

Details and momentary lapses of reason in Leopardi, Warburg and Freud¹

Examining this paradigm [...] can perhaps help us to go beyond the sterile contrasting of 'rationalism' and 'irrationalism'.

Carlo GINZBURG, *Clues* (1979)

1. The years 2000 witnessed the publication of two anthologies of Sherlock Holmes pastiches, *Shadows Over Baker Street*, edited by Michael Reaves and John Pelan (2003),² and *The Gaslight Grimoire*, edited by J.R. Campbell and Charles Prepolec (2008).³ Both anthologies shared something in common: the detective created by Arthur Conan Doyle was made interact with the world of the supernatural, in the first case with the mythology originated from Howard Phillips Lovecraft's 'Cthulhu Tales', and in the second with typical situations and figures of the Victorian horror fiction. The operation was of course by no means new: in 1978, Loren D. Estleman had for example published the novel *Sherlock Holmes vs. Dracula; or, The Adventures of the Sanguinary Count*. The idea of making Sherlock Holmes cross the sphere of the occult was somehow implicit in the postmodern game of pastiche-making, through which the Victorian detective par excellence could almost naturally interact with the fully Victorian genre of horror tale. Already in the Victorian age Holmes's popularity had actually engendered the idea of fusing the detective-type created by Conan Doyle with the world of the occult, giving thus birth to several 'detectives of the supernatural', among which we can recall E. And H. Heron's Flaxman Low, Algernon Blackwood's John Silence and William Hope Hodgson's Carnacki. In writing the preface to the *Gaslight Grimoire*, however, David Stuart Davies asked himself why these occult emulators of Sherlock Holmes did not work as well, in terms of popularity, as Conan Doyle's creation. The question was even more puzzling if we considered how the coupling could seem, at least at a first glance, almost obvious and natural. Indeed, both detective story and its occult sub-genre originated from late nineteenth-century positivism. And so did modern investigation and 'psychical research', two Victorian inventions that Conan Doyle himself eloquently epitomized: not only did Sherlock Holmes's

¹ This paper forms a necessarily experimental and limited part of a broader research on Leopardi and the problems of grace and the uncanny in post-Enlightenment aesthetics, whose first results have been disseminated in several publications: 'Il passo di Nerina. Memoria, storia e formule di *pathos* nelle *Ricordanze*', *Italianistica*, XXXIX: 2 (2010), pp. 41-66; 'Oblique Gazes. The 'Je ne sais quoi' and the Uncanny as Forms of Undecidability in post-Enlightenment Aesthetics', in *Tension/Spannung*, ed. by Christoph Holzhey (Wien-Berlin: Turia & Kant, 2010), pp. 73-93; 'Voltaire's Verwirrung', in *Phantasmata: Techniken des Unheimlichen*, ed. by Fabio Camilletti, Martin Doll, Rupert Gaderer and Jan Niklas Howe (Wien-Berlin: Turia & Kant, forthcoming 2011).

² Michael Reaves and John Pelan (eds.), *Shadows Over Baker Street: New Tales of Terror!* (New York: Del Rey, 2003).

³ J.R. Campbell and Charles Prepolec (eds.), *The Gaslight Grimoire. Fantastic Tales of Sherlock Holmes* (Calgary: EDGE, 2008).

creator write horror fiction, but actually engaged himself within the Spiritualistic movement, entering the 'Ghost Club' and the 'Society for Psychical Research' and writing such books as *The Coming of the Fairies* (1921) and a *History of Spiritualism* (1926).

My hypothesis is that this discrepancy is rooted in a fissure in terms of paradigm. In 1979, Carlo Ginzburg subsumed Holmes's method within the broader frame of an epistemological model based on 'clues', so to say small details from which a general theory could be deduced (or, to put it in Umberto Eco's terms, guessed through abductive reasoning).⁴ Originally a hunters' knowledge, this 'paradigm' had passed into medical semeiotics, ultimately reverberating in modern (namely, post-Enlightenment) art-history and philology, as well as in psychoanalysis and detective fiction. My hypothesis is that ghost-hunting is based on a radically different paradigm. According to nineteenth- and twentieth-century ghost-hunters (from Harry Price to Elliott O'Donnell), investigating a haunting requires an empathic relationship with the 'scene', thus not grounding detection in rational inquiry but rather in a momentary abdication of reason, or even in an altered state of consciousness. Instead of analyzing alterity from an external point of view, the ghost-hunter must accept to be 'haunted' by the very same alterity in order to acquire knowledge. This paradigmatic fissure enacts a clash when the two spheres of a clue-based paradigm of analysis and a haunting-based one are made to interact, as it is the case of Sherlock Holmes's occult emulators. This clash may result in a failure in literary and narratological terms, engendering a feeling of disease as it happens with Estleman's *Sherlock Holmes vs. Dracula* or with Blackwood's John Silence stories: Holmes's quick acceptance of the actual existence of vampires clashes with the character's usual behaviour that must necessarily be consistent in order to get a postmodern reader's pleasure of the pastiche, in the same way as John Silence's Holmes-like investigating techniques dissolve the enjoyment connected with the feeling of the uncanny that should be part of the genre he is inserted in.

This 'paradigm' is not limited to ghost-hunting, but appears coexistent alongside Ginzburg's model of clues, even within the same disciplinary domains. In this paper, which is meant to be a first and necessarily experimental attempt in the definition of a 'haunting' epistemological model, I analyze how the role of 'detail' – as a fragment 'alienat[ed] by force from its [...] context', thus engendering 'an alienating power that constitutes its unmistakable aggressive force' (Agamben)⁵ – can be reassessed and problematized by comparing some isolated and crucial experiences of modern culture such as those of Giacomo Leopardi, Aby Warburg and Sigmund Freud, shedding new light on philology, art history and psychoanalysis respectively as discursive practices and forms of knowledge.

2. In 1818 Leopardi undertakes a recognition of the Italian lyrical tradition, through the close analysis of a set of 'canzoni' by Petrarch, Fulvio Testi, Vincenzo Filicaja, Gabriello Chiabrera,

⁴ Cf. Carlo Ginzburg, 'Morelli, Freud and Sherlock Holmes: Clues and Scientific Method', *History Workshop Journal* 9: 1 (1980), pp. 5-36 and Umberto Eco, 'Horns, Hooves, Insteps: Some Hypothesis on Three Types of Abduction', in Umberto Eco and Thomas A. Sebeok (eds.), *The Sign of three : Dupin, Holmes, Peirce* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1983), pp. 198-220.

⁵ Giorgio Agamben, 'The Melancholy Angel', in Id., *The Man Without Content*, transl. by Georgia Albert (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), pp. 104-115, p. 104.

Alessandro Guidi, Giambattista Felice Zappi and Eustachio Manfredi. The analysis is carefully documented in Leopardi's intellectual journal, the *Zibaldone*, from pages 23 to 28, and is strictly interwoven with his concurrent aesthetical reflection. Leopardi's reading is systematic, and his criterion follows a homogeneous structure: after having read each author, Leopardi sketches a brief note in the *Zibaldone*, generally dissecting the author's oeuvre from the points of view of 'eloquenza', of 'immagini' and of 'sentenzie', sometimes accompanying his judgements with quotations. This partition is arguably derived from the pseudo-Longinus's treatise on the *Sublime*, that Leopardi presumably read in Jean Toup's bilingual edition published in Oxford in 1778.⁶ In this text, the sources of sublime eloquence ('fontes [...] fœcundissimi Sublimitatis') were retraced in the 'facultas dicendi', in the 'felix in sensibus audacia', in the 'vehemens et quasi numinis afflatus conceptus Affectus', in 'certa quædam figurarum conformatio', in the 'splendida Elocutio' and in 'magnifica elataque Compositio'.⁷ In other words, Leopardi's dissection of the Italian lyrical canon follows the categories of classical rhetoric in an almost strict way, generally adhering to the partition established in the treatise on *The Sublime*. While analysing Zappi's poetry, however, Leopardi seems to find these categories insufficient. The discovery of Zappi emerges as an alterity in Leopardi's research, immediately described as a happy surprise. Zappi's miniature taste, as expressed in his love sonnets, allows Leopardi to go beyond the claimed judgement pronounced by Baretti, who had blamed Zappi as an author of 'smascolinati sonettini, pargoletti piccinini, mollemente femminini, tutti pieni d'amorini'.⁸

Io solea dire ch'era una follia il credere e scrivere che ci fosse o in Italia o altrove qualche poeta che somigliasse ad Anacreonte. Ma leggendo il Zappi trovo in lui veramente i semi di un Anacreonte, e al tutto Anacreontica l'invenzione e in parte anche lo stile dei Sonetti 24.34.41, e dello scherzo: *il Museo d'Amore*. Anche le altre sue poesie sono lodevoli non poco per novità de' pensieri (giacchè non c'è quasi componimento suo dove non si veda qualche lampo di bella novità) con dignitoso garbo e composta vivacità e certa leggiadria propria di lui (così anche il Rubbi) per la quale si può chiamare originale, benchè di piccola originalità. I Sonetti Amorosì ed hanno le doti sopraddette, e qual più qual meno s'accostano all'Anacreontico (*Zib.* 28)

What does Leopardi mean by the adjective 'Anacreontico'? As Franco D'Intino highlighted, Anacreon is constantly mentioned by Leopardi as a paragon of untranslatability.⁹ Anacreon's poetry is characterized by a first impression of simplicity that hides a subterranean and unperceivable complexity ('quella semplicità [...] di Anacreonte che pare il non plus ultra, e vedete se vi pare che si possa pur chiamare semplicità', *Zib.* 20). This untranslatability seems to

⁶ *Dionysius Longinus*, ed. by Jean Toup (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1778). On the identification of Leopardi's source with Toup's edition, rather than to Gori's Italian translation, I agree with Gaetano, *Giacomo Leopardi e il sublime* (Soveria Mannelli: Rubbettino, 2002), pp. 111-16. See p. 111n. for an exhaustive profile of Toup's philological activity.

⁷ I quote from the third edition, *Dionysii Longini quæ supersunt*, ed. by Jean Toup and David Ruhnken (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1806), pp. 63-64.

⁸ Quoted in Alessandro D'Ancona and Orazio Bacci, *Manuale della letteratura italiana* (Florence: Barbèra, 1906), p. 369.

⁹ Franco D'Intino, 'Il gusto dell'altro. La traduzione come esperienza straniera in Leopardi', in *Hospes. Il volto dello straniero da Leopardi a Jabès*, edited by Alberto Folini (Venice: Marsilio, 2003), pp. 147-58.

reverberate onto the experience itself of reading. Anacreon's reader experiences an instantaneous and fleeting loss of control, which eludes every later attempt to dissect the experienced feeling and which makes impossible to frame it within the 'semiotica del testo' *ante litteram* of Longinus's categories.¹⁰ This obliges Leopardi to abandon his usual categories of analysis, and to try describing the 'Anacreontic' experience through a complex metaphor:

Io per esprimere l'effetto indefinibile che fanno in noi le odi di Anacreonte non so trovare similitudine ed esempio più adattato di un alito passeggero di venticello fresco nell'estate odorifero e ricreante, che tutto in un momento vi ristora in certo modo e v'apre come il respiro e il cuore con una certa allegria, ma prima che voi possiate appagarvi pienamente di quel piacere, ovvero analizzarne la qualità, e distinguere perchè vi sentiate così refrigerato già quello spiro è passato, conforme appunto avviene in Anacreonte, che e quella sensazione indefinibile è quasi istantanea, e se volete analizzarla vi sfugge, non la sentite più, tornate a leggere, vi restano in mano le parole sole e secche, quell'arietta per così dire, è fuggita, e appena vi potete ricordare in confuso la sensazione che v'hanno prodotta un momento fa quelle stesse parole che avete sotto gli occhi. Questa sensazione mi è parso di sentirla, leggendo (oltre Anacreonte) il solo Zappi. (*Zib.* 30-31)

Several years later, and always speaking of Anacreon, Leopardi recurs to the same image:

questa sensazione lascia gran desiderio e scontentezza, e si vorrebbe richiamarla e non si può; così la lettura di Anacreonte; la quale lascia desiderosissimi, ma rinnovando la lettura, come per perfezionare il piacere (ch'egli par veramente bisognoso d'esser perfezionato, anche più che ispirar desiderio d'esser continuato), niun piacere si prova, anzi non si vede nè che cosa l'abbia prodotto da principio, nè che ragion ve ne possa essere, nè in che cosa esso sia consistito; e più si cerca, più s'esamina, più s'approfonda, men si trova e si scopre, anzi si perde di vista non pur la causa, ma la qualità stessa del piacer provato, chè volendo rimembrarlo, la memoria si confonde; e in somma pensando e cercando, sempre più si diviene incapaci di provar piacere alcuno di quelle odi, e risentirne quell'effetto che se n'è sentito; ed esse sempre più divengono quasi stoppa e s'inaridiscono e istecchiscono fra le mani che le tastano e palpano per ispecularle. (*Zib.* 3441-42, 16 September 1823)

In stating the 'indefinable' pleasure caused by Anacreon as an 'aura', Leopardi defines then an effect of poetry grounded in an impalpability, in an uncertainty that cannot be framed (and certainly not systematized) within the categories of classical rhetoric, neither within the formulas of the sublime retraced in Longinus's treatise.

3. In describing the 'Anacreontic' experience of reading, Leopardi employs therefore the articulated simile ('similitudine', 'esempio') of a fleeting breeze. In parallel, he recurs to a set of rhetorical devices aimed at rendering the ineffable nature of the phenomenon that he is trying to describe: negation ('indefinibile', 'non so trovare'); adverbial or adjectival locutions denoting the approximation of the evoked concepts ('in certo modo', 'v'apre come il respiro', 'una certa allegria', 'quasi istantanea', 'quell'arietta per così dire, è fuggita', 'appena vi potete ricordare in

¹⁰ Umberto Eco, 'Sullo stile', in Id., *Sulla letteratura* (Milan: Bompiani, 2004), pp. 172-90, pp. 189-90.

confuso, ‘come per perfezionare il piacere’, ‘quasi stoppa’); asyndeton in syntax, aimed at rendering the instantaneous sequence of fleeting enthusiasm and emptiness (‘quella sensazione indefinibile è quasi istantanea, e se volete analizzarla vi sfugge, non la sentite più, tornate a leggere, vi restano in mano le parole sole e secche, quell’arietta per così dire, è fuggita’); climax and anticlimax (‘più si cerca, più s’esamina, più s’approfonda, men si trova e si scopre, anzi si perde di vista non pur la causa, ma la qualità stessa del piacer provato’). In other words, a figurative language is aimed at rendering what appears as a peculiarly extra-verbal (namely, speaking from an etymological perspective, *extra-logical*) experience: the textual analysis attempted in the *Zibaldone* cannot avoid, while considering Anacreon (and Zappi), being trapped within a necessarily figurative (and therefore a-philological and a-scientific) language. Rational and philological analysis cannot help but concerning the ‘parole sole e secche’, which ‘sempre più divengono quasi stoppa e s’inaridiscono e istecchiscono fra le mani che le tastano e palpano per ispecularle’: the inquiry into the nature of the ‘arietta’ must therefore proceed through a different paradigm, adopting different analytical tools.

The simile itself of the breeze is eloquent. In the course of his studies on Florentine Renaissance, the German art historian Aby Warburg precisely identified the haunting ‘survival of antiquity’ (*Nachleben der Antike*) in the ‘imaginary breeze’ that animated what he called the ‘accessories in motion’ (*bewegtes Beiwerk*) of painted figures, as clothes and locks of hair. For Warburg, the breeze is therefore the visible embodiment of a foreign alterity intruding in the



space of the *imago*. This is precisely what happens in Ghirlandaio’s frescoes in Santa Maria Novella, where Warburg identifies a resurfacing of antiquity in a walking feminine figure that he calls the ‘Nymph’. Ghirlandaio’s ‘Nymph’ moves from the right side of the fresco, while her clothes are moved by an invisible breeze: her light movement clashes with the fixedness of other figures, announcing the eruption of an antique grace within the still medieval frame of the Christian painting.

What is most important, however, is that the description of the nymph’s haunting appearance is not destined by Warburg to his academic and ‘scientific’ writings, but rather to a singular narrative experiment conceived together with his friend André Jolles. In 1900, Warburg and Jolles give birth to a fictive exchange of letters in which Jolles pretends having fallen in love with the ‘nymph’:

Behind them, close to the open door, there runs – no, that is not the word, there flies, or rather there hovers – the object of my dreams, which slowly assumes the proportions of a charming nightmare. A fantastic figure – shall I call her a servant girl, or rather a classical nymph? – enters the room... [...] This lively, light-footed and rapid gait, this irresistible energy, this striding step (*Diese lebendig leichte, aber so höchst bewegte Weise zu gehen; diese energische Unaufhaltsamskeit, diese Länge vom Schritt*), which contrasts with the aloof distance of all the other figures, what is the

meaning of it all?... It sometimes looks to me as if the servant girl rushed with winged foot through the clear ether instead of running on the real ground...(mit beflügelten Füßen den hellen Äther durchschnellt).¹¹

It seems that the haunting power of the 'nymph' cannot be described but by means of a figurative language, employing such devices as climax ('there runs – no, that is not the word, there flies, or rather there hovers'), oxymoron ('charming nightmare'), indefiniteness in description ('A fantastic figure – shall I call her a servant girl, or rather a classical nymph?'), asyndeton ('This lively, light-footed and rapid gait, this irresistible energy, this striding step') and rhetorical question. Here too language attempts at grasping what, again, looks like an eminently extra-verbal experience, in belonging to the domain of the *imago*: the charming and uncanny nature of the image can only be expressed by means of a language forcing its own limits, trying to convey the ineffable experience through a complex game of rhetorical devices.

The figure of the nymph seems therefore to be the inaugural apparition that reassesses the borders of time, allowing a reconfiguration of the 'survival of antiquity' within the space of the image as a theoretical problem, and to reassess the role of art history as a disciplinary discourse. Analogously, as Georges Didi-Huberman highlights, the concurrent discovery of a 'science of the soul' between Paris and Vienna, in the very same years, presupposes an uncanny and troubling image of femininity, whose movement acts and is interpreted as a signifier: the symptoms of hysterical women at the Salpêtrière become, to the young Sigmund Freud's eyes, the visible embodiments of another kind of 'antiquity' (belonging, in this case, to the history of the subject) and allowing the intuition of the space later to be called the 'unconscious'.¹² Quite interestingly, Freud's main problem, in disseminating the results of his research, is since the beginning the one of language and of the form that his scientific writings must assume. Freud is definitely aware that, unlike other kinds of 'scientific' works, psychoanalytical writings tend to assume a literary shape: already in the *Studies on Hysteria*, published in 1895 and written in collaboration with Joseph Breuer, Freud states that

it still strikes me myself as strange that the case histories I write should read like short stories and that, as one might say, they lack the serious stamp of science. I must console myself with the reflection that the nature of my subject is evidently responsible for this, rather than any preference of my own.¹³

¹¹ Quoted in Ernst Gombrich, *Aby Warburg: An Intellectual Biography* (Oxford: Phaidon, 1986), pp. 107-08.

¹² Georges Didi-Huberman, *Ninfa Moderna. Saggio sul pannello caduto*, transl. by Aurelio Pino (Milan: Il Saggiatore, 2004), p. 11: 'È noto che perché nasca qualcosa che possa definirsi moderna "scienza dell'anima", occorre che Freud, nel 1885, veda levarsi le isteriche in crisi nel teatro anatomico di Charcot, alla Salpêtrière. [...] In modo analogo, perché nasca qualcosa che possa definirsi moderna "scienza delle immagini", occorrerà un'apparizione che con la stessa forza sappia rovesciare un'altra forma di sapere scolastico: la storia dell'arte'. On the connection Warburg-Freud cf. also Georges Didi-Huberman, *L'immagine survivante. Histoire de l'art et temps des fantômes selon Aby Warburg* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 2002), pp. 273-334. On the iconography of the Salpêtrière cf. Georges Didi-Huberman, *Invention of Hysteria: Charcot and the Photographic Iconography of the Salpêtrière*, transl. by Alisa Hartz (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003).

¹³ Sigmund Freud, *Standard Edition*, ed. by James Strachey, 24 vols (London: The Hogarth Press 1953-74), vol. II, p. 160.

The 'nature of the subject' corresponds, as *The Interpretation of Dreams* will acknowledge, to the structure of the unconscious, which eschews the categories of diurnal logic (as the principle of non-contradiction) and forces therefore the limits of language when one tries to let the unconscious speak. The re-transcription of the extra-verbal dimension of the unconscious within diurnal speech must therefore enact a negotiation, which results in a necessarily figurative language (*Bildersprache*): slips of tongue, parapraxes or Freudian negations are as many as rhetorical devices through which the unconscious alludes, always skirting but never directly grasping it, to the repressed. Analogously, the discourse aiming at analysing the unconscious cannot but reduplicate this *impasse*. Echoing his very same considerations of 1895, in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) Freud will finally acknowledge 'la necessaria improprietà dei concetti e del linguaggio di cui si serve: una *Bildersprache*, che proprio per questo non può rispecchiare l'oggettività delle cose, ma che, nello stesso tempo, non può fare del tutto a meno di crederci, di cadere nell'autoinganno, di dimenticare l'elemento di finzione'.¹⁴

In Leopardi, Warburg and Freud, therefore, the analysis of an 'alterity' suddenly erupting from a beyond – be it the charming grace of Anacreon's poetry, the uncanny otherness of the surviving antiquity or the manifestation of the unconscious – seems to require, rather than rational inquiry, an acceptance of that very same alterity, reverberating in an acknowledgment of the limits of language and in the recourse to a richer and rhetorically gravid form of discourse. The analyser's discourse, in other words, accepts to be haunted by the very same alterity that it is trying to investigate: analysis requires an empathic relationship with its object, thus dissolving the borders between subject and object of the investigation.

4. In 1821, while discussing the problems of elegance and grace/charm ('grazia') in writing, Leopardi notes that

Se osserveremo bene in che cosa consista l'eleganza delle scritture, l'eleganza di una parola, di un modo ec., vedremo ch'ella sempre consiste in un piccolo irregolare, o in un piccolo straordinario o nuovo, che non distrugge punto il regolare e il conveniente dello stile o della lingua, anzi gli dà risalto, e risalta esso stesso; e ci sorprende che risaltando, ed essendo non ordinario, o fuor della regola, non disconvenga; e questa sorpresa cagiona il piacere e il senso dell'eleganza e della grazia delle scritture. (*Zib.* 1323, 14 July 1821)

The space of grace is hence that of detail: the acknowledgment of grace requires a specific attention, a philology of the infinitesimal that could be able to retrace such imperceptible effect, constantly situated on the border between 'beauty' and 'affectation'. 'La grazia' writes Leopardi on 17 July 1821, 'deriva dallo straordinario [...], che quando è troppo, per un verso o per un altro, cagiona l'effetto opposto': still, 'e l'inusitato è pur l'*unica* fonte dell'eleganza' (*Zib.* 1336). 'Il grazioso deriv[a] dallo straordinario, cioè da quello ch'è fuor dell'ordine *sino a un certo punto*' (*Zib.* 1327, emphasis mine); on 17 October 1821, Leopardi will situate poetic elegance in 'quelle proprietà, quelle facoltà, modi, forme, metafore, usi di parole o di locuzioni, che si allontanano dal

¹⁴ Graziella Berto, *Freud, Heidegger Lo spaesamento* (Milan: Bompiani, 1999), p. 4.

costume e dalla natura della nostra lingua, senza però [...] discostarsene di troppo', thereby engendering a 'straordinario *fino a un certo segno*, e in modo ch'egli faccia colpo senza *choquer* le nostre assuefazioni' (*Zib.* 1937, my italics). The 'certo punto' and 'certo segno' show the peculiar indeterminateness of the aesthetic category that Leopardi is trying to evoke, constantly tended between the familiar *heimlichkeit* of language and the troubling *unheimlichkeit* of the unexpected 'straordinario'. The detail determining the effect of 'grazia' is therefore a bipolar and multistable sign, determining an imperceptible game of defamiliarization, which obliges the philologist-poet to an incessant analysis of those linguist units that determine the effect of poetry, which is always grounded in the feeling of the undetermined.

Throughout the *Zibaldone*, Leopardi undertakes a systematic registration of what he calls 'parole [...] poeticissime', as those connoting vastity, either spatial, temporal or of feeling ('irrevocabile, irremeabile', *Zib.* 1534; 'notte notturno [...] oscurità, profondo', 1798; 'Posterì, posterità, [...] futuro, passato, eterno, lungo in fatto di tempo, morte, mortale, immortale', 1930; 'finito, ultimo ec.', 2251; 'Antichi, antico, antichità; posterì, posterità', 2263; 'Alto, altezza', 2350; 'ermo, eremo, romito, hermite, hermitage, hermita [...] lo spagnuolo ermo, ed ermar (con ermador ec.) che significa *desolare, vastare*, appunto come il greco *éremos*. [...] la deserta notte, e tali immagini di *solitudine, silenzio ec.*', 2629). The poetic effect is minutiously retraced in small details of analysed texts:

Le parole *lontano, antico*, e simili sono poeticissime e piacevoli, perchè destano idee vaste, e indefinite, e non determinabili e confuse. Così in quella divina stanza dell'Ariosto (l. 65.)

Quale stordito e stupido aratore,
Poi ch'è passato il fulmine, si leva
Di là dove l'altissimo fragore
Presso a gli uccisi buoi steso l'aveva,
Che mira senza fronde e senza onore
Il pin che *di lontan* veder *soleva*;
Tal si levò il Pagano a piè rimaso,
Angelica presente al duro caso.

Dove l'effetto delle parole *di lontan* si unisce a quello del *soleva*, parola di significato egualmente vasto per la copia delle rimembranze che contiene. Togliete queste due parole ed idee; l'effetto di quel verso si perde, e si scema se togliete l'una delle due. (*Zib.* 1789, 25 September 1821.)

Le parole che indicano moltitudine, copia, grandezza, lunghezza, larghezza, altezza, vastità ec. ec. sia in estensione, o in forza, intensità ec. ec. sono pure poeticissime, e così le immagini corrispondenti. Come nel Petrarca

Te solo aspetto, e quel che *tanto* AMASTI,
E laggioso è rimasto, il mio bel velo.
E in Ippolito Pindemonte
Fermossi alfine il cor che BALZÒ *tanto*.

Dove notate che il *tanto* essendo indefinito, fa maggiore effetto che non farebbe *molto, moltissimo eccessivamente, sommamente*. Così pure le parole e le idee *ultimo, mai più, l'ultima volta ec. ec.* sono di grand'effetto poetico, per l'infinità. ecc. (*Zib.* 1825-26)

This operation aims at producing in Italian an effect that was common in Latin, a language that

ha [...] moltissime frasi ec. che per la stessa natura loro, e del linguaggio latino, sono di significato così vago, che a determinarlo, e renderlo preciso non basta qualsivoglia scienza di latino, e non avrebbe bastato l'esser nato latino, perocch'elle son vaghe per se medesime, e quella tal frase e la vaghezza della significazione sono per essenza loro inseparabili, nè quella può sussistere senza questa. (*Zib.* 2288-89, 26 December)

The assumption is supported by a passage from *Georgics*, in which the Latin ablative determines an irreducible undecidability on the level of signification: we cannot know, Leopardi writes, if the expression 'Zephyro' means 'al zefiro, per lo zefiro, col zefiro ec.'. 'Zephyro' is therefore an isotopy of the kind defined by Eco as 'isotopia narrativa non vincolata a disgiunzioni isotopiche discorsive che generano in ogni caso storie complementari': all senses are included in the expression, and the 'isotopie [...] si rafforzano a vicenda' which, for Leopardi, is precisely the effect of poetry.¹⁵

It seems therefore as if the poetic effect was grounded in a bi- – or even a multi- – polarity of the detail-signifier, embodying a set of tensions without resolving them and consequently resulting in a 'vague' undecidability. Intrinsically alien to whatsoever poetic mysticism, Leopardi grounds the poetic effect outside the sphere of the rational, as far as diurnal rationality requires a strict correspondence between signifier and signified, and the strong adherence of semiotic codes to the principle of non-contradiction: through the interaction of philological, linguistic and rhetoric analyses, Leopardi's aim is to understand 'what poets have long known by the name of suggestion or evocation', and which is 'the constitutive ambiguity of the poetic (literary) message'.¹⁶

In other words, the detail-linguistic unit acts, in Leopardi, as a *Pathosformel*, which is equally constructed – in Warburg's thought – as an undecidable bipolarity:

L'image – parce que réglée sur les pouvoirs de l'inconscient – se joue des contradictions logiques: il semble bien que Warburg n'ait pas eu besoin de la théorie freudienne pour observer chaque jour cette inquiétante labilité du materia qu'interroge l'historien de l'art. Il lui a suffi d'un 'regard embrassant' sur les traditions littéraires et les déplacements iconographiques de la 'nymphé': ne fût-ce qu'à constituer son archive, il se trouvait de plain-pied dans ce que, plus tard, Georges Dumézil devait appeler 'l'ampleur et l'imprécision des *nymphai*'. Mortelle *et* immortelle, endormie *et* dansante, possédé *et* possédante, secrète *et* ouverte, chaste *et* provocante, violée *et* nymphomane, secourable *et* fatale, protectrice de héros *et* ravisseuse d'hommes, être de la douceur *et* être de la hantise, *Ninfa* assure bien la fonction structurale d'un *opérateur de conversion* entre des valeurs antithétiques qu'elle 'polarise' et 'dépolarse' alternativement, selon la singularité de chaque incarnation.¹⁷

¹⁵ Eco, *Lector in fabula*, p. 100.

¹⁶ Roland Barthes, *Criticism and Truth*, transl. by Katrine Pilcher Keuneman (London: Continuum, 2004), p. 27.

¹⁷ Didi-Huberman, *L'image survivante*, p. 348.

Warburg's *Pathosformel* is, as Didi-Huberman, again, highlights, an 'image-symptom': the Freudian symptom, individuated and isolated by the observer's gaze, embodies the underlying and unconscious tension in a multistable symbolization, in the very same way as the *Pathosformel* epitomizes a (binary or multiple) opposition without resolving it.

In Leopardi, Warburg and Freud we witness therefore an attention to the detail that does not (only) lead to the abductive reconstruction of a more general frame, according to Ginzburg's paradigm of clues. This aspect is of course present in all the three of them: if Warburg's and Freud's application of the 'inditiary paradigm' has been closely examined by Ginzburg himself, Sebastiano Timpanaro's studies on Leopardi's philology have shown how Leopardi's textual conjectures have often proved to be right, which makes Leopardi one of the most important philologists of the European nineteenth century.¹⁸ Still, the role of detail in their work seems to open other possibilities of reading, insofar as the detail is often constructed as a space of tension, eschewing the principles of diurnal logic, and whose analysis is therefore not demanded to diurnal rationality, but rather in an empathic 'tuning' of the observer with its object of observation. This deterioration of the sign relation between detail and its undecidable meaning projects modern 'thinking through details' onto the 'irrationalist' acknowledgment of an irreducible ambiguity of knowledge, which requires the subject to momentarily abdicate to reason in order to grasp his object of analysis. As Leopardi writes in 1823, echoing the simile he had already employed for describing the effects of Anacreon's poetry, only a few people perceive a certain kind of grace, characterized by a peculiar 'indefinibilità' and 'inconcipiabilità', which is

quasi un soave e delicatissimo odore di gelsomino o di rosa, che nulla ha di acuto nè di mordente, o quasi uno spiro di vento che vi reca una fragranza improvvisa, la quale sparisce appena avete avuto il tempo di sentirla, e vi lascia con desiderio, ma vano, di tornarla a sentire, e lungamente, e saziarvene. (*Zib.* 3178-79, 16 August 1823)

Leopardi's 'most poetic words' that are able to create this 'fragranza improvvisa', Warburg's *Pathosformeln* and Freud's symptoms reveal themselves as multistable figures, respectively reassessing philology, art history and psychoanalysis as specific discursive practices; and dissolving the borders between 'scientific' and 'narrative' languages, between subject and object of observation, and ultimately between an abstract ideal of 'asepticity' in style and an analysis that cannot help but being another, interminable, form of writing.

Hence the peculiar choices of the three of them in giving a final shape to their theoretical reflection. Leopardi's ultimate answer is the paradoxical interweavement of philological density and aerial levity of his later poetry: not by chance, in September 1829 – while he is composing the second of the so-called 'canti pisano-recanatesi', 'Le Ricordanze' – the theoretical reflection developed in the *Zibaldone* ceases, with the exception of three more pages drafted between 1830 and 1832. In other words, the poetic discourse becomes the outcome and the space itself of the reflection, in which the poetic subject speaks – at the same time – *through* poetry and *about* poetry. In the same way, Warburg's project of the *Bilderatlas Mnemosyne* can be seen as a way of speaking through images about images, as well as the psychoanalytical discourse finds, in Freud's

¹⁸ I refer here to Sebastiano Timpanaro, *La filologia di Giacomo Leopardi* (Bari: Laterza, 1997).

latest elaboration, its inmost nature (and *échec*) in an unavoidably 'interminable analysis', a discursive embroidery whose outcome is not anymore the 'cure', but rather an indefinite production of discourse.

This process can be seen as a *haunting*, through which the explored alterity (the charming grace of certain poetry, the 'charming nightmare' of certain images, the eruptions of the unconscious in diurnal life) *haunts back* the analyst's writing. To speak of 'haunting' is surely a metaphorical choice, but not only. Probably not by chance, in 1929 Warburg spoke of his 'science without name' as of a 'ghost-story for adults' (*Gespensstergeschichte für ganz Erwachsene*);¹⁹ ten years before, in his essay on *The Uncanny*, Freud had equally stated the kinship of his new scientific discourse with the world of the occult by writing that he would not be surprised 'to hear that psychoanalysis, which seeks to uncover [...] secret forces, [has] for this reason itself come to seem uncanny to many people'.²⁰ Rather than a clue revealing a wider frame to the rational mind, the haunting detail 'uncover[s] [...] secret forces', fading back onto the analyst's gaze.²¹

¹⁹ Aby Warburg, *Mnemosyne. Grundbegriffe, II* (2 July 1929), London, Warburg Institute Archive.

²⁰ Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny*, ed. by David McLintock and Hugh Haughton (London: Penguin, 2003), p. 150.

²¹ Going quickly back to the narratological problem of the occult emulators of Sherlock Holmes, we may therefore say that the best experiments in this directions are those cases in which the 'detectives of the occult' do not adopt the epistemological paradigm based on clues, but move rather within a 'paradigm of haunting', as it happens with Tiziano Scavi's *Dylan Dog*, a series in which the main assumption is the transience of the borders between the natural and the supernatural world ('maybe, for monsters, we are the monsters'). We can equally consider intrusions of the 'paradigm of haunting' within traditional detective fiction: Thomas Harris's detective Will Graham (*Red Dragon*, 1981) does not follow an inditiary paradigm in his investigations, but rather seeks for an empathic relationship with the crime scene, through which he 'tunes' his own mind with the killer's; Fred Vargas's police chief Jean-Baptiste Adamsberg proceeds through 'intuition', leaving his mind connecting apparently disconnected details. In this case, an inditiary paradigm is maybe at stake, but what is important is that it requires a momentary abdication of reason, letting the intuition come to the rational mind as an unexpected flash.