proposal on the pre-Adamic creation of heathens.) What defines the elemental, in every case, is the fact that they do not have a soul and hence are neither men, nor animals (since they possess reason and language), nor are they properly spirits (since they have a body). More than animal and less than human, hybrids of body and spirit, they are purely and absolutely “creatures”: created by God among the material elements and as such subject to death, they are forever excluded from the economy of redemption and salvation:

Although they are both spirit and man, yet they are neither [one nor the other]. They cannot be man, since they are spirit-like in their behavior. They cannot be spirits, since they eat and drink, have blood and flesh. Therefore, they are a creation of their own, outside the two, but of the kind of both, a mixture of both, like a composite remedy of two substances which is sour and sweet, and yet does not seem like it, or two colors mixed together which become one and yet are two. It must be understood further that although they are spirit and man, yet they are neither. Man has a soul, the spirit not. . . . This creature, however, is both, but has no soul, and yet is not identical with a spirit. For, the spirit does not die, but this creature dies. And so it is not like man, it has not the soul; it is a beast, yet higher than a beast. It dies like a beast and the animal body has no soul either, only man. This is why it is a beast. But they talk, laugh like man. . . . Christ died and was born for those who have a soul, that is who are from Adam, and not for those who are not from Adam, for they are men but have no soul. (228–229)

Paracelsus dwells with a sort of loving compassion on the destiny of those creatures in every way similar to man but innocently condemned to a purely animal life:

And so they are man and people, die with the beasts, walk with the spirits, eat and drink with man. That is: like the beasts they die, so that nothing is left. . . . Their flesh rots like other flesh. . . . Their customs and behavior are human, as it is their way of talking, with all virtues, better or coarser, more subtle and rougher. . . . In food they are like men, eat and enjoy the product of their labor, spin and weave their own clothing. They know how to make use of things, have wisdom to govern, justice to preserve and protect. For although they are beasts, they have all reason of man, except the soul. Therefore, they have not the judgment to serve God, to walk on his path, for they have not the soul. (230)

As non-human men, the elemental spirits described by Paracelsus constitute the ideal archetype of every separation of man from himself (here too, the analogy with the Jewish people is striking). Nevertheless, specific to nymphs as opposed to other non-Adamic creatures is that they can receive a soul if they enter into sexual union with a man and generate a child with him. Here Paracelsus is connecting with another, more ancient tradition, which indissolubly tied the nymphs to amorous passion and the reign of Venus (this tradition lies at the origin of both the psychiatric term “nymphomania” and, perhaps, also of the anatomical term designating as “nymphae” the small lips of the vulva.) According to Paracelsus, indeed, many “documents” attest that the nymphs “have not only been truly seen by man, but have had sexual intercourse with him [*copulatae coiverint*] and have borne him children” (236; translation modified). If this happens, both the nymph and her offspring receive a soul and thus become truly human:

It has been experienced in many ways that they are not eternal, but when they are bound to men, they become eternal, that is, endowed with a soul like man. . . . God has created them so much like man and so resembling him, that nothing could be more alike, and a wonder happened in that they had no soul. But when they enter into a union with man, then the union gives the soul. It is the same as with the union that man has with God. . . . If there were no such union, of what use would be the soul? Of none. . . . From this it follows that they woo man, and that they seek him assiduously and in secret. (238–239)

Paracelsus places the whole life of nymphs under the sign of Venus and

of love. If he calls “Mount of Venus” the society of nymphs (*collectio et conversatio, quam Montem Veneris appellitant . . . —congregatio quaedam nympharum in antro . . .*—how can we not recognize here a topos par excellence of love poetry?), it is because, in truth, Venus herself is nothing but a nymph and an undine—even if she is the highest in rank and was once, before she died, their queen: *iam vero Venus Nympha est et undena, caeteris dignior et superior, quae longo quidem tempore regnavit sed tandem vita functa est* (here Paracelsus grapples in his own fashion with the problem of the after-life of pagan gods).

Condemned in this way to an incessant amorous search of man, nymphs lead a parallel existence on earth. Created not in the image of God but of man, they constitute his shadow or *imago*, and as such, they perpetually accompany and desire that of which they are the image—and by which they are at times themselves desired. And it is only in the encounter with man that the inanimate images acquire a soul, become truly alive:

Just as one says: man is the image of God, that is, he has been made after his image—in the same way one can also say: these people are the image of man and made after his image. Now, man is not God although he is made like him, but only as an image. The same here: they are not men because they are made after his image, but remain the same creatures as they have been created, just as man remains the same as God has created him. (229)

The history of the ambiguous relation between men and nymphs is the history of the difficult relation between man and his images.

IX

The invention of the nymph as the preeminent love object is the work of Boccaccio. However, this is not a creation *ex nihilo*; rather, he is performing his habitual gesture, both mimetic and apotropaic, of transposing a Dantean and Stilnovist trope into a new realm, which we could define as “literature” in the modern sense (a term we could not apply without quotation marks to Dante and Cavalcanti). Thus secularizing essentially theological-philosophical categories, Boccaccio retroactively constitutes as esoteric the experience of the love poets (whose practice in itself is completely indifferent to the esoteric/exoteric opposition). By placing literature against an enigmatic theological background, he disrupts and at the same time preserves its legacy. At any rate, the *Ninfa fiorentina* is undoubtedly

the central figure of Boccaccio's love poems and prose, at least from 1341 when he composes the *Comedia delle ninfe fiorentine*, a strange prosimetric work composed of novellas and terza rima whose title does not conceal an allusion to Dante's poem. (In 1900, by giving the title *Ninfa fiorentina* to the notebook collecting his correspondence with Jolles, Warburg discreetly evokes Boccaccio, an author especially dear to Jolles.) And once again in his *Ninfale fiesolano*, in the *Carmen bucolicum*, and in a special sense in *Corbaccio*, to love means loving a nymph.

Dante refers to the love object as nymph in few places, but they are decisive: in the third epistle, in the eclogues, and above all in *Purgatory* where she marks a sort of threshold between Eden and Heaven. Among love poets, the amorous object represents the point at which the image or phantasm communicates with the "possible intellect." The love object is therefore a limit-concept, not only between lover and beloved, between subject and object, but also between the individual living being and the "single intellect" (or thought, or language). Boccaccio makes this theological-philosophical limit-concept the locus of the specifically modern problem of the relation between life and poetry. The nymph thus becomes the literary quasi-reification of the *intentio* of medieval psychology (for this reason Boccaccio, pretending to give credit to a well-known rumor, will turn Beatrice into a Florentine maiden). The two decisive if apparently antithetical texts here are the introduction to Day 4 of the *Decameron* and the *Corbaccio*.

In the introduction, with reference to the opposition between Muses ("tarry with them always we cannot, nor they with us") and women, Boccaccio clearly takes side with the latter; he also proceeds to smooth out the separation: "The Muses are ladies, and albeit ladies are not the peers of the Muses, yet they have their outward semblance."²⁶ In the *Corbaccio*, however, his choice is overturned, and the ferocious criticism of women goes hand in hand with the claim of exclusive concern with the *Ninfe Castalidi*. Against the women who affirm that "all good things are female: stars, planets, and the Muses," Boccaccio opens up with brusque realism an incurable fracture between Muses and women: "It is quite true they are all females, but they don't piss."²⁷ With the usual short-sightedness, some scholars have tried to resolve the contradiction between the two texts by projecting it onto a chronology—that is, onto the author's biography and thus seeing it as an effect of age. The oscillation is instead internal to the question and corresponds to the essential ambiguity of Boccaccio's nymph. The gap between reality and imagination that the Dantean and Stilnovist theory of love meant to

repair is here re-introduced in all of its power. If the *ninfale* is that poetical dimension in which the images (that “do not piss”) should coincide with real women, then the *ninfa fiorentina* is always already in the process of dividing herself according to her opposed polarities—at once too alive and too inanimate—while the poet no longer succeeds in granting her a unified existence. The imagination, which in the love poets assured the possibility of a conjunction between the sensible world and thought, here becomes the locus of a sublime or farcical rupture into which literature inserts itself (as will, later on, the Kantian theory of the sublime). Modern literature, in this sense, is born from a scission of the medieval *imago*.

It is not surprising, then, that in Paracelsus the nymph is presented as a creature of flesh and bone, who is created in the image of man and who can only acquire a soul by uniting with him. The amorous conjunction with the image, symbol of perfect knowledge, becomes the impossible sexual union with an *imago* transformed into a creature that “eats and drinks” (how can we not recall here Boccaccio’s crude characterization of the Muse-nymphs?).

X

The imagination is a discovery of medieval philosophy. It reaches its critical threshold and also its most aporetic formulation in Averroes. The central aporia in Averroism, which elicited obstinate objections from Scholastic thought, is in fact situated in the relation between the “possible intellect,” separate and unique, and discrete individuals. According to Averroes, individuals unite (*copulantur*) with the “single intellect” through the phantasms located in the internal senses, in particular the imaginative faculty and memory. In this way, the imagination is assigned a decisive role: at the highest point of the individual soul, at the limit between the corporeal and incorporeal, the individual and the common, sensation and thought, the imagination is the final waste material that the combustion of individual existence abandons at the threshold of the separate and the eternal. In this formulation, it is imagination, not the intellect, that is the defining principle of the human species.

This definition is nonetheless aporetic, because—as Thomas Aquinas insistently objects in his critique, affirming that, if the Averroist thesis were allowed, then the individual man would not be able to know—it locates imagination in the void that gapes between sensation and thought, between the multiplicity of individuals and the uniqueness of the intellect. Hence—

as it usually happens when we try to grasp a threshold or a passage—the vertiginous multiplication of medieval psychological distinctions: the sensitive power, the imaginative faculty, the faculty of memory, the material or acquired intellect (*intellectus adeptus*), and so on. Imagination delineates a space in which we are not yet thinking, in which thought becomes possible only through an impossibility to think. In this impossibility the love poets place their gloss on Averroist psychology: the *copulatio* of phantasms with the “possible intellect” is an amorous experience, and love is, first and foremost, love of an *imago*, of an object in some sense unreal, exposed, as such, to the dangers of anguished doubt (called “*dottanza*” by the Stilnovists) and of failure [*mancamento*]. Images, which are the ultimate constituents of the human and the only avenues to its possible rescue, are also the locus of the incessant failure of the human to itself [*mancare a se stesso*].

Warburg’s project of collecting in the *Mnemosyne Atlas* the images (the *Pathosformeln*) of Western humanity must be set against this background. Warburg’s nymphs atone for this ambiguous legacy of the image, but move it onto a different historical and collective ground. In the *Monarchia* Dante had already interpreted the Averroist legacy in the sense that, if man is defined not by thought but by a possibility to think, then this possibility cannot be actuated by a single man, but only by a *multitudo* in space and time—that is to say, on the grounds of collectivity and history. To work on images means for Warburg to work at the crossroads, not only between the corporeal and incorporeal, but also and above all between the individual and the collective. The nymph is the image of the image, the cipher of the *Pathosformeln*, which is passed down from generation to generation and to which generations entrust the possibility of finding or losing themselves, of thinking or of not thinking. Therefore images are certainly a historical element; but on the basis of Benjamin’s principle, according to which life is given to everything to which history is given (the principle could be reformulated as, life is given to everything to which an image is given), it follows that nymphs are, in some ways, alive. We are used to attributing life only to the biological body. Instead, a purely historical life is one that is *ninfale*. In order to be truly alive, images, like Paracelsus’s elemental spirits, need a subject to unite with them. However, as in the union with the undine-nymph, this encounter hides a mortal danger. Indeed, in the course of the historical tradition, images crystallize and turn into specters, which enslave men and from which they always need to be liberated anew. Warburg’s interest in astrological images has its roots in the awareness that “the observation of the

sky is the grace and damnation of man,” and that the celestial sphere is the place where men project their passion for images. As it is in the case of the *vir niger*—the enigmatic astrological decan that Warburg had recognized in the frescoes of palazzo Schifanoia—in the encounter with the tension-charged dynamogram, the capacity to suspend and reverse the charge and to transform destiny into fortune (*fortuna*) is essential. In this sense, the celestial constellations are the original text in which imagination reads what was never written [*ciò che non è mai stato scritto*].

In the letter to Vossler, written a few months before his death, Warburg re-formulates the project of his atlas as a “theory of the role of human image-memory” (*Theorie der Funktion des menschlichen Bildgedächtnisses*) and relates it to Giordano Bruno’s thought:

You see, here under no circumstances may I let myself be diverted until I succeed in incorporating a figure that has captivated me for forty years and that up to now still has not been properly placed anywhere, as far as I can see, in the history of ideas: Giordano Bruno.²⁸

The Giordano Bruno to whom Warburg is referring here can be none other than the Bruno of the magical-mnemotechnical treatises, such as *De umbris idearum*. It is interesting that Frances Yates in *The Art of Memory* (1966) did not realize that the seals Bruno inserted in that text are shaped like natal horoscopes. This resemblance to one of his main objects of research could not have gone unnoticed by Warburg, who, in his study on divination in the age of Luther, reproduces almost identical horoscopes. The lesson Warburg draws from Bruno is that the art of mastering memory (in his case, more precisely, the attempt to comprehend the role of the human *Bildgedächtnis* through the *Atlas*) has to do with images expressing human subjection to destiny. The *Atlas* is the map that must orient man in his struggle against the schizophrenia of his imagination. The cosmos, held on the shoulders of the eponymous mythical hero (Davide Stimilli underlined the importance of this figure for Warburg), coincides with the *mundus imaginalis*.²⁹ The definition of the *Atlas* as “ghost stories for adults” finds here its ultimate significance. The history of humanity is always a history of phantasms and of images, because it is within the imagination that the fracture between individual and impersonal, the multiple and the unique, the sensible and the intelligible takes place. At the same time, imagination is the place of the dialectical recomposition of this fracture. The images are the remnant, the trace of what men who preceded us have wished and desired, feared and

repressed. And because it is within the imagination that something like a (hi)story became possible, it is through imagination that, at every new juncture, history has to be decided.

Warburg's historiography is in this respect very close to poetry, in keeping with the indiscernibility of Clio and Melpomene suggested by Jolles in a beautiful essay written in 1925.³⁰ It is the tradition and the memory of images and, at the same time, humanity's attempt to free itself from them in order to open, beyond the "interval" between mythical-religious practice and the pure sign, the space for an imagination with no more images. In this sense the title *Mnemosyne* names the image-less: the farewell—and the refuge—of all images.