Signum triciput: art, idea, history

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Panofsky, Erwin. *Hercule à la croisée des chemins et autres matériaux figuratifs de l'Antiquité dans l'art plus récent*, Paris : Flammarion, 1999

- 1 The translation of Erwin Panofsky's book, published in Leipzig in 1930, and reissued in Berlin in 1987, entails an outlook that has certainly been introduced as a basic factor for reassessing the way iconography is accepted in France--and above all the Germany of Panofsky and all those who, together with him, made his oeuvre possible. The discovery of the challenges of this kind of analysis is a gradual process. The undertaking was embarked upon in 1967 with the *Essays in Iconology* published in New York in 1939. Bernard Teyssèdre made the point about the possible oddity, for a French mind, attaching to a combination of Warburg's historical method and Cassirer's philosophy of symbolic forms. He emphasized the scope of an intellectual history split between Hamburg and Princeton by underscoring the fact that the historian's primary task is to think. Involved here was the introduction of Panofsky into the human sciences, just when his work, on which the experts were far from turning their backs, was being subjected to marked omissions. The death of Robert Klein occurred at this precise moment. According to the introduction writer, the shift to English would have made it possible to «rethink» and even «demystify» a certain vagueness resulting from a kind of false Germanic «depth». Danièle Cohn does not espouse the same approach: not only does she incite the reader to «venture» into this Germany of theory, destroyed and corrupted in the manner familiar to us all, but, in a note that might have been better developed in her helpful preface, she pays tribute to Panofsky's language. This is stated or re-stated in a relationship to be established with language, institution, and today's rhetoric, but also for the history of Panofsky and the *Geisteswissenschaften*. In 1966, Panofsky questioned the term borrowed

from Cesare Ripa, and eventually suggested, forty years later, that he would be happy if it was to be refashioned from the term: iconography, promoted, as a result of his endeavours, to the level of a science of interpretation. Thirty years later, there is cause to wonder whether the distinctness of origins does not once more become a necessity, if only to relaunch what we call an interpretation and «science». Not so much a result as something aimed at. In any event, a resumption and a connection, with their point of balance at issue.

- 2 As an object, the book is interesting for its asymmetry, its development and its logic. It consists of two studies, one on the theme of the *Signum tripit*, the other on Hercules Prodicus. Their purpose: to establish the correlation between a textual tradition and an image-related tradition with regard to figurative types that only emerged in the 15th century. The viewpoint is not, strictly speaking, one of historical evolution. It focuses rather on the notion of «figurative materials» and the way they are re-worked, the book's subtitle being in a way the key to the interpretative system. The foreword is written as an enlightened plea for iconographic research. In it, Panofsky demonstrates that works do not issue from existing models but from constructions by analogy, which question and enliven the past. The author has little trouble in showing the inanity of a disjointedness between form and «exegesis of content». The argument is more complicated than it might seem, insofar as there is an exploration of the limits of this «added knowledge», which he also calls a «secondary» stratum. It was easy for him to speak out against the «anti-historical interference» which consists, in terms of relative knowledge, in deciding between «essential» and «non-essential» contents: « Cultured people of bygone times (which would often include great artists) not only thought differently, but also knew and read different things than those that present-day cultured people know and read. » The surest explanations are those not straightaway thought about. What seems «natural» and «psychologically understandable» has little chance of being able to lay claim to accuracy. There would be nothing to say about this if the author had not in a way given himself away. The issue is one of classical culture or, rather, the relationship between experience of the present and an «historical understanding» of the past. The example of Renoir's *Peaches* suggests the mistake implicit in introducing an allegorical reading. Panofsky does not sense the transformation of his own system. What Meyer Schapiro did a little later with Cézanne. In a more general sense, he has a restrictive conception of the uncultured man and thereby the cultured man. It is the dimension of his enlightenment to which he is blind. He failed to see that the artists of his day produced very exactly what he observed in Dürer. For the author of *Idea*, it was certainly not possible to see that Max Ernst and Schwitters were playing with daring behind his back, and that he was not alone, along with Saxl and Klibansky, in understanding *Melancolia*. But here we are entering the abandoned sanctum of iconology.
- 3 With *Ombres et lumières*, we are a long way from the humanist density summed up by the feeling of «melancholic pride» of the elderly citizen of Hanover. Michael Baxandall presents his book as the product of work in progress on the «problems of visual attentiveness» in the 18th century, in modern thought and in the art of painting. Shadow is part of this notion, which is introduced as nebulous and tentacular. The author prompts keen interest, all the more so by straightaway adding a question about which one might legitimately never have lent a thought, even when dreaming: do shadows survive the attention paid to them? Here there is the stuff of fiction, of a form of obsession, and perhaps of discoveries. A priori, it is not a bad thing to remove visual

experience from all manner of certainty. But pictures are not shadows, and those referred to by the author may be looked at in museums, where they depend upon light. The fact is that the project does not involve envisaging the function of shadow in such and such a picture by Largillierre or Rigaud. In a more disconcerting way, it involves what the author calls «our visual experience». He offers one or two, if the truth be told, somewhat dry accounts in a methodical exposé which gives pride of place to the physical formation of shadows, to the ideas of the 18th century, and to current research on the topic. This investigation is beyond reproach, but the shift to the level of aesthetic representation fails to be persuasive. When it is a matter of envisaging a moment qualified by Rococo empiricism, the gain seems rather slight, and ends up being reduced to a report: this painting is pictorial. The analysis of Chardin's *Jeune dessinateur* is more thorough, but it is more a question here of attentiveness, for Baxandall explains that the painter has the nerve to show us an abstract picture competing with the academic exercise. This book should persuade us that it is preferable to know a given thing in order to pass judgement. The author does, indeed, warn us that «the attempt is not very conclusive», which is honest of him.