

The Weeping Rock

Revisiting Niobe through Paragone, Pathosformel and Petrification

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1 | The “weeping rock” of Niobe that according to legend still stands on Mount Sipylus in Turkey.

0. Preface

The point of departure for this article is the centrepiece of Publius Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* VI, 146-312: Niobe’s transformation into a weeping rock. Niobe’s transformation incorporates the form and matter of the medium of sculpture. According to the humanist *paragone* debate, painting and sculpture compete to be the medium with the highest qualities of virtuosity. In the first part, I explore the iconographic deployment of Niobe in the *paragone* rivalry, taking up examples from the field of tension between the second and third dimensions, between *grisaille* and stone, between figurative and non-figurative.

Aby Warburg refers to the Niobe motif's *Nachleben* in his *Mnemosyne Atlas*, *Tafel 5: Beraubte Mutter (Niobe, Flucht und Schrecken)*. This displays the images of both the bereaved mother (Niobe) and the murderous mother (Medea). The montage also introduces the theme of the descent to the underworld. It becomes clear how the cluster of motifs around the figure of Niobe – *hybris*, *lamentatio* and the chthonic substrate – functions as a direct entry to a bipolar hermeneutics of the visual medium: the ‘historical psychology of human expression’ that navigates between Apollo and Dionysus. By extension we can consider how the Niobe motif is an externalisation of the furthest boundaries of what human artistic expression can achieve: the unending tribute to love, but also the ceaseless struggle against death.

The “weeping rock”, that according to legend still stands on Mount Sipylus in Turkey, draws upon deeper anthropological patterns [Fig. 1, 2]. Petrification indicates inertia, frigidity and a Medusan psychosis of fear. In nature, stones and rocks have a ‘slumbering insistence’ that can be captivating. Stones are after all visible but impenetrable, they index an irrevocable absence in their presence, and ‘have abode’ in an otherworldly region of utter blindness and silence. From a psychoanalytical perspective, Niobe’s petrification symbolises the straitening of her life and the loss of *anima* within a culture divorced from authentic feeling, nature, and instinct. Here Niobe meets Echo. Looking at this from the perspective of the artistic medium, the final image, Niobe’s petrification returns as the first image: the brute matter in which art lies locked, the *Ur*-form in which artistic eruption is already heralded. This elision reveals Niobe’s transformation as the most radical conceivable form of ‘iconogenesis’: the visual arts sprout from a paradoxical inertia and continue to be watered by Niobe’s bitter tears.

1. Dumque rogat, pro qua rogat, occidit



2 | Artuš Scheiner, *Niobe*, 1920, ill. in *Pohàdki Starovĕkĕ* (*Ancient Fairy Tales*) by František Ruth, Šolc & Šimáček Inc., Prague.

Ovid tells the story of Niobe in book VI. The proud and beautiful Phrygian Niobe – her robes woven with golden thread – can claim descent from an impressive pedigree of gods.

‘What madness is this,’ she cried, ‘to honour the gods in heaven, of whom you have only heard, more highly than those whom you can actually see? Why is Leto worshipped at altars built in her honour, while my divinity as yet receives no tribute of incense? I am the daughter of Tantalus, who was the only mortal ever allowed to participate in the banquet of the gods: my mother is the sister of the Pleiads, and Atlas, the mighty god who carries the vault of heaven on his shoulders, is my grandfather. On the other

side, Jupiter is my grandparent, and I can proudly boast that he is my father-in-law as well’ (Ovid, VI, 170-176).

Niobe fails to understand how the people can honour what they cannot see, while her living presence embodies her divine ancestry. She mocks Leto’s twins, Apollo and Diana, while she herself has given birth to no fewer than seven sons and seven daughters.

I am beyond the reach of Fortune’s blows, for though she may take much away from me, still she will leave me much more than she takes. I have so many good things, there is no room for fear. Suppose some of my many children could be taken from me: though bereaved, still I should not be reduced to a mere two, such as Leto’s family consists of – one might as well have no children at all! Have done! Enough of this sacrifice. Remove the wreaths of laurel from your heads!’ The women took off their garlands, and left their rites unfinished: but Niobe could not stop them from offering unspoken prayers to their goddess (Ovid, VI, 175-203).

Leto is filled with sadness; her laments already herald catastrophe. Niobe is punished for her *hybris*: Apollo kills her seven sons, surprising them as they were exercising their horses. The girls are killed at home by Diana. Niobe begs for her last daughter to be spared, but the punishment is unrelenting.

But even as she made this prayer, the child for whom she prayed fell dead. Utterly bereft now, she sank down surrounded by the bodies of her sons, her daughters, her husband, and grief turned her to stone. The breeze could not stir her hair, the blood drained from her colourless face, her eyes stared in an expression of fixed sorrow. There was nothing to show that this image was alive. She could not turn her head, nor move her arms or legs: even inside her, her tongue clove to her palate and froze into silence, there was no pulsing in her veins, and her internal organs too were turned to stone: yet still she wept. A violent whirlwind caught her up, and carried her away to her own country, where she was set down on a mountain top. There she wastes away, and even now, tears trickle from her marble face (Ovid, VI, 301-312).

Dumque rogat, pro qua rogat, occidit: orba resedit
exanimes inter natos natasque virumque
deriguitque malis; nullos movet aura capillos,
in vultu color est sine sanguine, lumina maestis
stant inmoti genis, nihil est in imagine vivum.
Ipsa quoque interius cum duro lingua palato
congelat, et venae desistunt posse moveri;
nec flecti cervix nec brachia reddere motus
nec pes ire potest; intra quoque viscera saxum est.
Flet tamen et validi circumdata turbine venti
in patriam rapta est: ibi fixa cacumine montis
liquitur, et lacrimas etiam nunc marmora manant
(Ovid, VI, 301-312).

The divinely exacted penalty for Niobe's pride is the gruesome murder of her children. But this is followed by a second punishment: petrification by sadness. The actual metamorphosis takes place during her petition: "dumque rogat, pro qua rogat, occidit". She 'dies' within her despair. This

is the point of no return in a radical and irrevocable sclerosis: petrification. The transmogrification exchanges the horror of loss for another horror: being forever turned to stone before the eyes of others, without the release of being able to disappear into Hades, delivered to the moment just before all consciousness vanishes and so still cruelly aware of the fourteen perished children.

This is why this particular stone weeps, making marble a metamorphosis within the metamorphosis, an image of an image. The choice of stone – “lacrimas etiam nunc marmora manant” – is by no means a random one.



3 | Tintoretto, *Strage dei figli e delle figlie di Niobe*, 1541, Modena, Galleria Estense.

Marmor comes from the Greek *marmairein* (μαρμαίρειν, which means to shimmer, to shine like the surface of the water. In the *Iliad*, Homer speaks of the shimmering sea: ἅλα μαρμαρέην (*hala marmareèn, Iliad*, XIV, 273). Virgil, when he writes of the marble smoothness of the sea, turns *marmor* and *mar* into synonyms (Fobelli 2007, 27-32). Digging still deeper into the etymological past we find the Sanskrit root *mar*, connoting movement (as of waves), and *mar-mar*, suggesting a more surging motion – which we can still hear when we

speak of the ‘murmuring’ sea (Schwarzenberg 2000, 22; Baader, Wolf 2010). The derivation of the word itself – *mar/marmor/marmora* – may also have contributed to the idea that marble is water metamorphosed into stone. Theorizing on mineralogy, the Arab scholar and physician Avicenna conjectured that conglutination (as seen in alluvial formations) and congelation (as in the growth of stalactites) have a lapidifying effect on water; in short that water ‘stiffens’, ‘freezes’ and ‘petrifies’ through the action of a ‘mineral force’ (Avicenna, 46).

The ancient and medieval commentaries on Ovid interpreted Niobe’s turning to marble in a variety of ways (Lesky 1936, 643-706; Wiemann 1986, 6-9). The Greek writer and traveller Pausanias provides an extensive description. In his accounts of his journeys through Greece he claims to have seen the rock for himself.

οὗτος μὲν ταῦτα ἔλεγεν: ἐπὶ δὲ τοῦ Νοτίου καλουμένου τείχους, ὃ τῆς ἀκροπόλεως ἔς τὸ θεάτρων ἐστὶ τετραμμένον, ἐπὶ τούτου Μεδοῦσης τῆς Γοργόνης ἐπίχρυσος ἀνάκειται κεφαλὴ, καὶ περὶ αὐτὴν αἰγίς πεποιήται. ἐν δὲ τῇ κορυφῇ τοῦ θεάτρου σπήλαιόν ἐστιν ἐν ταῖς πέτρας ὑπὸ τὴν ἀκρόπολιν: τρίπους δὲ ἔπασσι καὶ τούτῳ: Ἀπόλλων δὲ ἐν αὐτῷ καὶ Ἄρτεμις τοὺς παῖδάς εἰσιν ἀναίρουσιν τοὺς Νιόβης. ταύτην τὴν Νιόβην καὶ αὐτὸς εἶδον ἀνελθὼν ἔς τὸν Σίπυλον τὸ ὄρος: ἡ δὲ πλησίον μὲν πέτρα καὶ κρημνός ἐστιν οὐδὲν παρόντι σχῆμα παρεχόμενος γυναικὸς οὔτε ἄλλως οὔτε πενθοῦσης: εἰ δὲ γε πορρωτέρω γένοιο, δεδακρυμένην δόξεις ὀρᾶν καὶ κατηφῆ γυναῖκα (Pausanias, 1, 21, 3).

On the South wall, as it is called, of the Acropolis, which faces the theater, there is dedicated a gilded head of Medusa the Gorgon, and round it is wrought an aegis. At the top of the theater is a cave in the rocks under the Acropolis. This also has a tripod over it, wherein are Apollo and Artemis slaying the children of Niobe. This Niobe I myself saw when I had gone up to Mount Sipylus. When you are near it is a beetling crag, with not the slightest resemblance to a woman, mourning or otherwise; but if you go further away you will think you see a woman in tears, with head bowed down

Philemon regards the petrification as a symbolic image of Niobe's suffering: psychic and bodily rigidity (Philemon, Frg. XVI). The Greek mythographer Palaephatos, who was later followed by the Byzantine poet Johannes Tzetzes, contended that the motif derived from an actual funeral monument in Sipylus and that the sculptor had diverted water from a nearby spring to run from the eyes of the statue (Palaephatus, 8; Tzetzes, IV, 463). The 12th-century Byzantine writer Eustathios says that the myth was based upon an existing natural phenomenon at that location (Eustathios, Per. 87). Giovanni Boccaccio, in his *Genealogia deorum gentilium libri* mentions that petrification is a result of shock and sadness (Boccaccio, 12, 2). And the image in Sipylus weeps simply because ground water seeps through the cold stone.

The Renaissance also saw the emergence of a monumental iconographic tradition regarding Niobe (Bordignon 2008; Bordignon 2015; Cook 1964; de Halleux 2004; Rebaudo 2012; Tisano 2018; Zeidler 2018), after the medieval tradition in the manuscripts and woodcuts based upon the *Ovide*

moralisé, the *Divina commedia* by Dante Alighieri and the *De claribus mulieribus* by Boccaccio (Wiemann 1986, 241-243, figs. 2-17). The episode generally appears in private spaces as part of series on Diana and Apollo, and on the basis of moralising messages, the Niobe motif is also represented on bridal chests, known as *cassoni* (Wiemann 1986, 78, cat. 108-111). Tintoretto painted Niobe among sixteen ceiling octagons, commissioned in 1541 for the bedchamber in the Palazzo San Paterniano of the Venetian count Vettor Pisani (now in Galleria Estense, Modena), under the title: *Niobe mutato in sasso ed i figli saettati da Apollo* [Fig. 3] (Wiemann 1986, cat. 31). The composition is said to go back to a now lost work by Giorgione for the Casa Sorenza in Venice, described by the painter Carlo Ridolfi (Polati 2010). Here again, the description is: "*Niobe cangiata in sasso e di lei figliuoli saettati da Diana e da Apolline*". Tintoretto's *raccourci* references the ultimate gesture of despair, the moment that Niobe imploringly raises her arms: "ad caelum liventia brachia tollens". The foreshortened perspective provides a symbolic form that heightens the drama. The viewer is drawn into this anagogy of suffering, which at the same time is so close: only one desperate arm's length away.

Niobe also appeared in public space, in the famous frieze by Polidoro da Caravaggio on the façade of the Palazzo Milesi in Rome [Fig. 4] (de Castris 2001, 108-172; Gnann 1997, 90-117). Here, too, the massacre itself was depicted together with Niobe's consequent despair. This *chiaroscuro* frieze was much copied and has also been preserved in Enrico Maccari's etches from 1876 [Fig. 5] (Maccari 1876; Wiemann 1986, 71, cat. 87). It was the last frieze that Polidoro painted before the Sack of Rome in 1527. Giorgio Vasari celebrated the mastery of *grisaille* and the virtuosity of the *paragone* effect of bronze figures: "un' infinità di figure di bronzo che non di pittura, ma paiono di metallo" (Vasari, 62). This brings me to the theme of the *paragone*.



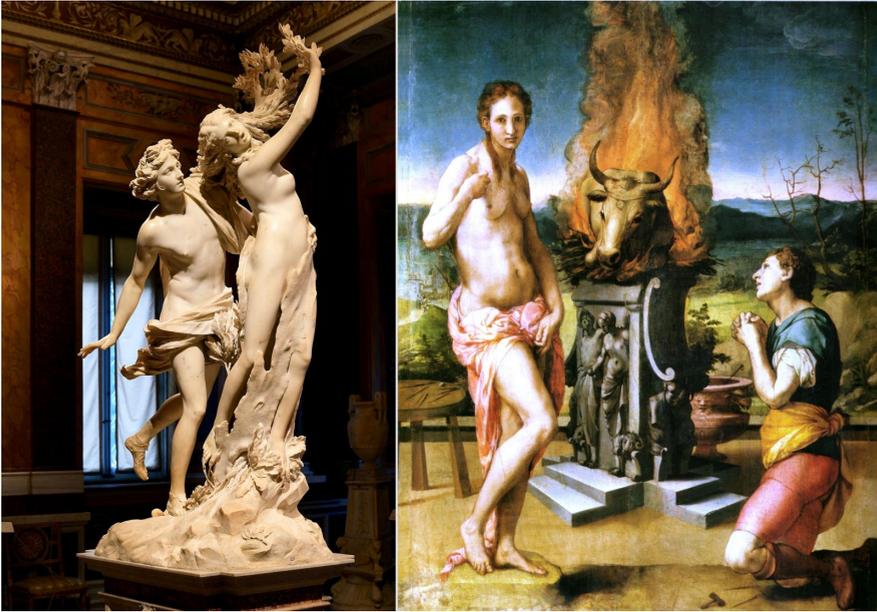
4 | Polidoro da Caravaggio, *Frieze with Niobe*, 1527, Rome, façade of Palazzo Milesi;
 5 | Polidoro da Caravaggio, *Etching of the frieze with Niobe*, 1527, from: E. Maccari, *Graffiti e chiaroscuri. Saggi di architettura e decorazione italiana. Secolo XV-XVI*, Rome 1876.

2. The “self-aware image”

Ovid generally describes his metamorphoses with great plasticity. In the tragedy of Niobe too, the metamorphosis is a descriptive finale: the wind no longer stirs her hair, the blood drains from her visage, her tongue freezes, and it is not a mild breeze but the furious storm that carries Niobe back to her Asian homeland where she remains as weeping marble.

In his *Metamorphosis in Greek Myths*, P. M. C. Forbes Irving discusses the two archetypal characteristics of petrification in classical mythology: complete lifelessness (in contrast to transformation into a tree or a bird, for example); and the immutable location of stone as a landmark, as a *monumentum* and thus also as a frozen *momentum* in time. The “stone figure” mostly indicates a radical disjunction between humanity and divinity, mirroring an equally shocking pattern of behaviour. We cannot discuss all of the many examples in the literature, but Medusa is particularly well known (e. g. Kristeva 1998). Irving primarily finds the punishment of being turned to stone in a context of blasphemous talk and sexual aberration (Forbes Irving [1987] 1990, 139). It is a particularly pitiless transformation. After all, having to endure in a “stony death,” is a life without desire: not living but hanging between the animate and the inanimate (Forbes Irving [1987] 1990, 143). The stone figure is a “compromise between natural material and human form, between men and the other world” (Forbes Irving [1987] 1990, 141). Stones cannot speak, they are immobile and fixed in their emotional sclerosis. The stone figure is in a condition of absolute silence, of everlasting blindness and permanent coldness (Forbes Irving [1987] 1990, 146). To be turned into rigid stone symbolizes not only erection but also castration (Fenichel 1937).

Niobe's petrification is of a piece with these archetypes. Her punishment dismantles her prideful talk – now she is forever silent – and her pride in her fertility is exchanged for infertile rock. But Niobe also deviates from tradition. First of all, there is no connection to the punishment of male lust: Crompton mentions that in Sophocles and Plutarch one of Niobe's sons appeals to his homosexual friend (Crompton 2003, 51). Secondly, she corresponds to a condition of being that she had already reached psychically and physically. As Barolsky states: "When Ceres learns her daughter is queen of the underworld, she is stunned, like a woman turned to stone. Seeing the body of her dead son Polydorus, Hecuba is, in her shock, also like hard rock. In their grief, Ceres and Hecuba are both stone-like, in a state of living death" (Barolsky 2005, 152). In her hardening by grief, Niobe receives her permanent mantle. Niobe herself becomes the many-headed tombstone that she weeps over, comparable to the 'smiling stone' on which Demeter sat lamenting Persephone in self-imposed mourning. Forbes Irving mentions that in Sophocles petrification is considered the equivalent of a tomb (Forbes Irving [1987] 1990, 142, 146). Thirdly, her stone is not completely petrified: she weeps, retaining a trace of her former human state. In this sense she is suspended between inanimate nature, which has no feelings of sadness, and animate creatures, such as birds, that do (Forbes Irving [1987] 1990, 149).



6 | Gian Lorenzo Bernini, *Apollo and Daphne*, 1622-1625, Rome, Galleria Borghese;
 7 | Agnolo Bronzino, *Pygmalion and Galatea*, 1528-1530, Florence, Galleria degli Uffizi.

In his *Ovid, Bernini, and the Art of Petrification*, Paul Barolsky plumbs the relationship between the *Metamorphoses* and artists' self-reflection. Gian Lorenzo Bernini's *Apollo and Daphne* is a well-known *Metabild* for the metamorphoses that are possible in the hardness of marble [Fig. 6]. The nymph's transformation is so sensual, so lifelike, so caught in the process itself, that it seems as though Bernini must have kneaded the marble with his fingers.

Bernini is a modern Pygmalion, the mythic sculptor of Ovid to whom he was compared in his own day. In their state of shocked stillness, viewers of Bernini's statue are in turn like all those people in Ovid who are petrified or seemingly turned to stone. [...] Here is the ultimate paradox of mimetic sculpture in marble, where simultaneously stone is flesh, flesh is stone (Barolsky 2005, 154)-

The apex of this masterful *paragone* is the wind: this invisible, wonderful stimulator of movement – breath and psyche together – gives the image life (Baert 2013; Pardo 1991).

Looking at Bernini's statue, we also see in stone the impression of wind as it ripples through Apollo's draperies, a wind of which Ovid speaks that now flows through Apollo's hair as well as that of Daphne: the ultimate *leggerezza* or lightness. Like other *virtuosi* before him, the sculptor gives visible form to what is invisible, as he portrays the rush of wind. Conveying the impression of wind, which is itself invisible, Bernini nevertheless retains a clear sense of the visible presence of stone (Barolsky 2005, 159).

And the viewer's shock at such virtuosity transfers petrification to the viewer themselves, who is struck still by amazement at an artist who can create life from inert matter.

Niobe is in every respect the opposite transformation. Ovid tells us that Niobe's hair could no longer dance in the wind, and the same wind becomes a brutal *raptor* that abducts her stony form. But Niobe is also a remarkable "retrograde petrification". The counterpart of Niobe's petrification can here be identified: Pygmalion's girl, also described by Ovid in *Metamorphoses* (X, 247-297), that comes to life from ivory sculpture. Unlike marble, ivory is composed of anorganic and organic matter; in other words, it contains all the elements of life. As a material it is also very close to human skin. Where Ovid describes how Pygmalion felt the beating of the girl's veins, how her flesh became warm and suffused with blood, and how she blushed up to her face upon seeing her creator, he describes how Niobe's blood drew from her face, her tongue stiffened and all her senses vanished into a weeping rock.

In Agnolo Bronzino's version now in the Uffizi Gallery in Florence we see that the theme was being used in the *ekphrasis* and *paragone* discourse [Fig. 7] (Baert 2018). Bronzino deviates from iconographic tradition by placing the eye contact (*lumen*) with Pygmalion outside of the confines of the painting to where Bronzino was standing, and thus the first person the girl saw was her true creator, the painter (and not the sculptor), just as the text in Ovid's story says: the light and her creator. The position of Galatea's arm is also ambivalent; she appears to be pointing at herself: the 'self' of the creation and the artwork come to life has been realised. This 'self' is not Pygmalion's ego, who kneels in his own isolated amazement. No, the 'self' is the self of Bronzino, who is saying: look, you're alive now!

All these subtle adaptations of the Ovidian myth contribute to the *mise en abîme* of the medium, of the self-referential image.

I ascertain – at least at this stage of the argument – that Niobe does not participate in this iconographic self-reflection. Her petrification, the metamorphosis itself, is not the subject of visual reflection. In painting I had expected to find blood draining, bare flesh turning cold, under a bleak *grisaille* brush; or references in sculpture to the material of the stone itself. Her main role seems primarily to be that of the stricken mother, the centre point of unbearable horror and murder depicted in a frieze. Niobe does not support the *paragone* aesthetic and the self-aware image (Stoichita 2015). In a humanistic context that praised artists for their *pneuma*, the life that they can put into an image, she is the reverse path (Barkan 1993). Pygmalion's Galatea is embraced in the ideals of what art is able to achieve; she exemplifies what is at stake. Niobe's petrification, in contrast, lies at the amorphous origin of images, not at their perfected extreme. This is why only her sorrow, her horror can be the subject of 'narrative'. What she contributes to art is diachronous pathos, the massacre in private space, the doleful exemplum for mothers in a patriarchy, as Gilby states: "The classical Niobe is a figure of power who emanates the solid sub-terra strength of Greek female culture despite the obvious minatory goals of the myth's creators".(Gilby 1996, 152), but not the synchronous apathy at the mountain top, where she will overrule that sorrowful role in thunderous silence. I will return to this issue in the fourth part of this essay.

3. Beraubte Mutter



8 | Tafel 5 of the *Bilderatlas Mnemosyne*.

In Aby Warburg's *Denkraum*, the *Nachleben* of the *Antike* plays a crucial role (Warburg *Renewal*, 585-586). This means that the concept can be found in his *oeuvre*, in both a theoretical and an iconographical way. In this section, I will connect the Niobe motif to Warburg's concept of *Pathosformel* or internal transfer (transport) of antiquating formal energies – *Pathosformeln* – that navigate between bacchanalian exuberance and classical soberness, between the realm of Dionysus and that of Apollo. According to Warburg, this polarity is part of a universal dynamic in the anthropology of imagery, a

dynamic that keeps refreshing itself over the eras. Indeed, Aby Warburg is describing a history of polarities that results in an anthropology of the history of western civilization in which philology, ethnology, history, and biology converge into the *Zwischenraum* where the turbulences of the magical and symbolic thinking of cultural memory are at work. Only within this interspace will it be possible to find any basis for understanding and curing the schizophrenia of human culture. Imagery is precisely where the *polarité pérenne* of history – this *psychomachia* of the Warburgian method (Didi-Huberman 2013, 8) – and energy are unearthed and left behind (Baert 2016a, 25).

Warburg's fascinations, obsessions, techniques, and desires to chart his *Pathosformeln* culminated in the *Mnemosyne* project. He launched the project in 1924 together with Gertrud Bing along with the so-called *Bilderatlas* (Warburg *GS II. 1*). Mnemosyne is the goddess who gave all things a name, and she is also the mother of the Muses. The choice for this goddess is not without meaning, since it connects the notion of inspiration (Muses) with the semantic difficulties of naming the meaning of an image and expressing it in language. Aby Warburg's introduction to the *Mnemosyne* written between 1926 and 1929, reads:

Bewußtes Distanzschaffen zwischen sich und der Außenwelt darf man wohl als Grundakt menschlicher Zivilisation bezeichnen; wird dieser Zwischenraum das Substrat künstlerischer Gestaltung, so sind die Vorbedingungen erfüllt, daß dieses Distanzbewußtsein zu einer sozialen Dauerfunktion werden kann, deren Zulänglichkeit oder Versagen als orientierendes geistiges Instrument eben das Schicksal der menschlichen Kultur bedeutet. [...] Der Entdämonisierungsprozeß der phobisch geprägten Eindruckserbmasse, der die ganze Skala des Ergriffenseins gebärdensprachlich umspannt, von der hilflosen Versunkenheit bis zum mörderischen Menschenfraß, verleiht der humanen Bewegungsdynamik auch in den Stadien, die zwischen den Grenzpolen des Orgasmus liegen, dem Kämpfen, Gehen, Laufen, Tanzen, Greifen, jenen Prägrand unheimlichen Erlebens, das der in mittelalterlicher Kirchenzucht aufgewachsene Gebildete der Renaissance wie ein verbotenes Gebiet, wo sich nur die Gottlosen des freigelassenen Temperaments tummeln dürfen, ansah. Der Atlas zur Mnemosyne will durch seine Bildmaterialien diesen Prozeß illustrieren, den man als Versuch der Einverseelung vorgeprägter Ausdruckswerte bei der Darstellung bewegten Lebens bezeichnen könnte (Warburg *Einleitung*, A1.A4).

The conscious creation of distance between oneself and the external world can probably be designated as the founding act of human civilization. When this interval becomes the basis of artistic production, the conditions have been fulfilled for this consciousness of distance to achieve an enduring social function which, in its rhythmical change between absorption in its object or detached restraint, signifies the oscillation between a cosmology of images and one of signs; its adequacy or failure as an instrument of mental orientation signifies the fate of human culture. [...] The process of de-demonizing the inherited mass of impressions, created in fear, that encompasses the entire range of emotional gesture, from helpless melancholy to murderous cannibalism, also lends the mark of uncanny experience to the dynamics of human movement in the stages that lie in between these extremes of orgiastic seizure — states such as fighting, walking, running, dancing, grasping — which the educated individual of the Renaissance, brought up in the medieval discipline of the Church, regarded as forbidden territory, where only the godless were permitted to run riot, freely indulging their passions. (en. tr. in *Mnemosyne Atlas. Introduction*, A1.A4)

Warburg felt mentally and academically torn between these poles and could think of no other way to dress this gaping wound than through an *Aufklärungsversuch* in his inner dualistic and cosmogonic struggle (Didi-Huberman 2013, 8). Aby Warburg writes about this cultural-schizophrenic oscillation: “Urprägework in der Ausdruckswelt tragischer Ergriffenheit; *Pathosformeln* sind *Dynamogramme*”. His desire to bring order to chaos gave rise to an *Ikonologie des Zwischenraums*: the space where the energy shoots between the polarities of the *Pathosformeln* (Aby Warburg: “Das Problem liegt in der Mitte”) (Koos et al. 1994, plate 32/32b). This leads to a so-called *Distanzierung*: a motto written on a Fragmente writing from 1901: “Du lebst und tust mir nichts – Ahnung von der Entfernung – Distanzierung” (“You live and do me no harm – Presentiment of distance – Distantiation as basic principle”). “This *Grundprinzip* prescribes that he remains both near and distant from the perilous phenomena” (Johnson 2012, 28), as Warburg declared: “The deeper power in contradictions and in the subtle challenge that images could pose to the viewer’s own detachment. You live yet you do me no harm” (Gombrich 1970, 71).

Aby Warburg places Niobe in Plate 5 of the *Bilderatlas* [Fig. 8]. On the left side of the panel are three sculptures from the iconic group in the Uffizi, known as the ‘Niobids’ [Fig. 9]. The statues were found in 1583 near San Giovanni in Laterano on the Esquiline Hill of Rome and were moved to the garden of the Villa Medici (North 2012, 114-115; Welcker 1836; Wiemann 1986, 146ff). In his *The Age of Fable*, Thomas Bulfinch records one form of *paragone* relating to petrification: “In the Uffizi gallery in Florence, there is a plaster cast of an ancient marble statue of Niobe. The sculpture depicts a beautiful and incredulous Theban queen embracing her horrified child“. The following Greek axiom is connected with this sculpture: “To stone the gods have changed her, but in vain; the sculptor’s art has made her breathe again” (Bulfinch [1867] 2007, 106). Modern research has dated the group as a Roman work (1st century BC – 1st century AD), possibly after a Greek model. The group had once formed part of an open group of sixteen sculptures described by Pliny as “Niobe, her fourteen daughters and the pedagogos” (Pliny, 36, 29). Pliny places the group at the temple of Apollo Sosianus in Rome. The find had an impact on the aesthetic discourse of the time comparable to that of the discovery of the Laocoön group, dug up on 14 January 1506 in a vineyard near the Roman Colosseum (Richter 1992). M. H. Loh also points out: “For the generation

at the beginning of the sixteenth century, the emotional intensity of the Laocoön must have seemed somewhat of a traumatic disruption at a moment when the classical style was coming to be redefined by the gentle contrapposto that structured works like Michelangelo's Bacchus (1497)" (Loh 2011, 399). Remarkably, Warburg does not show the best-known sculpture from the group, namely Niobe herself pleading that her last daughter be spared [Fig. 11]. Johann Joachim Winckelmann devoted lyrical passages to this specific sculpture, which he took to be exemplary of the 'high' or 'sublime' style that he dated to the late fifth or early fourth century as *Ausdruck der Figuren aus der Heldenzeit* (North 2012, 112).



9 | View of the Niobe room in the Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence.

The original caption to plate 5 reads (WIA III.104.1 tr. en Engramma Mnemysne Atlas, Pl. 5):

Antike Vorprägungen. Magna mater, Kybele. Beraubte Mutter (Niobe, Flucht und Schrecken). Vernichtende Mutter. Rasende (beleidigte) Frau (Mänade, Orpheus, Pentheus). Klage um den Toten (Sohn!). Übergang: Unterweltsvorstellung (Raub d. Proserpina). Griff nach d. Kopf (Mänade, Cassandra, Priesterin! [Tafel 6]).

On the left we see the group around the Earth Mother: mothers intentionally (Medea) or unintentionally (Niobe) involved in the murder of their children, children of mothers symbolically sacrificed (the castration of Attis, son of Cybele). The central bloc consists of figures from the myth of Dionysus, the god of orgy and sacrifice, with Orpheus and Euridice as prototype. On the right are examples from Hades, with the rape of Persephone as prototype. The earth mothers – Cybele, Niobe, Medea, Demeter – are therefore read together with sacrifice, the ritual cycle of life and death (Centanni et al. 2000).

In Mnemosyne's plate 5 the ancient repertoire of emotional precoinages of panic, defense, fury is embodied in mythical female figures starting from Cybele, the archetypal mother. In this panel the emotive formula of the fleeing woman is embodied by the Niobides. All of these themes and figures are evoked as 'ghost-images' in the following plates of the Atlas, as 'revenants' from Antiquity to Renaissance art (Bordignon 2012).

In the montage of plate 5, the ancient "Versuch der Einverseelung vorgeprägter Ausdruckswerte bei der Darstellung" is thematised in the Pathosformel as the fury, as Leidenschaft in the Niobe, as the bacchanalian delirium dance motif of the Maenads, as the cycle of death and fertility. Even as death by the gaze itself. And so, the *Pathosformeln* of these earth mothers become figures of Dionysus. "E così i suoi avversari, sbrantati dalle donne in preda all'*enthousiasmos*, diventano figure di Dioniso" (Bordignon 2012).

For Aby Warburg, the conflict between the dramatic, chaotic image and the mild, loving image is a personal truth. To him, images are a threat as well as an embrace: they tack between Dionysus and Apollo. In every image, there is also death. "In other words, Warburg's aptitude for the *astra* (concepts) always brought him in proximity to the *monstra* (chaos)" (Didi-Huberman 2012, 50) "Formen des sich Verlierens m [sic] d[as] Bild. I – Verharren beidem Gefühl des Überbewältigtwerdens durch die Vielheit der Dinge," he writes (Warburg 1888-1895,137).

We can now understand the Niobe group in Plate 5 as a paradigm of humanity's deepest panic sublayer, and so as Niobe's chthonic position in iconography. Paul Verhaeghe argues that the chthonic image should not

be interpreted metaphorically, but rather 'phorically', that is to say as 'bearing', as 'carrying', as a first and necessary step in a confrontation with what is deemed 'unimaginable' within the Real.

A processing of the unimaginable makes it bearable, prepares signification, so that it becomes bearable. [...] It tries to shape the unutterable. [...] Chthonic art differs from and contrasts with oedipal art, which in one way or another always involves a sexual genital processing of this originally undifferentiated and terrifying force. The oedipal development is the final phase of this process, as it channels and socialises *eros* and *thanatos* [...]. Sigmund Freud calls this mourning process '*Trauerarbeit*', and equates it to analytical *Arbeit*, the work performed in psychoanalysis. In both cases, the identity of the person may be deconstructed by destroying the identification layers that form the ego (Verhaeghe 2013, 74; cfr. Hagman 2001).

Where Bernini's Daphne and Bronzino's Galatea were intended to display the utmost *paragone* – the beauty of the marble and colouring, Apollo smiling at such virtuosity, the light of the *astra* reflected on the medium – Niobe is the implosion of its opposite, of stony death, of Dionysus' grimace, of the engulfing darkness of the *monstrum* (Didi-Huberman 2001). Niobe stands on the edge of the abyss, Hades visible on the further side, but she still living among us. The image still barely belongs to the human, embodying the excess of what the gaze can just bear without destroying. "Du lebst und tust mir nichts". In this sense she is like a stone monumentum between Euridice and Orpheus, like a landmark, that we should never forget: "In every image, there is also death".

I think: Niobe would have absorbed the shock of the all-destroying gaze of Orpheus with her stone body; she would have saved Euridice. Amongst the other chthonic beings in Plate 5, between the mothers who became maenads and tore Orpheus apart, and the mourning Demeter, Niobe can now be reconciled to her punishment. In the Mnemosyne project, Niobe for the first time knows who she is.

Giorgio Agamben argues that Warburg's *Pathosformeln* are autonomous hybrids of archetypes. They possess an equivalent 'first-timeness' (the *primavoltità*). Every photograph taken as part of the Mnemosyne project constitutes an archè and, consequently, is archaic. Or as Wolfgang Kemp

formulates it: "Each recollection must be stored in the collective memory, where it is rooted in the primal experiences of sorrow, ecstasy, and passion that have left their indestructible 'engrammes' on the psyche of humankind. When a memory arises from these depths, it must work in a 'polarizing' way, as 'explosive', as a formula of liberation and activation" (Kemp 1991, 88).

This means that the *Bilderatlas* is not only an atlas of the *Pathosformel*, but also an instrument of the *em-pathos*, as Georges Didi Huberman argues in his study *Hepatische Empathie. Die Affinität des Inkommensurablen nach Aby Warburg* (Didi-Huberman 2010). In 1892, after correcting the second proof of his doctorate on Sandro Botticelli (1445-1510), Warburg decided to add a short prelude (Warburg 1892). In this text, still at the beginning of his exceptional biography and career, Warburg connected the renewal of his method to three concepts: *Nachleben*, *Pathosformel*, and *Einfühlung* (Didi-Huberman 2010, 3). The last concept he defines as follows:

dass dieser Nachweis für die psychologische Aesthetik deshalb bemerkenswerth ist, weil man hier in den Kreisen der schaffenden Künstler den Sinn für den ästhetischen Akt der 'Einfühlung' in seinem Werden als stilbildende Macht beobachten kann (Warburg *WEB*).

Georges Didi-Huberman considers Warburg's methodical parameters of *Einfühlung* as the ultimate key in reading and understanding the Mnemosyne atlas. The cognitive affect of empathy – seemingly 'ambivalent' or 'paradoxically' situated between the 'emotional feeling' and the 'cerebral thinking' – is reflected in the heart of the Warburgian dialectics.

Ist das nicht im Grunde ein elementares Paradigma aller Erkenntnis, die versucht, ausgehend vom Sinnlichen zu Intelligiblem zu gelangen? Und besteht darin, nebenbei bemerkt, nicht die hauptsächliche Arbeit eines jeden Archäologen oder Kunsthistorikers? (Didi-Huberman 2010, 6),

4. Back to the weeping rock



10 | The Black Stone of Paphos in Cyprus, venerated as Aphrodite, example of so-called *Argoi lithoi* or *baitulia*: meteorites considered as divine *acheiropoietai*.

I wrote earlier: Niobe lies at the amorphous origin of images, not at their ultimate extension into mimetic perfection. This is an image of the image in the sense of alpha and omega, of a *longue durée* that attempts to embrace Bildwissenschaft, of which Aby Warburg once said: “ganzen Skala kinetischer Lebensäußerung phobisch-erschütterten Menschentums”. Niobe’s metamorphosis to stone is the beginning: the Ur-image; the *primavoltità*.

The mystery of a stone that arrived in its location without human intervention, craggy, not shaped by human hands, appeals to the creative power of nature (Baert 2004). “La pierre comme élément de la construction, est liée à la sédentarisation des peuples et à une sorte de cristallisation cyclique. Elle joue un rôle important dans les relations entre le ciel et la terre” (Chevalier, Gheerbrant 2002, 751). The stone is fashioned by a nature that breaks, fractures, tears, scours, carves and washes. Weathering creates an image that does not derive from human ideas but will inspire them.

A divine origin is often ascribed to stones. They fall from heaven, or are cast earthwards by gods. The *Geworfenheit* of a stone is the manifestation of the divine. Although it had no figurative features, the “stone cast from heaven” was thought to preserve the image of the god. These were often black, meteoric rocks. When



11 | *Niobe with her youngest daughter*, Roman group statue of the Niobids, 1st century BC-1st century AD, Florence, Galleria degli Uffizi.

Pausanias visited the cult location of Pharaï in Achaia, he was amazed at the veneration of thirty square stones. The author refers to them as *argoi lithoi* or *baitulia* (meteorites) (Freedberg 1989, 67ff; Pausanias, 7, 22-24). In early Antiquity there was a belief that the gods themselves had cast down these stones. They are the first “embodiments” of the gods, reaching humanity as a raw and unworked mass, rudimentary signs of their existence. Yet in all their aniconicity these stones were still regarded as “portraits”. The meteorite was inherently animated by the goddess, encased in stone despite its lack of face or limbs [Fig. 10]. Pausanias has already been quoted above describing Niobe’s rock: close by it is indiscernible, but from further away her profile becomes recognisable.

“When you are near it is a beetling crag, with not the slightest resemblance to a woman, mourning or otherwise; but if you go further away you will think you see a woman in tears, with head bowed down”.

Niobe too goes back to the Ur-image where form and matter have not yet separated, but lie enclosed in one another (Baert 2017a). Niobe is a descendant of such images fallen from heaven. The greatest taboo – the unthinkable taking place under the eyes of one mother at the prompting of another mother – demands the greatest totem: the ultimate gravity of aniconic rock. The rock is the only monument powerful enough to block the catastrophe, the trauma, wrapped in deep layers of silence. The dolmen of a throat sewn shut. Again, I see a relation between the fantasm of Niobe on the mountain and the ‘shock’ of the Laocoön. As Loh points out: “What is a scream other than the disarticulation of speech? The utterance that fails to communicate. The thought that cannot yet crystallise. Sensation rising to the surface” (Loh 2011, 399). The furthest possible point of banishment in time: perhaps when humans first walked erect.

Niobe is the mouth of the dormant crater from which all other images will erupt.

Now we can understand why Mikhail Bakhtin found “the sexless and ‘perfect’ Niobe and her daughter” in the Uffizi such a paradox. He did not understand Winckelmann’s tribute. “In classical antiquity the human body is entirely enclosed and complete. It is a lonely singular body distanced from all others. Therefore, all the indications of growth, of incompleteness and procreation are removed and the eternal imperfection of the body is hidden, conception, pregnancy and birth hardly occur” (Bakhtin [1965] 1995, 122) J. H. North also states:

De-sexualised and modestly draped, these figures are removed from the category of objects of desire and, being female they can be imagined (by men) as entirely untouched by the stirrings of desire. In this sense these female figures are absolutely sublime, according to Winckelmann, because their de-libidinized form denies the evocative charge that would be carried by nakedness. [...] Winckelmann compares the figure of Niobe with the figure of Laocoön. He considers them as examples of the difference between the de-erotised ‘sublime’ and the subsequent ‘beautiful’ style. Niobe is, in Winckelmann’s view the embodiment of negativity – she is no heroine. [...] Because she had no self, she has given up the struggle against her fate. Winckelmann ignores the protective gesture, surely an expression of her concern for her innocent daughter. The marble statue of Niobe depicts her at the moment when she is herself transfixed and turned to stone (North 2012, 71).

In the marble amorphous *lythos*, however, Niobe is deconstructed to her archaic, furious – almost Homeric – essence, and after Warburg’s Mnemosyne she can return home a second and final time. “The identity of the person may be deconstructed by destroying the identification layers that form the ego”. The inconceivable – a woman, deprived of her motherhood and her identity – can only return to the universal matrix of the earth itself: afigurative. In this chthonic place of rest, she no longer needs her identity, mimesis, *paragone*, even *Pathosformel*.

I would go a step further. Is Niobe not the stumbling block, the *skandalon* according to the hermeneutics of *la violence (désir) mimétique* developed

by the anthropologist and philosopher René Girard (1923-2015) in mythology (Girard 1972)?

Chez tous les écrivains majeurs, je pense, la rhétorique des oxymores constitue une allusion significative aux vicissitudes de l'interaction mimétique et rejoue obscurément l'essentiel drame humain de la pierre d'achoppement mimétique, le skandalon que nulle interprétation linguistique ne pourra jamais appréhender. (Girard 2011, 46-47)

Girard makes an idiosyncratic reflection on the ideal of the stumbling block. The Greek word *skandalizein* is derived from 'limp', 'stumble'. *Skandalon* derives from 'stumbling block' (Girard 1984). If you follow someone with a limp, Girard writes, you'll see that it seems as if that person repeatedly appears to want to (or is going to) coincide with his shadow without ever succeeding. Girard's image strikingly evokes how limping – the 'scandal' – comes closest to the grotesque drama of humankind, namely to be unable (or not allowed) to coincide with the 'self'. The 'scandal' shows in all its deficiency, in all its imperfection and *tristesse*, the loss of the absolute reflection and the impossibility of eliminating the dichotomy. As A.-B. Renger interprets Girard:

Das Opfer, der Sündenbock, wird getötet, heroisiert und/oder heiliggesprochen, verdanken sich doch ihm die Triebabfuhr und das durch die Opferung ermöglichte neue soziale und kulturelle Gleichgewicht. Nach Girard sind Mythen über Götter, Helden, Stadtgründer oder Stammesväter regelmäßig Zeugnisse von Sündenböcken im Sinne der mimetischen Theorie: Berichte über reale Gewalttätigkeiten gegen reale Opfer, die in den Berichten oft die Züge einer Monstrosität tragen. (Renger 2014, 55)

I cannot devote too much time to Girard's patriarchal bias in his mimesis model. The mirror paradigm is innately phallogocentric, and the author pays no attention to the matriarchal aspects in mythology and religion (Von Werlhof 2007).

The meaning of 'stumbling block' is hence highly ambivalent: it is the defect but also the opening to insight; the obstacle but also the possibility. As if, in the stumbling, everything is briefly lit up, as if there is hope. "The

paradox implies that Niobe's petrification has simultaneous potency and impotence. Her story is an enigma of pretension, perpetual grief, masochistic desire, self-awareness, providential fury, and glory" (Gesell 2013, 12) Glory: in Niobe's Ur-image the womb again swells with fruit, like the still undressed black stone of Kybele. Demeter becomes her friend and her daughter Persephone the consolation for the loss of the seven other daughters. Niobe – the image of the image – has become a second *omphalos*. Not a monument at the perfected end, but a landmark for an eternal beginning. This enormous stumbling block – "l'essentiel drame humain de la pierre d'achoppement mimétique" – is needed to parry the *skandalon*. The tragedy is unbearable and terrifying from close up (no foreshortening here), but from a safe distance becomes watchable and healing. And Niobe herself looks out over the open landscape; she is restored in her Homeric *teichoscopia*. "You cannot know/ how deep my feelings are / Their colours are hidden / like water among the rocks," writes an unknown hand in the Japanese masterpiece *The Tale of Genji*, written with unprecedented sophistication in Kyoto between 1000 and 1008 by lady-in-waiting Murasaki Shikibu (Shikibu, 539).

Niobe opens to our eyes a scopic regime in which a deep consciousness of the elements, of wind and rain, are part of our *Gefühlsraum* (Schmitz 1969) and of our (artistic) experience (Deblieu 1998; Hsu, Low 2008, 17-35; Ingold 2005; Ingold 2007). Niobe's tears cut wrinkles through her petrified body: erosion as mourning. But the fluid is also a cautious sign of fertility regained (Sidgwick 2014). Niobe's image is therefore also a comfort. Her tears irrigate the land. And is marble not the murmur of the sea? In this sense Niobe has found the power for a different sort of hermeneutics of the image: "stoniness". The anthropologist Tim Ingold in his *Being Alive* describes this as "materials against materiality" (Ingold 2011, 19-32). Like a friendly iconoclast, Tim Ingold argues for the study of our material culture as an integrated process of the natural elements and surfaces of materials, of interactive views of buildings, sculptures, even, dolmens, menhirs and rocks like Niobe.

Stoniness, if you will, is not constant but endlessly variable in relation to light or shade, wetness or dryness, and the position, posture or movement of the observer. [...]

Stoniness, then, is not in the stone's 'nature', in its materiality. Nor is it

merely in the mind of the observer or practitioner. Rather, it emerges through the stone's involvement in its total surroundings – including you, the observer – and from the manifold ways in which it is engaged in the currents of the life world. The properties of materials, in short, are not attributes but histories. (Ingold 2011, 30.32)

For Tim Ingold, the human creature, in its environment and with the materials it shapes, is a wanderer. If we take the “dwelling gaze” (Ingold 2011, 4, *passim*) and the “open sensibilities” (Ingold 2007, 33) of the natural elements as medium, even as the ultimate *paragone*, we liberate ourselves from an Art History that is all too “end-directed” and “teleonomic” (Ingold 2011, 4), and we emancipate Niobe's image of the image, high on a mountain, seen from afar, to be a friendly living being that guides us in the surprising labyrinth that shapes our humanity.

Niobe has become, at last, her history. Indeed, the *istoria* discussed by Leon Battista Alberti (1404-1472) will move spectators when the men painted in the picture outwardly demonstrate their own feelings as clearly as possible. Nature provides – and there is nothing to be found more rapacious of her than she – that we mourn with the mourners, laugh with those who laugh, and grieve with the grief-stricken. Yet these feelings are known from movements of the body (Loh 2011, 393). But also when images, like Niobe, are petrified in aniconic stoniness, when they are materials against materiality, they can survive as *istoria*. That is what Ingold understood in Niobe's plea in the plea: “*dumque rogat, pro qua rogat*”.

This is the difference between Niobe and Echo (Baert 2016b; Baert 2017b; Baert 2017c). From her own tragedy, Echo offers no comfort, no glory. Echo has no perspective on the hills and the mountains. Echo merges entirely into nature. There is no fluid. There is no final irreducible silhouette on a mountainside, no stumbling block. No *teichoscopia*. See, her clothes are not yet consumed, but her bones are already as soft as wax. And her face has completely vanished beneath the moss. Echo fully and heroically undergoes “l'essentiel drame humain de la pierre d'achoppement mimétique” in the opposite of mimesis. She partially made possible Niobe's “perpetual grief, masochistic desire, self-awareness, providential fury, and glory”.

The question must be confronted of why Echo was obliged to surrender herself to this form of petrification, even more pitiless than that of Niobe herself. The question arises what *skandalon*, what taboo Echo had to counter, that was so gigantic and so crushing that she could only avoid it by vanishing? The disaster known as Narcissus? The catastrophe of the origins of the image in a mirror?

I was placeless and so innocent. I was unparticular and so invulnerable. But I was also happy. The only image of this happiness, the only contraband I could smuggle back across the frontier of full wakefulness, was not an image of myself – for that surely did not exist on the other side of the frontier – but an image of something akin to myself: the flat surface of a rock, a stone over which a skin of water flowed continuously.
(John Berger (1926-2017), *And our faces, my heart, brief as photos*, 14)

Dust in the air suspended
Marks the place where a story ended.
(T.S. Eliot (1888-1965), *Four Quartets: Little Gidding*)

* I am grateful to Paul Arblaster, Andrew Benjamin, Monica Centanni, Sarah Eycken, Stephanie Heremans, Han Lamers and Laura Tack. Special thanks to colleague Joacim Sprung.

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English abstract

A very complex article that sinks into the mythology of the Niobe's transformation into a weeping rock. The material inertia, the petrification of the form as a final outcome is set in counterpoint to the dynamism of the highest degree of pathetic expression, Warburg's *Pathosformel*, and opens to a comparison on *Paragone's* rhetorical theme in the debate between the arts. The cluster of motifs around the figure of Niobe - hybrid, lament and chthonic substrate - become direct access to a bipolar hermeneutic of the visual medium: the "historical psychology of human expression" that navigates between Apollo and Dionysus.

key words | Niobe; metamorphosis; petrification

*La Redazione di Engramma è grata ai colleghi – amici e studiosi – che, seguendo la procedura peer review a doppio cieco, hanno sottoposto a lettura, revisione e giudizio questo saggio
(v. Albo dei referee di Engramma).*