

Andrea Pinotti

Memory and Image

Italian Academy, *Fellows-lunch Oct. 8 2003*

1. Manet's chain

Tradition (transmission of cultural values) in general can be a very abstract issue if one does not refer to specific objects which perform as carriers or vehicles or supports of the transmission itself.

Art history is among the historical disciplines perhaps (from this point of view, at least) a happy discipline, since it can investigate material, real objects such as works of art: such carriers are much more tangible than, for instance, the objects with which the history of ideas or the history of folklore usually work, which are sometimes opinions not even recorded on written texts.

One possible way of practicing art history as a history of the cultural tradition is to establish a "chain" among the artistic phenomena, so that the last phenomenon is the most derivate, and determined by the previous degrees influencing it (as regards forms, themes, styles, and so on), up to the origin of the chain itself as a the Prime Mover, the *primum momentum agens*. Such method has something to do (although it is not identical with) an aetiological (causalistic – deterministic) approach based on the cause-effect model, and it seems quite close to the genealogical "family tree" which reconstructs the origins of a family through the different levels of kinship.

Let's see an example of a chain in art history, drawn from the work of one of the most influential art (and culture) historians of late 19th – early 20th century: Aby Warburg (1866-1929). In his last years Warburg studied Edouard Manet's *Dejeuner sur l'herbe* (fig.1), and was enthusiastically excited when (leaning on previous studies by Gustav Pauli) he could trace back the origin of it – through the 17° (fig.2) and the 16th century (fig.3) – in a hellenistic relief (the front part of an ancient sarcophagus) which is to be seen immured in a wall of Villa Medici in Rome (fig.4).

A chain which could be perhaps properly represented either in the *right-side* way, stressing the movement performed by the art historian *from* the derivate image *to* its source, or in the *left-side* way, stressing the relation of cause-effect within art history itself:

<i>Construction-path</i>	<i>Reconstruction-path</i>
Villa Medici	Villa Medici
↓	↑
[Raffaello] lost	[Raffaello] lost
↓	↑
Marcantonio Raimondi	Marcantonio Raimondi
↓	↑
Tivoli	Tivoli
↓	↑
Manet	Manet
...	...

Of course, the chain can be continued far beyond Manet (and Warburg): for example, in a kitschy (or ironic?) acrylic on tin by pop-artist Isabel Samaras (*Déjeuner*, 1996).

We could provisionally say that the last, unachieved, huge project elaborated by Warburg, the so-called “Mnemosyne-Atlas”, had to be according to its author a sort of map of the imaginative chains building Western figurative memory. To the same task Warburg devoted his *Kulturwissenschaftliche Bibliothek* (Library of culture-science) in Hamburg, which is nowadays still active in London (Warburg Institute) as an interdisciplinary center for studies in the humanities with particular stress on the visual expression.

2. Matter and memory (matter is memory)

As some of his theoretical annotations scattered throughout his intellectual life – from some early passages of notebooks sketched in the Nineties to the year of his death (1929) – seem to attest, Warburg, according to the general cultural atmosphere of his age, inclined to interpret such cultural image-chains, in the sense of a *biological* heredity, following some post-darwinian German theorists as the physiologist Ewald Hering (1834-1918) and his follower, the zoologist Richard Semon (1859-1918).

The “family-tree”, as a graphic model often adopted by such approaches, immediately and intuitively shows that here we have to do with individual phenomena as long as they are included in a network of relations to other individual phenomena, so that the whole result is to be understood as a social or collective complex.

The issue of the memory of images is therefore inscribed in the more general question of collective and social memory, whose effective existence – together with the existence of a collective and social conscience and unconscious – was taken as a matter of fact and hardly contested within the context of late 19th-early 20th century culture, particularly as regarded the psychological and sociological thought (we could here mention the heterogeneous names of Samuel Butler – who independently developed a theory very close to Hering’s and Semon’s –, of W.B. Yeats, L. Hearn, R.M. Rilke, Moeller van den Bruck, J. Burckhardt, E. Haeckel, A. Forel, B. Russell, E. Mach, S. Freud, C.G. Jung, M. Halbwachs).

In a preparatory passage of the lecture on the Serpent Ritual (1923) Warburg writes: “The instruments of my library should help in answering the problem so well formulated by Hering: ‘Memory as organized matter’”.

What is the meaning of this last sentence? It refers to the title of a famous lecture given by Hering in 1870: *Über das Gedächtnis als eine allgemeine Funktion der organisierten Materie* (On Memory as a General Function of Organized Matter). Hering conceives memory as a fundamental property of reproduction of organic beings. The nervous substance of any organism retains the traces of its experiences and hands them down as an inheritance to the following generations, just as she received in its turn a certain amount of traces from the previous generations. Such process, materially connecting each single organism – from the most elementary animal to man – to an infinite chain of previous and subsequent beings, is both constant and unconscious: “Therefore each organic being is in front of us as a product of the unconscious memory of the organized matter, which steadily increasing and dividing into parts, constantly assimilating new matter and always giving it back to the inorganic world, always assumes something new in its memory, to reproduce it over and over again”.

It is not possible, here, to follow Hering in all the premises and consequences of his theory (regarding in general physiology and neurology in their historical development, in particular the controversial issue of heredity of acquired properties). I will not but underline some points important for Warburg's perspective.

We should consider that Hering explicitly refers to the oral and written literary traditions as to the "memory of humanity" only in a secondary sense, i.e. dependent on the material memory of the nervous substance, which preserves and reproduces not only the most primary and archaic physical needs (like hunger or reproduction, ruled by the so-called *instinct*), but the superior processes of conscience as well, like the conceptualisation in its different degrees, which is certainly not due to the work of the single individual, but rather to the effort of thousands years performed by the brain substance of millions of ancestors: a controversial point in theoretical biology which would have still been shielded from criticism by Freud in his essay on Moses (1934-38).

In this sense, artists seem not to act differently from little chicks. The chick, just got out of the egg, not only demonstrates a remarkable skill in coordinating its movements, but also the perceptive ability to notice the seeds one throws to it, exactly seizing the direction and measuring the distance separating itself from food. In performing such actions, it can base itself certainly not on the "personal" experience it could gain within the egg, but on the experience accumulated by thousands of beings which preceded it and from whom it descends. The simple stimulus of the perception of food on the retina triggers a chain-reproduction of a series of perceptions sensations volitions which are preserved by the memory of the species.

3. Memory and image

Warburg seems to have completed Hering's allusion to the literary tradition on the side of visual culture: Warburg's *iconology* (assumed in the widest sense of a theory of culture from the point of view of a theory of image) appears at the same time as a history of matter reflected in art as in its mirror or image.

If we go back to the example of Manet's chain, it is possible now to include it in the general context of Hering's views, and even to understand why Warburg referred in some cases to the "task of social memory" as to a "mnemonic function" and to the "function of the European collective memory as a force capable to shape styles".

- We could certainly raise the following objection to Hering's theory and especially to Warburg's use of it in a field (humanities) which is not easily reducible to mere laws of nature (the old debate of *Geisteswissenschaften* vs *Naturwissenschaften*!): artists are definitely not chicks, and Marcantonio Raimondi was deliberately looking at Raphael's drawing as at a model, like Raphael himself had possibly looked at Villa Medici's relief as at a prototype: all these are cases of conscious "imitation" or "inspiration" and cannot be reduced to an example of unconscious collective memory. But Hering specifies that, when an animal acts instinctively (that is on the basis of an ancestral memory), it does not simply operate as a blind mechanism, but – rather on the contrary – it performs its actions with consciousness (Hering's perspective of organic life is *monistic*, therefore we would hardly find in his works a qualitative distinction of the human world on one side and the rest of organic world on the other side), knowing how to vary its operative processes corresponding to the changeable circumstances: the single organism is therefore subject to errors and

improvements. The example here sounds Warburghian *ante litteram*: the liberation of the butterfly from its grub (*Verpuppung der Raupe*), that in Warburg would become the grub of Burgundian art which gets rid of the cocoon and transforms itself into Florentinian art.

Moreover, the history of art is rich both of conscious, intentional voluntary resumptions of ancient artistic forms in following periods (for ex. in Ghirlandaio's workshop the conscious use of models extracted from books of archeological drawings), and of unintentional revivals (for ex. in the case of the intellectuals of Reformation, who are somehow compulsively forced to resort to superstitious practices of astrological divination; or in the case of the Pueblo children in New Mexico, in whose drawings the thunderstorm is unintentionally represented through the archaic symbol of the snake-lightning).

- Another objection that could be raised involves the possibility of the new, of the original (a quite recent obsession of the artist, if we consider the whole of art history; still Goethe would define himself nothing else but a “plagiarist”!). It could seem that, if any behaviour of any organism (chick or artist) is determined by the information received via heredity, it could be hardly possible to perform in a brand new way, and art would therefore be the eternal repetition of the identical (a sort of Nietzschean nightmare). Life (*das Leben*) would only literally be a Post-life (we could translate in this restrictive way the famous concept of *Nachleben* used by Warburg to describe the “survival” and “revival” of ancient forms in Renaissance art). As to this point, Hering maintains that certain properties of an individual can be transmitted to the derivated organism (organism-son) without having been inherited by the organism-parent itself, but just acquired in relation to the circumstances in which the organism-parent lived: any organism can therefore bequeath to its successor a “small heredity” added to the “big heredity of the entire species”. This guarantees, in Warburg's perspective, the possibility that each single artist, although connected as an Aristotelian “second substance” (*Cat. 5, 2a13*) to the generations which preceded him or her (an issue which worried two of Warburg's masters, Justi and Burckhardt), might bring to the chain of tradition his or her *novum* gained through his or her individual experiences.

Any personal and individual variation and intervention, nevertheless, operates on the basis of an archaic foundation which is not more singular than plural, and which could not be properly attributed to any personal name (an *anonymous* background, what by the way connects Warburg to Wölfflin's “art history with no names”, *Kunstgeschichte ohne Namen*). Hering's stress on the basic, archaic instinctual needs helps us comprehending some of Warburg's apparently quite odd allusions to a “substrate of an elementary humanity”; to a “comparative research of the eternally unalterable Red Indian living in the desolate human soul”; to the “identity or rather indestructibility of the primitive man, who remains the same in all the ages, so that I could identify him even as an organ of the early Florentine Renaissance, and later of the German Reformation”; finally to a “modern ‘*homo non sapiens*’”.

Art (and more in general culture) is – against every theory of progressive improvement – a constant and also tragic re-elaboration of a past which does not pass.

4. The mnemonic trace

But other problems and objections menace this heredity-theory transposed to the history of figurative culture. According to Hering's perspective, heredity is – as we have

seen – a form of material transmission of nervous substances modified by experience. It is very important to stress the fact that both for Hering and for Warburg the mnemonic or mnestic traces, imprinted on the nervous substance by particularly incisive, strongly energetic and infinitively repeated experiences, are *material* traces. Hering writes: “In our nervous system a material trace (*eine materielle Spur*) is left, a modification of the molecular or atomic structure”.

Therefore Hering can lyrically conclude his conference stating that “the conscious human memory dies out with death, but the unconscious memory of nature is faithful and unextirpable: who succeeds in impressing on it the traces of his own actions, will always be remembered by nature”.

In order to better define from a terminological point of view such material traces Warburg would borrow from one of Ernst Haeckel’s pupils and a follower of Hering, Richard Semon, the concept of *engram*. At the same time, Warburg borrows from him the concept of *Mneme*, a German grecism employed by Semon to refer not simply to individual memory nor to recollection, but rather to the general complex of collective unconscious memory.

The term “engram” is often used by Warburg, and also modified into that of “dynamogram” (*Dynamogramm*): i.e. energetic (*dynamis*) sign (*gramma*), or into that of “symbol-preserve of energy (*Energiekonserve-Symbol*)”: engram, dynamogramm, symbol are equivalent terms in Warburg’s conception used to refer to a moment of accumulation of an energetic charge deriving from a sufficiently intense and often repeated event capable to inscribe itself indelibly in the collective memory as a material track.

What kind of event could be such one? As intense as a traumatic event, belonging to originary archaic pathemic experiences, powerful enough to leave a trace on the nervous substance of our forefathers. Such experiences have possibly to do with moments of powerful religious enthusiasm within archaic human communities, first of all with frenetic and orgiastic dionysiac rituals. Here Warburg thinks the matrix of the engrams should be sought. Here *Phobos* (fear, anguish, angst) acts as an *Ur* (origin), as an originary power appointed to coin the forms. Warburg defines the transmissible patrimony of such traces a “heredity of phobic engrams”.

In his life-long somehow obsessive research, Warburg particularly focused on two emotional moods which according to him (and to his typically very German dualistic and polarized *forma mentis*...) represented the two polar pure extremes of any determined concrete emotion: *mania* and *melancholy*, the first connected with ecstasy, enthusiasm and possibly ritual homicide, the second related to depression, spleen and possibly suicide. From a figurative point of view, he saw such poles epitomized by the two emblematic figures of the ecstatic Nymph and of the depressive fluvial divinity, the River-God. Both are characterized by a certain bodily posture: on one side, noteworthy is the peculiar angle of the nymph’s foot in each of these ecstatic female figures, which obsessed the character of Wilhelm Jensen’s short story *Gradiva*, analysed by Freud and by the Surrealists. On the other side, we can remark the reclining body of the melancholic river-god, which became a *topos* in the representation of such psychophysic atmosphere.

Warburg wrote in his journal: “Sometimes I feel like, in my role of psycho-historian, I have tried to diagnose the schizophrenia of the West through the autobiographical reflex of its images, The ecstatic (maniac) Nymph on one side, the distressed (depressive) fluvial divinity on the other side”. It is also quite remarkable that Warburg

himself was found psychically suffering from that same polar disease, if we trust the diagnosis of his famous psychiatrists Ludwig Binswanger and Ernst Kraepelin.

5. Model as *Vor-Bild*

Let's go back, then, to Manet's chain. If the relation among Manet, Tivoli, Raimondi, Raphael and Villa Medici is actually an engrammatic one, that is based on the heredity of archaic traces, it should be possible, moving from the last derivate image, to re-ascend backwards to the Prime Mover of the chain itself, to the very material origin of it.

Warburg is quite self-confident: Manet's *Déjeuner*, which became famous as a critical point breaking the figurative tradition, relies on the contrary upon "an ancient model (*Vorbild*)" (the hellenistic relief) through an "Italian mediation" (in three main moments: Tivoli, Raimondi, Raphael), and the whole relation of all these figures can be determined "with an exactness such as only seldom was obtained in art-science". The Tivoli-image is even characterised by Warburg as the discovery of a missing link, literally in Goethean terms as an answer to the "postulates of an intermaxillary bone". Just like Goethe thought that the discovery of the *os intermaxillare* in the human osteological system had cancelled the pretension that human beings were different from other primates, Warburg feels that the identification of the Tivoli-image cancels the claim that Manet's *Déjeuner* is separated from the previous tradition.

Because of lack of time, we must now neglect a comparative analysis of the details which could show how actually the images of the chain differ from one another, and focus on the general affinity of them. Let's just rapidly observe that such figurative chain contains both the maniac and the melancholic figure, therefore it can be interpreted as a sort of synopsis of the whole Warburgian research.

We should rather concentrate on the *arché* or 'principle' which is the first starting point of the chain itself: it seems that such primary image is conceived by Warburg ontologically as a real object, and chronologically as a precedent: in other words, we have here to do with an original image, in the sense of a work of art which actually existed in a past time, in "ancient times" (possibly Greek), an image that Renaissance and modern artists could directly see or indirectly grasp through the mediation of other works which quoted it or hinted somehow at it. Such direct or indirect vision is the condition of possibility of imitation, *mimesis*, repetition of the ancient model or type in the new image; in this way the ancient figure survives, is born again, is rediscovered, awakes. In such perspective the "model" is to be understood – according to the German term *Vorbild* – as a *Bild* (image) which stands *vor*, in the double meaning of this prefix, both spatial and temporal: *vor* (in front of) the Renaissance artist's eyes, as an image to be imitated; *vor* (before), preceding him in the linear development of art history.

But the model as a *Vorbild* raises more questions than answers. In more than one occasion, when the characteristics of such original image are to be precisely established and described, Warburg cannot victoriously appeal to that "exactness" boasted in Manet's case. Here are some examples:

a) the Arch of Costantin – a most important source for the books of archaeological drawings used as typological manuals by the artists in Renaissance –, shows reliefs which are fragments of an enormous frieze which "*most likely* celebrated Trajan's victories against the Dacians in a building of which we have *no memory*".

b) the Greek original which inspired the engraving of Mantegna's school used as a model by Dürer to represent *Orpheus' Death* "goes *undoubtedly* back to an ancient

work, now *lost*, representing Orpheus' or *perhaps* Pentheus' death". The unquestionability of the identification of the model contrasts with its absence (it is lost) or with its oscillation (perhaps Orpheus, son of the Thracian king Eagrus and of the Muse Calliope, torn to pieces and beheaded by the Maenads by order of Dionysus; perhaps Pentheus, king of Thebes likewise lacerated by the Maenads and beheaded by his mother Agave).

c) For Antonio Pollaiuolo's David fighting against Goliath, "it seems to me *beyond all doubt* that the model was a figure like the pedagogue of Niobe's daughters". Unfortunately, what seems particularly "ancient" in Pollaiuolo's work - young David's head - could not follow any model, because as Warburg himself recognizes, "the pedagogue was found *without his head*".

d) Problems are to be found even as regards our Manet's chain, apparently the most "exact" reconstruction, although it is based on one of the "ancient stone sarcophagi which, distributed in all Rome as monumental remains even in churches, represent in early Renaissance the main vehicles through which the world of pagan divinities could be physically preserved in modern age" (the physical material trace!). The sarcophagus of Villa Medici, actually, physically "transmitted" its main motives to Raphael's drawing and Raimondi's engraving. But the latter shows a decisive, unfaithful "modification (*Veränderung*)" if compared to the ancient relief, "diverging in this way from the ancient scheme": in Raimondi we do not find Tellus, the Lady of Earth; moreover, the pagan nymph who in the ancient relief stared upwards, in Raimondi gazes at the observer; finally, in the engraving we find a naked woman throwing her clothes behind her back: "On the sarcophagus such motif is *not* present. It has *probably* been elaborated on the model of an ancient statue and transposed" to this modern figure". Once again, the ancient model is missing, is probable, is hypothesized. We can perceive a drift from the "exactness" of the *Vor-Bild* to the mere probability of a not well identified "ancient statue".

Such drift raises serious questions around the issue of the model interpreted as a *Vorbild*, as an *original image*.

6. Original and originary

The uncertainty of the result of an archeological quest hunting the original prime mover of a certain series or chain of images is an ancient problem, very well described (more or less in the same years of Warburg's activity) by Thomas Mann in the prologue of his tetralogy on Joseph and his brothers: "Deep is the well of the past. Shouldn't we call it unfathomable?". In the tetralogy, quite clearly, the historical source is transformed by Mann into a mythical origin, which cannot be neither directly exhibited nor situated in a particular moment of the linear representation of chronological time. Myth never properly happened as a historical event, nonetheless it is active in any historical process, informing it as its condition of possibility: it is the eternity of what never was.

It is very remarkable that an author at whom both Thomas Mann and Warburg, independently, looked as at a master, Goethe, had encountered the same difficulties in his researches of natural science, especially in botanics and osteology. While searching the *Urpflanze* (the original plant) and the *Urwirbel* (the original vertebra) from which all vegetal and osteological phenomena would derive, he understood - at a certain point of his voyage to Italy - that the *Ur*, the origin, was not to be seized as an actual physical phenomenon, the very first one, really existed on earth at the beginning of the world. *Ur*

was rather to be grasped as the immanent origin of any phenomenon, as its invisible condition of possibility, which inhabits the single phenomenon and which makes it possible and real. The *original* plant becomes therefore the *originary* plant: not the most ancient plant ever existed, but the leaf, which, transforming itself through expansion and compression and elongation and shortening becomes all the organs of any plant (both of the ancient and of the present ones, regardless of the historical time of their existence). Such approach was called by Goethe *morphology*, that is a study of the forms (*morphé*) of nature, describing not how the single forms look like, but what makes them possible and recognizable. Adopting a musical metaphor, we could say that the originary form is like a *theme* which is never given in itself, but only in its *variations*.

Such morphological approach, not very successful in Goethe's time (he was notoriously accused of being a naturalistic amateur and not a real scientist), knew a revival in the Twenties of 20th century (much earlier than the theories of the origin as a "secondary-primary" as developed by the post-phenomenologists and post-structuralists *à la* Derrida). We could mention, from very different fields, Th. Mann and T.S. Eliot, Propp and Jolles in the literary theory, Spengler and Frobenius in the philosophy of culture, Husserl, Simmel, Benjamin and Wittgenstein in philosophy, Wölfflin and Warburg himself in the so-called *Kunstwissenschaft*, the science of art.

Warburg early (1907) acknowledged his debt towards Goethe's *Metamorphosis of Plants* (1790), even if he never seemed to deliberately replace the traditional historical model with the morphological model: the two paradigms cohabited in his research, sometimes in a mutual help, sometimes (perhaps more often) in a reciprocal unsolved contrast.

According to such morphological (we could say "typological", as well) model, the relation of images connected by what Wittgenstein would call a "family resemblance" is not to be represented on a chronological line going from the most ancient (never to be determined, as we have seen) to the most recent. Their relation is an equidistant reference to an energetic center, which makes them possible but is never given in itself, as a theme of infinite possible variations.

Art history, in such perspective, could therefore be quite paradoxically defined as a tireless unprecedented repetition (=mnemonic recollection) of something which was never given.

My main concern, in this research, is to try and understand how the theories of the mnemonic material traces, developed by Hering and Semon and used by Warburg to explain the collective memory of the images, relate to the non-material originary forms (in Warburg's terms, the *Formeln*, the formulas) as conditions of possibility of any representation, as suggested by the morphological approach. That is, to try and understand how the *original* relates to the *originary*.