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Grief and Meditation. Figures of Melancholia

A thematic plate, throughout the Mnemosyne Atlas

edited by the “Seminario di Tradizione classica”, coordinated by Monica Centanni and Katia Mazzucco; translated by Elizabeth Thomson

Once more in search of experimentations and new methodological applications of Mnemosyne as an instrument, this montage follows an itinerary that journeys through Aby Warburg's Atlas. This time the thread is a postural detail that, like an eloquent sign, characterises many of the figures in the plates — the face resting against the hand.

Several photographs conserved at the Warburg Institute in London document a project of this kind, carried out by Warburg himself before he mounted the plates of the Mnemosyne Atlas, that follows a thematic itinerary. On the occasion of the exhibitions organised by the Kulturwissenschaftliche Bibliothek Warburg (1925, 1926, 1927), but also as part of the research activities of the Institute and making them known, thematic plates with a title would be assembled using materials from its wealthy photographic library. The plates would then be undone in order to create new combinations of themes, works and meanings, and can be found, finally, in the complex and labyrinthine itineraries of images that make up the plates of the final version of Mnemosyne.

These early thematic panels have reached us as a result of the providential work of Gertrud Bing who made a photographic record of them. They show, albeit in ways still not clearly understood due to the current state of documentation and research, the various stages in which they were planned and constructed. Amongst these photographs, three actually document the existence of as many plates that gather together figures in this posture. Two of the panels bear respectively the titles “TRAUER UND [...] (the gap is in the photograph itself) “[.....] EDITATION” (again, the gap is in the photograph). The works that have been reproduced and pinned to them — paintings from Pompeii, miniatures from illuminated manuscripts, details of paintings and prints, and sculptures — are not all present in the Atlas. However, from those that have found their way there, it is possible to recognise several figures that have already been studied in Plate 53, namely those belonging to the ‘meditative pensive’ extreme of the ‘active, graceful’ posture.

This re-working of a montage from images distributed in various panels,

focuses the viewers' attention on questions that have already been posed throughout the hermeneutic itineraries in Warburg's plates, but they also open up avenues to new and stimulating ways to develop them, and to hypothesise on the origins (Ur), development and diffusion of this particular postural sign; to make comparisons between various derivations and filiations (taking into account their relative contexts); and to evaluate their various semantic importance, and any instances of desemanticisation.

Plate 4 introduced the polarities between the ecstatic (maniacal) nymph and the depressive, mournful river god, heralding the discourse on Manet and the importance of the Judgement of Paris in the Villa Medici prompted by plate 55, and Dürer and Melancholia prompted by plate 58 (to be dealt with in future editions of *Engramma*).

The montage of this plate crosses the boundaries of the panels that make up the Atlas and it brings to light one further link: the tangents between the purely eloquent gesture of the hand that supports the leaning face; the Pathosformel of the semi-recumbent/abandoned figure (maniacal and/or depressive); and the representation of melancholia as the intellectual emancipation of the humanist (*melancholia ex otio exque acedia*). The theme of our inquiry acquires further legitimation when one considers that during the years immediately following the publication of Warburg's works on Luther and Dürer (1920), Saxl, Panofsky and Klibansky inaugurated what would be known as the Warburghian school and initiated one of the richest areas of research in iconological studies with their interpretations of Dürer's engraving and their unsurpassed analysis of saturnine melancholia (1923) — confirming that Warburg's research was from the beginning carried out via the montages of the *Mnemosyne* plates.

In the montage of the plate, the figures have been placed in a thematic and formal chronological order rather than a merely chronological order related to the dates of the work. The images of the melancholic figures taken from the Atlas have been placed in a sequential order that highlights the principal hermeneutical thread that guided our reconstruction: the theory — yet to be validated — that the first occurrence of the Pathosformel of the melancholic is to be found in images of the Muse. The archetype of this posture can be seen in classical archaeological materials associated with the Muse as the inspirer of poetry. Initially there was only one Muse (the generic Thea invoked by Homer in the first verse of the *Iliad*), shown in conversation with the poet, with a hand touching her face. In stages the Muses multiply, and reach the canonical number of nine, assuming the distinct characteristics and conventional attributes

associated with the various forms of poetry of which they are patrons. In this itinerary, they also assume typifying postures so that the Muses charged with inspiring historical poetry (Clio), epic poetry (Calliope), comic and dythirambic poetry (Thalia), and lyric poetry (Erato) are depicted in a posture which is gathered and composed, whilst the Muses of music (Euterpe) and dance (Terpsichore) in agitated and festive postures. The Muses of the those forms of poetry that Aristotle placed in the category of *spoudaion*, namely the patrons of hymnodic poetry (Polyhymnia), cosmological poetry (Urania), and tragic poetry (Melpomene) — individually characterised by their specific attributes, share the same posture — they lean slightly forward, usually supported, and hold a hand to their faces. The polarity between the composed Muse and the festive Muse is one of the forms of representation of the opposition (or rather of the *palintropos harmonia*) between the extremes that Friedrich Nietzsche would define as Apollonian and Dionysian. It should be remembered that Warburg was one of the earliest readers to re-evaluate Nietzsche after his period of mental illness when his works had been forgotten. The polarities between the festive Muse and the pensive Muse (see Plate 53 and the section that opens this new montage top left, figs. 53.3 53.12 53.10 53.11) can be interpreted as a formula for portraying the opposition between maniacal excitation, evident in the formulas of Pathos associated with Maenads and Nymphs, and the mournful depressive (the posture of the melancholic and of river gods). This polarity would later be theorised by the psychiatrist Ludwig Binswanger as a psychic and philosophical alternative to 'being' that oscillates between delirium and folly.

The first figure of pensiveness — a prelude to melancholic introversion — is therefore the portrayal of 'poetic thought', which from the beginning, has strong associations with allegory. More specifically, the allegories of serious poetry (tragedy, philosophy and hymns to the gods and heroes; see 'Poetry', one of Mantegna's so-called Tarot cards, a generic muse with a flute for attribute, fig.50/451.4) coincide with a female figure characterised by the significant posture of her face resting in her hands.

The typology of the pensive (and inspired) intellectual derives from this archetype of the Muse as inspirer. Poets, wise men (Hypocrites, fig. 75.9), can be assigned to this category, as can be seen by the central group of figures in the plate. The posture becomes characteristic of individuals like Saint Paul, Saint Jerome and Saint Augustine (figs. 75.1, 31.14, 43.14, 58.8). This meditative intellectual polarity that feeds off intellectual otium, derives from the saturnine character of the inspired poet (see figs 39.23, 39.21, 45.1).

The "theatre of mourning" for an early or unexpected death appears in

the bas-reliefs of classical sarcophagi, especially in scenes of the death of Alcestis. The death of a heroine consumed by her final battle — and the tragic death of Meleager, who as a result of the murderous act of his mother Althaea, is consumed together with the brand on which his life depends — are the subjects of ancient funerary representations (see the group of images in the section top right of the plate). Among the various characters present at the scene of a final battle against death (Alcestis), or the bearing of a corpse (Meleager), one repeatedly finds a figure, usually female, in the formula of Pathos associated with melancholia, with the hand supporting or hiding the face — see figs. Figs. 5.19, 5.8, 5.10, 5.20). The classical theatre of death based on the corpse of a hero, as a result of direct transmission via the models of Hellenic sarcophagi, becomes by the fourteenth century the theatre for the passion of Christ. Whilst the figure and posture of the corpse are based on those of Meleager, the figures that surround him replicate the various formulas of pathos of grief associated with ancient mourners. The most emphatic and agitated formulas of pathos that express the intensity of mourning turn both Mary's into Maenads true and proper. However, the posture of mournful pensiveness that progressively characterises St. John is also recovered (figs. 42.5, 42.18). In this sense, therefore, St. John also becomes a figure of transmission at the crossroads between the first representation (female) of poetic pensiveness and doleful, silent melancholia (entirely masculine) that manifests itself in a gesture that is contemplative rather than agitated.

Contemplation, via the same postural feature, can also semanticise the portrayal of a sleeping person (whether a soldier asleep by the sepulchre of the Risen Christ, or Constantine's guard, fig. 30.5) through whom visions and miraculous, allegorical premonitory dreams materialise (cf. Figs. 31.11, 31.9).

The hand in face therefore ends up conditioning the posture of the whole character, whether seated or standing, and involves the entire body — a supported, reclining, sitting or abandoned figure — gives form to a Pathos-formel true and proper and not just an eloquent gesture.

The formula is, therefore, a powerful one that can be traced from ancient models to the contemporary era, as Warburg himself suggested (1929) - see sarcophagus portraying the Judgement of Paris (cf. lower section that closes the plate). In Manet's portrayal of worldly nymphs nostalgia for nature is reclaimed through an historical process of "archaeological sterilisation", employed as a pretext for bourgeois indignation (fig. 55.14). At its least intense and more common degree of signification, this posture emerges spontaneously as an engram that communicates (or signals) an albeit fleeting state of mind, embracing doubt and pensiveness.

At its most intense degree of signification, however, it is a formula of pathos that lies at the intersection of inspired thought, intellectual contemplation, thoughtful melancholia, and mournful depression, and is a posture that becomes emblematic of the intellectual, and — in an itinerary that leads us back to the archetype — is a characteristic of the artist and poet (cf. Figs. 58.8, 53.4).

“Auch sie führt zum Gedicht: Melancholie” [Gottfried Benn];

“Melancholia, that to poetry leads”.



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