AMERICAN UNIVERSITY STUDIES

The Aesthetics of Grace

Philosophy, Art, and Nature

RAFFAELE MILANI
Translated by CORRADO FEDERICI

In *The Aesthetics of Grace: Philosophy, Art, and Nature*, Raffaele Milani traces the fascinating history of the idea of 'grace' from ancient times to the 1700s. Although this term has been displaced by other concepts with the advent of modernism and postmodernism, the complex ideas related to the notion of 'grace' remain an important aesthetic category, and Milani presents an impressive panorama of reflections on and interpretations of the subject. The subtitle of the work indicates the broad scope of a study that recounts the origins of the term in Latin *gratias* (favor, regard, or gift), corresponding to the Greek *Kharites* (givers of beauty and charm). The volume then goes on to examine the Middle Ages, when the concept acquires a more specifically religious meaning (divine mercy, thanks), the Renaissance, when the terms 'gracefulness' and 'elegance' come to dominate in the treatises of the time, and the Ages of Romanticism and Neoclassicism, with their particular treatment of the topic. In the process, Milani meditates on the visual representations of these multiple meanings in the form of second-century frescoes, fifteenth-century paintings by Botticelli, Raphael, Titian, Da Vinci, Mantegna, Correggio, and Carracci, seventeenth-century canvases by Poussin and sculptures by Bernini, and eighteenth-century sculptures by Antonio Canova and paintings by Fragonard. This engaging work weaves with skill and subtlety philosophical, theological, and artistic ideas into a stimulating tapestry.

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Introduction

We could begin with 18th century and Rococo taste, dominated as they are by whimsy and delight, to find the roots or foundation of grace itself among the many meanings attributed to gracefulness. Alongside such extravagances, we could then note the interpretative brilliance of some neoclassical and romantic minds that, at the end of the Age of Enlightenment, made this ancient idea in myth, art, and thought relevant by interweaving aesthetic and theological issues. I am thinking primarily of Winckelmann and Schiller who, in an exemplary synthesis and with a passion for the past, described the many different faces of grace.

Discussing this idea in the *Encyclopédie* entry for the term, Voltaire shifted the focus toward le gracieux, saying that grace does not indicate merely that which is pleasing, but that which pleases from the standpoint of feeling. He provided a historical reason for this: for him, Venus, the goddess of beauty, always appears in the Greek imagination accompanied by the Graces, who inspire the feelings of sweetness and mysterious fascination we see in the figure, in her comportment, and her smile. Grace exists beyond perfect proportions and architectural beauty because it inspires a special kind of enchantment. For the philosopher, the charming and the small things are definitely more inclined to grace than are large and majestic ones. What is more, it is not always true that the opposite of grace—coarseness, wildness, or aridity—constitutes per se an anti-aesthetic value. The *Farnese Hercules* does not, in fact, have the grace of the *Belvedere Apollo* or the *Antinoös*, and yet it does not appear coarse or rustic in spite of this. A work can lack grace and delicateness, but not necessarily appear unpleasant. Even frightening things, when depicted by the genius of an artist, can produce pleasurable effects of contrast. There is a grace in painting and in sculpture, as there is in diction and eloquence. Its features are harmony, delicateness, smooth expressiveness of the parts, and amiability. There is also a moral aspect that invites us to think of the grace of benefices and favors that we receive. In the imagination of the ancients, the Graces presided over gifts, harmony, joys, loves, games, and communal feasts. They were "the tangible emblems of all the things that could make life pleasurable." Voltaire concludes his remarks with a thoroughly Enlightenment idea, namely, that "those who dismiss mythology as a fable should at least acknowledge the value of these pleasant fictions that reveal truths, from which may derive the happiness of the human species" (1981, p. 129).

Montesquieu also reflected on grace in the form of 'le gracieux' and went on to describe the depth of its structure. His *Essai sur le goût* (*Essay on Taste*) contains a paragraph on the *je ne sais quoi*, that is to say, the notion of

a nature that is examined in terms of a whimsical reinvention of the pastoral idyll, of rustic pleasures, of Arcadian sentimentalism, through the mediation of the picturesque and the propensity for the eccentric. He also speaks of an invisible charm that sometimes emanates from some people, which is impossible to define, and for this very reason it is placed in the category of the *je ne sais quoi*, based primarily on surprise, on which attraction depends; that charm is not tied, therefore, to the simple beauty of form, to proportion and symmetry. In fact, Montesquieu adds that rarely does formal attire possess grace, while the clothing of shepherdesses often does, in a context of a reinvented Arcadia. In this way, in a quest for natural authenticity, we finally come to appreciate the simplicity of Raphael or the purity of Correggio, he declares. He likes the fact that these artists highlight something that remains mysterious. The spirit that slowly emerges in a smile creates a splendid illusion: something is kept hidden for the sake of shining a stronger light on it, as though the effect occurs by chance. In this way, the surprise that originates in the attractiveness of grace and that has nothing in common with affectation presents itself. From the smile we pass then to attitudes. Let us consider Venus and her girdle, which immediately makes her appear different from the imposing Juno, as well as the proud Pallas. Venus' sweetness derives from her ingenuousness and her modesty (*aidos*). Montesquieu comments as follows: "[T]elle est la sagesse de la nature, que ce qui ne seroit rien sans la loi de la pudeur, devient d'un prix infini depuis cette heureuse loi, qui fait le bonheur de l'univers" (such is the wisdom of nature that objects that have no value apart from the principle of modesty have acquired infinite value from the time this propitious principle was instituted, which is to the benefit of the universe" (1970, p. 89).

In the 1600s in Great Britain, John Dryden had already spoken of "poetic grace," locating it beyond the reach of rhetoric and referring to the sweet mystery of the *je ne sais quoi*. After him, in the wake of these thoughts, Ben Johnson would meditate on "inexplicable elegances" and Alexander Pope on "lucky licence." Each, however, expresses the ineffability of grace as a free gift of divine love that radiates out in all directions, which is a topic that dominates literary discussions across the centuries, where an analogy is drawn between the noblest elements of poetry and religious mysteries. From antiquity, grace has been the active contemplation of a gift offered by nature and the heavens to make us divine, like the creator of that gift. Early on, it assumes the form of an ardent desire for the salvation provided by Greek wisdom in the face of doubt as to the existence of the divinity and desire to exorcize this peril in various ways, to the point of exalting the myth of self-sacrifice. In addition, precisely for these reasons, grace is the antidote to the immense pain in history.

Hans Georg Gadamer has provided a valuable interpretation of grace based on his reading of Plato's *Philebus*. These pages refer to joy even when it manifests itself through tears, underscoring the harmony experienced by one who rejoices. According to this text and others like it, *charis* is that which renders us happy; it is pleasant nature, grace that emanates serenely from the beautiful (Aeschylus, *Agamemnon*, 417; Plato, *Laws* 2, 667). According to this line of thinking, grace is not simply a condition or a feeling, but a kind of manifestation of the world; it is the culmination of existence, involving human nature and the divine. It invites participation and is festive. This joy of the world becomes God's creation in the Christian vision.

Grace has different faces, from theology to philosophy and from literature and the arts to nature. If we concentrate on the ideas, figures, and forms that define it, grace surpasses the greatest achievements of technology and genius, and it appears to be independent of experience in the strict sense. We cannot touch it; it simply brushes against us; it is impalpable.

Johann Joachim Winckelmann defines grace as "the pleasurable in accordance with reason," a gift from the heavens, but one applicable to all activities. It is developed through education, but it may become one's nature because nature possesses this capability innately. It is never associated with constraint or affectation; it is elusive and light, and it acts in the simplicity and the calmness of the soul; it avoids violent passions. In ancient times, grace was a feature of Apelles and in modern times of Correggio. Through it, everything that a human being does becomes pleasurable. In art, it moves us through imitation; it possesses a mysterious power and a heightened sense of perfection in both immaterial and material works, and it causes the ancient to prevail over the modern. The serenity of inner joy dominates in the attitudes of the figures depicted, allowing the dignity of human beings and their spiritual dimension to manifest themselves. Winckelmann writes that, in Athens, the Graces were placed at the entrance of sacred sites, and he states: "Our artists should also place them at the entrance of their studios and make sacrifices to them in order to render them propitious deities."

At the end of the 18th century, which was so much influenced by the philosophy of Leibniz, Schiller meditates on grace, inspired by Mendelssohn, Home, Kant, and Sulzer. Schiller says that nature and morality, matter and spirit, earth and sky, come together marvellously in the works of the Greeks. The freedom that governs beauty, which originates in nature, is paramount in this view. Grace is "the beauty of the figure under the influence of freedom, the beauty of those phenomena that are determined by the person." Moral sense can accompany plastic beauty and it enhances the beautiful soul in which sensitivity and reason, sense of duty and inclination, nature and freedom, are in harmony. The point is that man is at once a *person*, a being that can, in turn, become a cause in a series of states and emotions that he himself

determines, and not nature with its law of necessity. Grace is accompanied and completed by dignity, which is to say, the sublime. Schiller states that, if grace and dignity are united in the same person, the expression of humanity is whole and it is present, active, and true, justified by the world of the spirit and dispersed in phenomena. The two qualities of the soul touch each another, and their boundaries become blurred. The ancients are represented in this ideal.

Rosario Assunto has reminded us that, between the 18th and the 19th centuries, the principle of the greatness of the ancients was interpreted as "closeness to nature": art is like nature and nature is like antiquity. This is what the authors cited above thought, but this is also the case in Switzerland, Italy, and Germany. They contemplated antiquity by imagining its origins. In this tendency to idealize, there is a desire to sublimate nature, and there is an attempt to recover it in a pure form outside of temporality, formulating an entirely aesthetic and symbolic theory of vision: grace appears in images of flight and of the wave as what is narrated in myths and what is depicted in art. It is the goddess of nimbleness and metamorphosis, as indeed are water and the wind.

In aesthetic perception and in the making of art, there is a moment in which the ordinary becomes extraordinary. Grace seems to blossom at a certain point from a propitious and unforeseeable moment; there is no sudden burst; rather, we slowly come upon surprise, which, in turn, becomes admiration. I have mentioned the "propitious moment," which is so important that it embraces the state of grace, in which everything is transformed. In the light of these observations, I would like to recall Pindar's famous verse: "epetai d'en ekastoi / metron: noesai de kairso aristos" ("Each thing has its limits; knowing it is the best and most timely way") (*Olympian Ode* 13, vv. 47–48).

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Part I.

The Machine That Is Grace

The idea of grace is born in antiquity and develops in the history of philosophy, theology, and the arts. It belongs to Mediterranean culture, but its meaning can also be found in other cultures quite different from this one. And so, just as there is an aesthetic of the sublime, an aesthetic of the beautiful, an aesthetic of the tragic, which are sets of values and feelings, there exists an aesthetic of grace.

In the religious context, grace is the benevolence that God or a deity manifests toward the human creature, like a sovereign who looks with favor upon a subject and gives him gifts, not because he is obliged to do so, but because this is pleasing to him. As Voltaire writes in his *Philosophical Dictionary*, however, if Emilius Paulus, Cicero, Caesar, Titus, Trajan, Marcus Aurelius (and we could certainly add Seneca) were to return to the Rome for whose glory they had devoted themselves, "you must admit that they would be astonished by your decisions regarding Grace" (Voltaire 1981, p. 353). They would be equally confused, says the witty writer, to hear talk of Aquinas' "Grace of salvation," Cajetan's "medicinal Grace," and "inner," "external," "gratuitous," "sanctifying," "actual," "habitual," "cooperative," "effective," "sufficient," "versatile," and "congruent" grace. It is said that everything is grace from God. If this is true, Voltaire goes on to say, we must ask ourselves if God bestows a special grace upon a wolf when it finds in its path a lamb that he can eat. Apart from Voltaire's criticism of Catholic theology, we find in this text a passage from Homer that is very relevant to our discussion because it contains an ironic comment on heavenly grace. As an example of grace that is a gift from heaven, let us recall the conversation between Paris and Hector, in the third book of the *Iliad*. Paris says to him: "But do not blame me / for golden Aphrodite's lovely gifts. / Men cannot reject fine presents from the gods, / those gifts they personally bestow on us, / though no man would take them of his own free will" (vv. 70–74). The gods, therefore, give as gifts objects, events, figures, wonders, and changes. Sappho prayed to Aphrodite with her smiling and immortal face that weaves illusions; she pleaded not to be abandoned in her anguish and pain, until the goddess who had been so much invoked, came down from the heavens, to Crete, and into the sacred temple where "here you will find an apple / grove to welcome you and upon the altars / frankinsense fuming" (p. 13). In this image, the Graces follow her, "rosy-armed […] hallowed Daughters of Zeus" (p. 27), and join the Muses as we, indeed, read in the famous passage: 'Come to me now, you the delicate Graces, and you fairtresseded Muses" (p. 41).

We could think of the history of grace as a surprising repository for the human imagination and art, a body of rhetorical, compositional, conceptual, mental, sentimental, devices, of intuition and emotion, a splendid array of iconologies and cultural attitudes. This is a vision in which the golden elements of myth, philosophy, and the brilliance of the arts form a grand design capable of keeping diverse fragments of a perfectly harmonious whole elegantly unified. Returning to the metaphor of the "machine" and its particular application in the 1700s, eliminating negative connotations, what we have is a very special image: a scene of great scope, a manifestation of intelligence and sensibility in which we find the canons of art and taste, as well as the strategies of catharsis and salvation.

In this extraordinary 'device,' which consists of actions and ideas that grace fine-tunes through myth, religion, the arts, and customs, we can locate and interconnect the signs of a powerful sacredness. Pertinent to this study is the manner in which Joseph Campbell (vol. I, pp. 170–90) compares various allegorical and symbolic narratives and images. It concerns the Muses in particular and the inversion that they and the Graces undergo in the Christian vision. The American scholar refers to Franchino Gaffurio's diagram (*Practica Musicae*, 1496). In the lower part of this diagram, at the end of the serpent's tail, below the lion's head, there is the head of a woman whose name is Thalia or 'Abundance,' the first of the nine Muses, and we find the other eight on the left; at the top Thalia appears once more, but here the figure seems to be one of the three Graces (the middle one) who dance naked on Mt Helicon before the throne of Apollo. Here Thalia is the Muse that inspires bucolic poetry and comedy. Depicted below, beneath the earth, is 'silent' Thalia, poetry of nature that is not visible and not audible to humans who live in the noisy world until they discover nature's glory and thus attain supreme wisdom. In a religious interpretation, the Thalia we see beneath the earth could be identified with the exiled Eve, a victim of the serpent, pain, and privations; the figure at the top, instead, symbolizes Eve in her original state of purity. Next to her Euphronia or 'Joy,' with her back to the god, represents the inclination to rebel; Aglaia or 'Splendor,' whose gaze is fixed on the god, represents the Virgin Mary mother who changes the name of Eve to Ave, thus causing the work of Euphronia, the joy that for Christians means 'pleasure in sin,' to be destroyed. Still in the context of this traditional Christian interpretation, we can read the diagram more as the fall rather than as the redemption of the Muses and, therefore, of the arts. Christianity refutes the pagan idea of the seduction of the forms, which should instead be allegorical representations of spiritual themes and of the stories of the Savior and the saints in relation to the transcendence of God. On the contrary, in Gaffurio's diagram as in classical art, the Muses are associated with the body and the

power of the serpent. The serpent is not opposed to the Lord of life and light, but is a manifestation of his creative power and harmony. The mouth of the lion is a solar doorway and does not inspire fear. Furthermore, the rapture of the Muses, that is to say, the arts, will begin to be experienced in this same world, transporting the soul from one joy to another to the point where the eye contemplates the universe in its motion and its going, coming, and being. The serpent is not an antagonist of the Lord, but the vehicle of his descending grace, and the Muses are not antagonists of the nude Graces; rather, in a triple rhythm (three times three), they stand for the terrestrial heralds of their paradisal dance and they initiate us into the harmony of the universe. There are nine of them because the square root is the trinity depicted at the top of the image (the square root of nine is three). As is well known, the Muses teach us the harmony of the universe on whose levels appear the planets and their spheres, which are located on the right side of the diagram. There are correspondences as well: Thalia presides over the sphere of the earth; Cleo, who appears on the lower left, the Muse of history, occupies the level of the moon, which controls the tides of time; Calliope, the Muse of heroic poetry, presides over Mercury, who guides souls beyond the temporal sphere; Terpsichore, the Muse of dance and dramatic chorus, is in the sphere of Venus and Cupid; Melpomene, the Muse of tragedy, is situated in the purifying fire and the light of the sun; Erato, the Muse of lyric and erotic poetry, rules over Mars, the god of war; to Euterpe, the Muse of music and wind instruments, is assigned Jupiter, the Lord to whom the soul turns for protection; to Polyhymnia, the Muse of sacred song, is assigned Saturn who, with his scythe, severs us from this world which is controlled by the planetary spheres. The last figure, at the top of the diagram, is Urania, the Muse of astronomy, who is associated with the starry sky; she brings us from the serpent's body, whose knotted tail reminds us of the solar gateway, to the light of the Father.

The model of the planets, a map of reciprocal correspondences among the Muses, planets, modes, and chords is an ancient one. It was known to the Stoics and treated by Cicero in *The Dream of Scipio*, where he says that, with their motion, the planets produce a pleasant sound; the ninth planet remains immobile at the center of the universe and is said to be Gaffurio's *Surda Thalia* (silent Thalia). In Cicero's text, we are reminded that, by imitating this harmony on stringed instruments, cultivated people attain supernatural heights. Campbell contends that, for a visual demonstration of the unique relationship between the Neoplatonic symbolism of Alexandria and the Renaissance, on the one hand, and the works and prayers of the Irish monks of Glendalough, Dinglee of Kells, on the other hand, we need only to examine the "*Tunc* folio" of the *Book of Kells* from the 9th century. Gotfried's invocation of the nine Muses before Apollo's throne acquires new meaning, espe-

cially as it relates to the power of enchantment of Tristan's harp, which is similar to that of Orpheus who, in the early Christian tradition, could also represent the Redeemer, as he does in the Domitilla catacomb fresco. What is more, to shift metaphors and the frame of reference, we can point out that Dante's *Divine Comedy* expresses this vision of a spiritual dimension of the universe. The suspicion that the dark wood is analogous to the silent Thalia and that the hill where the valley ends, clothed in "the rays of the planet (the sun) / that leads others directly along every path," corresponds to Apollo's Mt Helicon, can be confirmed by the subsequent event in Dante's journey. In fact, Campbell goes on to say, three beasts appear suddenly: a leopard, a lion, and a she-wolf. As in Gaffurio's diagram, the grace of poetry, sent by the Muses, leads the traveler past the dangerous beasts. Recoiling from fear, the poet sees the figure of Virgil approaching: "I will be your guide," the pagan poet tells him. Dante prays: "O Muses, O high genius, now vouchsafe / mY-our aid" (*Inferno* 2, vv. 7–8). In his journey, Dante will meet other pagan masters who were the intellectual authorities of the Middle Ages: Homer, Horace, Ovid, and Lucan, then Cato and Statius. Beatrice, his personal Muse, leads the soul of the poet, with faith as well as the natural virtues of the pagans, through the hierarchy of planets in Gaffurio's diagram, to the seat of the triune God of which, according Christianity, the light of merely natural Apollonian reason is but an earthly manifestation.

According to Campbell, the Christian devaluation of the pagan god of light, Apollo, and of the entire classical mystical tradition, from which Christianity itself in part derives, is an elegant example of the way in which a later cult can supplant an earlier one, by simply rejecting the interpretation of its symbols, by reading them in a reductive manner, eventually superimposing on them its own. The fact that, in Dante, the guiding function of the pagans ends at the top of Mt Purgatory, the terrestrial paradise, is consistent with the Thomistic view that, as for the ancients, reason can lead to the pinnacle of earthly virtues, but only faith and supernatural grace (personified by Beatrice) can bring us beyond reason and to see God. By analyzing this triune God, however, we note that, in the Christian dogma of the three divine persons in one substance, the symbolism of the three Graces and of hyperborean Apollo is transposed into a mythological order of exclusively masculine masks of God, which is quite consistent with the patriarchal spirit of the Old Testament, but which radically overturns the symbolic, and hence the spiritual, connotations not only of the sexes but also of nature as a whole. The Greek view was an ancient one and it represented, for the most part, a system of symbols that was incredibly diffuse in the then known world (Campbell, vol. 1, pp. 170–90). In the patriarchal revision of the ancient heterosexual symbolism, the Son corresponds to grace that descends from above, the Holy

Spirit to its return to heaven, and the Father to the grace that permeates everything, as well as the only substance (triune) and the light of the Apollonian mind. In classical thought, three distinct persons would have been considered within a system of relations pertaining to the cosmic space-time mother. According to Campbell, they effectively appear in a 15th-century French image of the mother of God; although they are depicted as male, the three persons constitute the functions of *māyā* and could, therefore, be depicted as female. In Christianity, however, the female and male roles are reversed. In the entire history of the Christian cult, the possibility that its historicized symbols could be reinterpreted in a generally mythological sense has been a constant threat and, conversely, the opportunity for Greek—as well as Buddhist, Navaho, and Aztec—myth to acquire general Christian elements has also always been a threat. Many Renaissance and Baroque artists have exploited this interpretative possibility, as in fact occurred during the period of the catacombs with the frescoes on the ceiling of the Domitilla catacomb. In effect, this openness to multiple meanings is what Campbell defines as "the secret, subterranean current of our classical heritage of symbolic communication."

Gaffurio's diagram allows us, therefore, to understand the function and the value of the Graces in the mythological system, both in the time of the Renaissance, a period of feverish rediscovery, and, retrospectively, in the Greco-Roman imaginary.

1.

The Setting for Enchantment

Grace is accompanied by enchantment, by an extraordinary breath that fascinates without ever overwhelming. Along the course of tradition, this breeze moves the mantle that envelops the world like an immense cultural and representational device, something vaporous yet functional—an ungraspable mechanism for knowing and understanding. From ancient Greece and Rome, we find a thread of continuity; its names are *charis* and *venustas*. For the Greeks, beauty had a broader range of meanings than it does today: it was pleasure, attraction, and admiration. It satisfied the senses of sight and hearing, on the one hand; it also implied a quality of mind and character understood not just on a metaphorical level, on the other hand. The famous utterance of the oracle of Delphi, "The most just is the most beautiful," demonstrates that the Greeks had an array of meanings for the term "beautiful," which also included grace. When they refer to the cosmos and to nature, poets in particular speak of the "enchantment" that gives joy to mortal beings. Similar and related concepts, which are Pythagorean in origin, are harmony (*harmonia*), symmetry (*simmetria*), eurythmia (*eurhytmia*), cited by various writers, sculptors, architects, and orators. Aristotle adds to the doctrine of proportions that of *convenientia* (similarity) in his desire to underscore the fact that they (proportions) adjust to and harmonize with the properties of objects themselves in relation to the capacities of the senses, the imagination, and memory. Art (*techne*), the product of ability and work, appears alongside poetry, which maintained its supremacy since it originated in the Muses, that is to say, the realm of the divine, and it was therefore capable of generating sublime pleasures and of charming the soul. The voice of the gods is heard from the mouths of the poets and it transmits the memory of ancient deeds. Love and intoxication, gifts from Aphrodite and Dionysus, are often associated with the Muses. Cicero had inherited the notion of beauty in a process involving the semantic splintering of the term into various subdivisions: aesthetic beauty, moral beauty, *pulchritudo*, and *decorum*. He had also reflected on the difference between *dignitas* and *venustas*; the first was considered 'virile' and connected with *gravitas* or gravity, while the second was 'feminine' and linked with *suavitas* or sweetness. As noted above, we can say that *venustas* appears as the Latin equivalent of the Greek *charis*, that is, charm or enchantment. In the Hellenistic period, in discussing eloquence and style, Dionysius of Halicarnassus (*On the Arrangement of Words*) attributes different elements to grace: freshness, euphony, sweetness, power of persuasion, and similar qualities, whereas he understands beauty to signify grandi-

osity, solemnity, dignity, and richness. In the Middle Ages, the idea of beauty develops in relation to the visible world, and *venustas* also continues to mean charm and elegance, as do the notions of *pulchritudo*, *formositas*, *speciositas*, *decor*, and *elegantia*. Also worth mentioning is "Cystercian" ascetic mysticism and in particular the figure of Bernard of Clairvaux, as he relates to Plato, via the reflections of St Augustine, or as he relates to Plotinus, via the teachings of Pseudo-Dionysius. In an exaltation of the spiritual that recurs in the canons of the Cystercian movement, by virtue of which inner beauty appears to be superior to sensible beauty, which often tends toward vanity and ostentation, grace also finds an important space for itself because it refers to the beauty of the soul, which must undergo a process of purification.

Grace is an aspect of antiquity. For this reason grace remains one of the most overlooked of the aesthetic categories in the 20th century, with its isms and avant-gardes. Even with respect to tradition, it has been displaced by reflections on the beautiful and the sublime. Its mystery, however, continues to emit an aura for everyone to see, a strange magic that eludes definition since its meaning can conceal as well as reveal itself. Historically, it is more easily identifiable in the arts, literature, and myth than in philosophy. In fact, grace has the immateriality of apparitions and dreams. The Age of Enlightenment appears to accept and revive it, but in reality it tends to vulgarize grace by distorting its value and deforming it. Eighteenth-century gracefulness is ambiguous in that it includes the capricious and the captious, the curious and the elegant, in an attempt to capture the splendid evanescence that the theory of the *je ne sais quoi* suggests. Another form of modernity, namely Romanticism, would reinterpret the term and seek to restore its value.

It could be said, however, that at the outset of every possible discussion on this topic, there is a metaphysics of grace, which is also a metaphysics of love. The earliest source of this reflection is Empedocles, who writes: "*Charis* abhors intolerable Fate" (*Purifications* 116). In the light of his cosmology, which accounts for the evolution of the multiple, the antinomy between grace and "that which is not free" evident is. Fire, air, earth, and water, the root of all things, obey the alternating, cyclical principles of love and hate. At first, there is love, which can unite the dissimilar, creating a primitive sphere in which all the elements coexist. Then, after the god breaks his perfect solitude, love disappears to make room for hate, while the forms pass through an intermediate stage bringing about the separation of the elements and the attraction of like to like. But, then, love returns and establishes an inverse evolution in which the dissimilar re-enters and mingles with the other elements. The sphere, thus, is restored. What place does humanity occupy in this cosmic economy? When it enters the second phase of the cycle, our

world, chained as it is by the original motion, exists by virtue of the "progression" of hate. Humans and natural forms, which are subject to the universal principle, separate into sexes and species and become enemies to each another; they wander along a course of continual transmigrations in living, fragile, ephemeral forms that are susceptible to death in a hostile cosmos. At this point, grace affirms itself by drawing value and richness from this set of circumstances. It is tied to freedom, not to necessity and hate. In this cosmology, grace evokes nostalgia for the original state of oneness in which there is neither struggle nor separation. Grace is natural unity, conciliation, and harmony among all the elements, which cooperate to lead the whole being into a state of equilibrium. It is initially the principle of the sphere, which appeared fleetingly in the human experience, then became dramatically commingled with other objects. In our imperfect world, grace becomes a living symbol of the love that is suspended over the universe; yet, it is among us in the form of Aphrodite, the queen of the world.

Once more in Empedocles (*Purifications* 128, 130) we find a description of the golden age, when all the creatures, both beasts and birds, were tame and docile towards mankind, and benevolence reigned. In such a context, *charis* probably refers to the benefit of the 'Purifications.' Out of the fallen state and the ensuing transmigration emerges the nostalgic expectation of the original life that, if associated with the doctrine of Love, provides a bridge for the re-attainment of the divine. Perhaps for the first time Empedocles opens up philosophical speculation to grace. On the basis of these observations, the notion of *charis* is also linked to doctrines of transcendence as another way of studying the beautiful. Grace relates more closely to the theories of Plato for whom it is an "external gift," one that comes from outside of us. In the dialogue between Socrates and Parrhasius the painter, and in that between Socrates and Crito (perhaps Polycletus) the sculptor (Xenophon, *Memorabilia* III, 10), we find traces of this idea where they speak of imitation in art, feelings, and the soul.

Plotinus would follow this line of thinking and speak in favor of a beauty that is a manifestation of the soul. Grace is a gift that the soul makes to the body: "Every one of those Beings exists for itself but becomes an object of desire by the color cast upon it from The Good, the source of those graces and of the love they evoke" (*Enneads* VI. 7, 22). It must be said, however, in more precise terms, that the union of grace and love derives from Platonic themes.

In Plato, the notion of *charis* appears to be more implicit than explicit. Elegance or *euschemosyne*, which is a distinctive feature of love, may have a bearing on our discussion and reappears in the Latin culture in the context of *venustas*, a term that has already been used here. What Plato describes is a

grace seen as a divine delicateness and extreme tenderness (*Symposium* 195d-e, 196e); since its nature is fluctuating and flexible, it penetrates, or slips imperceptibly into the soul. Together with Love, grace, like Empedocles' *charis*, eludes the influence of Necessity (196, 197b). This is true in Agathon's argument, but Socrates objects, saying that he is confused by the distinction between desire and the object desired, between the one who loves and the one who is loved; at the same time, he confesses that he is also confused by the qualities that Eros possesses in relation to Necessity (199–204c). These passages invite us to visualize a metaphysical concept of grace that is inseparable from the doctrine of Love. In fact, we read: "love is the desire to possess the good forever"; it avoids what is vile and seeks what it lacks; furthermore, it is happiness that belongs to the creator, the poet, the musician, in other words, to those who promote actions that cause something to pass from non-being to being, because this is the act of creation. In this reasoning, in this interchange between ethics and aesthetics, we note a hierarchy of planes or a series of gradations: grace (a term more implicit than explicit) shifts toward the plane of superior reality, as can be gleaned from Diotema's argument; as grace, by elevating itself, becomes increasingly more form than matter, the ugly, as it descends, becomes increasingly more matter than form. From Diotema's words we can understand the strong ties that exist between grace and love (see Pt. I, ch. 4).

From Plato to Plotinus, grace becomes distinct from beauty, but it remains integrated with the doctrine of the beautiful that develops in a process of purification. In Plotinus, through the contemplation of ideas, the universal *élan* of the emanations of the One towards this same undivided One, origin and principle, becomes evident. Along the way, grace is defined increasingly in clearer terms, becoming as it does a spiritual kind of beauty; it radiates out like a strange light onto the intelligible world, the splendor of the good that is dispersed profusely (*Enneads* VI. 7–22). The good illuminates and colors the intelligible giving Graces to the object desired and loves (*charites*, *erotas*) to the one who desires. Grace and love correspond to each other on this scale in a theory of emanation, which resolves the twin problems of the unity of and the distinction between *charis* and *eros*. Light that descends (*charis*) and ardor that rises (*eros*) are merely the combined and inverted effects of the same movement. When the good makes its appearance among the ideas, grace is born. Correspondingly, it would appear that the concept of grace evolves more distinctly toward what is to be the foundation and, indeed, the conclusion of theories of ethics. According to Plotinus, the beauty of the human body lies mainly in the expression of the face, but it is the good that gives the face its grace. Grace becomes the sign of inner beauty, the beautiful internalized. It is beauty in the highest degree. *Charis* retains the ancient notion of

kalokagathia (nobility or goodness) to the point of being indistinguishable from it because it is the emanation of the good, on the one hand, and the culmination of the ascent of the good, on the other. In this line of development of the good and the beautiful, grace is precisely the close correlation in which their ultimate identity, that is, their interchangeableness and their indissoluble unity, becomes visible. Being a property of the good, grace soars even higher than does beauty since it adheres to one who is beyond the realm of the intelligible. In this context, however, the position occupied by desire should be clarified. While the good aspires to nothing, grace still orients desire and love in a sphere in which the beautiful would appear no longer to have a name; *charis*, a mysterious and extraordinary thing, somehow discloses another way of knowing. Only the good, however, inasmuch as it is divine, awakens and stimulates love. It is the desirable good and the attraction of origins. Without it, beauty would be powerless. If it were not present, says Plotinus, the intelligible itself would not attract us and reason could not communicate this enthusiasm and inspiration to the soul. Due to its intimate relationship with the good, grace retains the privilege of fascination. In fact, it is, properly speaking, the charm that is added to the *logos*, rendering the latter desirable and operational, thereby disposing the soul to love in order to return to God. Grace, then, is only the first and most subtle emanation that exists in the world of forms, a diaphanous state, and the final gradation of that which is discernible through which the true divine nature shines.

Turning our gaze toward the One to discover our destiny and harmony, we find ourselves moving as though in an inspired dance in which "the soul contemplates the source of Intelligence, the principle of being, the cause of the good." In this tension, we are not attracted mechanically; otherwise, what is generated would be corruptible. On the contrary, this ascent complements harmoniously the uninterrupted and eternal motion that emanates from the One. In spite of our corporeal nature, we receive perpetually the gift of life as long as it is what it is (VI. 9, 9). We understand that objects possess a beauty that comes from another source, which goes beyond the earthly, and we feel something prodigious emanating from that source. In fact, beautiful things are so, "by virtue of He who is before they are" (VI. 7, 31). This theory is different from that of the Stoics for whom beauty is proportion. In Plotinus, happy is he who, for the sake of obtaining the beautiful, leaves aside and disdains the domain of all the objects of the earth, the sea, and the sky, and turns towards Him in order to see him.

These are the themes of the ancient debate, which are revived in modern Idealism, especially by Schelling whose argument is re-presented through the interpretations of Luigi Payerson and Rosario Assunto, and which we still find relevant. Schelling re-proposes this notion of a "metaphysical aesthetic,"

developing with great originality the various connections between ideas and feelings, identified above in the philosophy of Plato and Plotinus. He moves away from the more conventional views, identifying the Idea with the realization of the object in the sense that the perfect identity of the objective and the subjective is revealed through the intuition of the artist. His thinking no longer relies on mental constructs or on generalized memory inherited from earlier doctrines. In the light of this philosophy of identity, we can examine art and grace as well as contemplation and love.

Describing the components of beauty in the plastic arts, Schelling sets grace in opposition to necessity (*Notwendigkeit*), as he juxtaposes the ideal to the real. For him, grace is the expression of an illusion (*Täuschung*) and in so doing he revisits Plotinus' *aneideon* (without form). We can also note the influence of the *je ne sais quoi* of the preceding century, but transferred to the metaphysical register. In terms of our discussion, the focus of his treatise is the freedom of the illusory (*keine Forderung*), to which are opposed the conditions and requirements of the true (*Bedingungen*). In this context, which opens up to art, we have the birth of grace, which occurs in concert with the appearance of the soul (*Seele*) in the world of forms. The spirit of nature (*Naturgeist*) frees itself; originally dispersed in matter, it slowly ascends toward its more spiritual essence. Like a dawn that illuminates form completely, the soul, says Schelling, allows its emergence to be intuited. It is still not totally present, but already everything around it prepares to receive it in a delicate play of light movements: rigid contours seem to become more vague and faint to be point of being soft. Grace, an enchanted mode of being that is neither sensorial nor spiritual but indistinct, permeates form and seeps into every shape, into the harmony of the parts. Such an imperceptible and at the same time tangible mode of being is what the Greek language denotes with the term *charis* and the German language with the term *Anmut*. Grace, then, is not precluded from the theory of archetypes, which entails the interchangeableness of the universal and the particular, in which, in a philosophy of mythology, art appears to be the representation of absolute beauty, that is to say, the beautiful in itself. It is the essence of Greek poetry in which the finite and the infinite interpenetrate each other simultaneously.

In Schelling's theory, however, grace is not ultimate spirituality. In this ascent of the spirit of nature towards the soul, grace stays close to the border between the sensible and the immaterial. It pertains to a synthetic and intermediate degree of 'spiritual corporeality' (*das geistige erscheint körperlich*). Grace is also the soul, but not the soul per se; it is, rather, the soul of the form (*Seele der Form*): the corporeal elevated to the plane of the spirit. This fusion of the two worlds into a single concept is also proof that the spirit of nature and the soul are not in opposition to each other, except in appearance.

As the revelation of the soul (*sinnliche Seele*), grace exists above all as conciliation; it is the link and harmony among all of the forces of the world (*die böchste Milde und Versöbnung aller Kräfte*), a manifestation of "the original unity of the essence of nature and the essence of the soul." On a deeper level, beyond the transfiguration of this same spirit of nature, it remains an indispensable vehicle for the attainment of moral goodness and its expression. When the universe is revealed to us through tangible grace permeated by moral goodness, we are struck and enchanted as if by the power of a prodigious event. Grace gives us the gift of certain knowledge that every contradiction is specious, that a bond links all creatures with the rest of universe, that an agreement (*Übereinstimmung*) has been realized, and that "in the inner fire of divine love" there is a fusion, in the world and for the world. Having reached this final stage, the figurative representation of grace, in the symbolic divine, is nothing other than the goddess of love (*Göttin der Liebe*). Love, universal *Liebe*, reflects its indivisible essence in every being.

Taking a broader perspective, I recognize that, whether we are dealing with Platonic contemplation or romantic *Weltanschauung*, the position of the aesthetics of ideas is consistent despite the centuries that separate these two sets of ideas; beneath the richness of appearances, aesthetics produces the same conclusion. That aesthetic position assumes the form of a succession of issues and problems that are more or less developed and more or less implied, in concepts that are clarified and that, in turn, clarify other concepts. It is a dialectical process that, nevertheless, has some unvarying relationships; a conceptual breath, which is at first only intuited, stirs and leads us continually to the touch of grace. Idealist speculation tends to explore the similarity of relationships and the essential identity of grace and love.

Alongside this metaphysical vision, which is linked to traditional lines of thought, we find others, as Raymond Bayer has shown; namely, Henry Home's humanistic vision, Edmund Spencer's evolutionary vision, and Schiller's ethical vision. I have more to say later on these two thinkers. At this point, however, it is useful for me to analyze Home's position because it diverges from the one articulated above.

Among modern theories of grace, Home's is the first and perhaps the most important in 18th-century Britain. A product of its time, the theory proposes to recover human values in a critical spirit, offering as it does interpretations that are different from those of a metaphysical nature. At the very dawn of aesthetics as a philosophical discipline, in the early 1700s, Platonic *kalokagathia* appears to be once more transported to English and Scottish schools of thought; it reappears through the psychological explanation of its signifying structure and, in this scholarly context, grace is discussed in the light of a movement of the spirit that qualifies it as a human trait. English

philosophy borrows this idea from the Greeks, as we can find traces of Platonism in Shaftsbury. In this context, human intelligence grows with fresh wisdom and subtlety. Once again, grace is seen as seductive charm and is understood by Shaftesbury as bodily movement and naturalness; the double relationship, however, makes the philosopher's investigation entirely 'earthly.' The humanistic viewpoint is privileged. There is a tendency to shape the metaphysics to conform to an empirical vision. Together with what grace is, consideration is given to how grace is. Grace is born of exercise and requires training from early infancy, but it cannot be reduced to a studied attitude or one based on the 'preciosity' (préciosité) fashion of the era. We can see it operate in the style of the 'virtuous.' The century's spirit of investigation emerges between the positions of Hutcheson and Hogarth, without ignoring those that come shortly after, for example, Burke's and Gerard's (*An Essay on Taste* 1759, Pt. 1, sect. II and III), which are so different. In a climate dominated by empiricism, grace is seen in the light of the totality of phenomena, in an effort to clarify both the invisible (inner) element and the visible (corporeal) element. The ancient affinity between love and grace is also present in the thought of Hutcheson, which also contains psychological and subjective elements.

In revisiting the centuries-old question of the relationship between love and grace, emphasis is placed on the figure of the lover who, better than anyone else, sees in the beloved the moral qualities that nourish him. It is he, and rightfully so, who confers these qualities on her because of his immediate feeling. Contemplation of the Ideas (that is, the metaphysical-objective vision of which I have spoken) gives way to subjective taste, but it does not erase the ethical dimension; indeed, the latter is enhanced. Grace is not distinct from the Good; it is one of the attributes of Beauty, which amazes us when we find it in a face, but such attributes come from the essence of virtue. Meanwhile, another interpretation is provided by Hogarth's analysis, which somehow enfolds this inner grace into the purity of its tangible appearance and generates the charm of natural and refined movements with which it expresses itself. A short time after mid-century, in France (the descritpions for *Grâce* and *Art de peindre* in the *Encyclopédie*), Watelet provides an admirable summary of the exquisite core of these varied analyses as he ranges from the grace of the body to its prime mover, thereby linking the two elements in methodical fashion and observing them in both the inner purity and in the motion of the limbs. He establishes a relationship between bodily gestures and the simplicity and directness of the motions of the soul. Prior to this, the deep unity of all of these elements was not elaborated. The humanistic bent in Home produces a doctrine in which innocence becomes nonchalance. According to such a theory, in this perfect union, human action responds to the

movements of the psyche and finds in grace the aesthetic quality of external movement.

Identifying the presence of psychic qualities everywhere in the visible world, English as well French thought established the gradations of grace on the human level following the reflections of Home (1762, p. 65). In two chapters of *Elements of Criticism* (6 *Motion and Force* and 11 *Dignity and Grace*), the Scottish philosopher vigorously reasserts the humanistic argument. Having underlined the fact that the aesthetics of grace is still unexplored territory, he reaffirms these two basic truths: that grace is unquestionably an attribute of agreeableness and that it is tied to expression and externalization. Heir to Condillac's contemporary psychologism, Home, therefore, starts from sensation and asks himself which of the five senses determines perception of the charming. He states that it is sight, because music cannot be described as charming except in metaphorical terms. But of which existents is this aesthetic quality an attribute, then? The answer is, of humans and only humans. An elephant, a lion, and even a horse cannot be called charming. Beauty and grandness are common to all humans and to other existents, while dignity does not apply to beings inferior to humans; grace is similar in this. To what phenomena is the latter conjoined? It does not always appear as beauty, except in certain circumstances. To Home's mind, grace is intimately linked to motion; when a person, even the most 'charming,' does not move or speak, we lose sight of the qualities that characterize him or her. Among possible attitudes, grace is tied precisely to those that are expressions of the soul. "In order to correspond to its end, a movement executed in the most perfect manner is elegant; but something more is needed in order to complete our idea of grace." This something must come from the changeability of the face: a face behind a mask, in fact, is no longer charming, and the feeling that a smile arouses is too complex to have a purely corporeal cause. The link between the agreeable qualities of the soul (sweetness, cheerfulness, affability, and sense) and elegant movements is the very essence of graceful appearance. But these qualities, neither individually nor taken together, are efficacious without a primary, indispensable quality: dignity, which is to say, moral beauty and self-respect. Taking up once more his preliminary theory of exteriorization, Home clarifies its meaning and importance by suggesting that, deprived of the gifts of amiability, human beings would not be able to simulate them; he adds, however, that even those who possess these qualities can attain grace only if the qualities can manifest or reveal themselves externally.

Home states: "Collecting these circumstances together, grace may be defined, that agreeable appearance which arises from elegance of motion and from a countenance expressive of dignity. Expressions of other mental quali-

ties, are not essential to that appearance, but they heighten it greatly" (ch. 11, *Dignity and Grace*). Especially in *Motion and Force*, the fact that the foundation of grace consists of movements sometimes beautiful and worthy, sometimes more physically appropriate, and at other times psychologically still more expressive. In this way, Home, in mid-Enlightenment century, represents the intermediate position of humanism fully, with Watelet and Winckelmann on one side and Mendelssohn, who is about to appear on the philosophical scene, on the other. The reference here is to Mendelssohn's (1775) *Briefe über Empfindungen* (in particular letter 11) and especially to a later essay, which introduces a theory of grace, in works on the Sublime and the Naïf of 1758 (1978). The Scottish philosopher had chosen to overlook grace in the arts, preferring to dedicate himself to the Renaissance theories of the 'gentleman' and to contemporary views on the 'virtuous.'

I have been discussing a theory of love from a metaphysical and a humanistic perspective. It is also possible to think of this topic from the standpoint of the Christian tradition in order to see its aesthetic and artistic implications. Here, as in various creation myths, we have the same tragic destiny involving a vision of a lost Paradise. In the human imaginary, this is a moment of anguish in which the same Creator seems to have become aware that what he created concealed very painful defects. In the desperate cry of Adam and Eve who are expelled from Paradise, which is so well represented by Michelangelo in the Sistine Chapel, we can perhaps detect the tears of God himself as he sees his chosen creatures leaving. In the original stories, the Creator allows an aura to shine everywhere so as to raise man up from suffering and death. In a certain sense, in an entirely human act, it is as if grace were a symbol of the emotion of God himself or of another supreme deity, before life and the world. Grace brings salvation by restoring the image of mankind before birth and after death in an ineffable time and space.

2.

Theological Grace and Sublime Grace

"We have no resource other than grace." With these words Martin Buber wishes to underline the binding covenant for Biblical and post-Biblical Judaism: the God who gives is a God who commands, and the pereson who receives is the person who carries out the command; God and humanity are joined tightly together; a genuine participation in sacred objects, therefore, must pass through the sanctification of the quotidian. At every moment, we must feel and live the thought that invites us "to be made just" through the intervention of the grace of God. Granted to those who have faith in Him, justice never loses the force of its demands, which always relate to the divine, and, in his lifetime, man is not called to prove any aspect of its meaning or its content. In the Judaic tradition, God faithfully guided his people in the desert, thereby affirming the unity of right and justice and offering neither an ethical image nor a social image but rather a true religious experience of Israel, which is one of the fundamental Biblical principles of the relationship between God and mankind. The concept of grace (favor or *chäsäd*) imagined as the embrace of God and Israel indicates a process of reciprocal correspondence. On the basis of God's devotion, it is possible to speak of human compassion for one's neighbor. God's benevolence toward his people must, however, extend to our treatment of our fellow human beings by putting into practice the words: "Yes, benevolence is dear to me." In fact, without mankind's imitation of God, which is to say, without the effects of grace on the world of mankind, the union with God and with His plan for life would be destroyed. From this follows the rabbinical teaching: "He who is moved to pity for his fellow man, will have pity from heaven and he who is not moved no pity toward his fellow man will have no pity even in heaven." The reciprocal nature of the grace-gift contemplated by Hosea, rejects the idea that mankind is merely an instrument of heaven or merely a place for divine grace; rather, it expresses the history of his experiences: mankind can respond to God with its entire being.

From the point of view of Christian hermeneutics, the Old Testament's early understanding of grace begins with faith: Yahweh "is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love" (Psalm 103:8). Especially in the covenant between the Lord and his chosen people, grace is defined as the source of salvation, which is freely given to the mankind by a loving God and its meaning is similar to that of mercy. In the New Testament, the term *charis* refers to salvation granted by God to mankind through Jesus Christ as an act of free and loving devotion. The word "grace" appears

in Paul and Luke. Paul in particular explains what grace means in the light of the coming of Christ. In many of his letters, he wishes for his readers, "the grace and peace of God, our father and of our Lord Jesus Christ," but he returns to the concept of grace especially when he speaks of *redemption* and the *vocation to the apostolate*. God brought about the justification, "freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Jesus Christ" (Romans 3:24). With the words 'freely' and 'by His grace,' Paul wishes to underscore the fact that God's salvific act in Christ's redemptive sacrifice was performed as his free consecration to love without the need for mankind to perform any meritorious acts. In short, grace is the love of God who brings about salvation through Jesus Christ, his son. It refers to the entire divine act, but in particular to the fact that mankind discovers a vital communion with God. In mankind, God's intervention brings about a transformation for the purpose of salvation.

In the Islamic interpretation, the phrase that opens every *surah* of the Koran, with the exception of the ninth, evokes grace as one of the lofty qualities of God. Both Arabic words *rubman* and *rabim*, with which this quality of the being of God is defined, imply a feminine element: the root of both words is, in fact, *rabim*, *rihm*, meaning uterus or womb. God forgives from the core of His being, gives much, is receptive to contrition, is pleased by expressions of gratitude, is supremely forbearing, indulgent, compassionate, and benevolent, the dispenser of love and fidelity, defender, guardian, and protector. All these qualities are worthy of being imitated by the faithful and need to be realized within the sphere of human potential. What we might call a dialectical tension between awareness of sin and absolute faith in grace recurs in the thought of many mystics.

In order to explain how theological grace is also sublime grace, having discussed, albeit briefly, the three great monotheistic religions, I now consider the relationship between *eros* and *agape*, comparing the ancient Greek, pagan, and Christian cultures. In 1937, Anders Nygren (1990, pp. 527–42) formulated a thought that still has great importance, which is that in *caritas* man should elevate himself to the Creator in order to recognize in Him, his *summum et incommutabile bonum* (highest and inalienable good). We also have, however, a saying that expresses the opposite: the more created man strays from the Creator, the more difficult is the descent of *caritas*. At this point, a question arises. Do humans have the power to lift themselves up to God or are they, as created beings, condemned to desire only the created things that surround them? In the clash between *caritas* and *cupiditas* is it not perhaps the latter that wins out? Can humans harbor a *caritas* like the one that the commandment to love requires?

Nygren states that the opportunity to weigh in on this problem is central in Augustine and it was presented to him in Paul's theology of grace; however, we encounter it primarily in Paul's diatribe against Pelagianism in which we find a form of Christianity that emphasizes the theme of mankind's communion with God. Pelagius does not intend to deny the value or the necessity of divine grace, but for him it is reducible to these three points: free will, the law, and the remission of sin. Paul's criticism of Pelagius can be summarized as follows: What good is the formal freedom of the will, with its abstract potential for making choices if, in concrete situations, we are surrounded by the temptations of the sensible world, which draw our desire downward by the pleasure they arouse in us, thereby chaining us to what is transitory? What good is it that the law and the example of Christ teach us to turn our desire upward, toward celestial objects if, according to Nygren, they leave us cold and indifferent with their remote sublimity? And finally, what good is it that God, in his grace and compassion, forgives the sins we have committed to this point in our lives if, in our subsequent actions, he leaves us with a free will that will never be able to divert our desire from inferior objects in order to turn it toward the superior objects? For grace to have real value, it is necessary that it have a concrete impact on our lives, that it become a real and active force. Augustine does not recognize true grace in Pelagius' 'deistic' grace because the latter means simply that God, from the beginning, has determined that mankind should help itself. Augustine affirms, instead, the effective value of grace and God's personal intervention in our lives. In this, Augustine does not intend to deny free will or laws, which are essential for goodness because, without free will, it would not be possible to speak of goodness or evil and, without laws, we would not know how to regulate our lives; however, he emphasizes the fact that these are not sufficient. Paul reserves the term *gratia* exclusively for divine intervention, without which such instruments would not be sufficient. In fact, "the fruit that does not come from the root of *caritas* is not good." The will must be freely won over by supernatural goodness. According to this view, from the Fall onward there exists in mankind a proclivity toward the world below and, for this reason, we lack the opportunity to aspire to the eternal. Humans do not contain *caritas* within them; it must reach them through a special act of divine grace; it must be infused from outside of them. In this infusion (*infusio caritatis*) of love, some have seen proof that Augustine has a magical, as well as a natural, conception of grace.

How does Augustine imagine this infusion of love? Being creature, humans are obliged to seek the good outside of them, in the world above or in the world below. The world above can offer an eternal and infinite good, but one that is difficult to attain, while the inferior world offers the advantage of

being immediately attainable; the competition between the two worlds is obviously unequal. The world below assails humans and binds them with the pleasure that it engenders within them. By comparison, says Nygren, the divine good seems so remote and unreal that it binds the human soul only loosely. In order to act on humans with the same force, the divine must approach them and place itself so near to them that its force of attraction becomes greater and more irresistible than that of temporal objects. This very thing occurred in the Incarnation, which created a bridge across the abyss that separates mankind from their Creator. From that moment on, God, our eternal *bonum* [good], is no longer remote. He descended into Christ, into the temporal world, and is now so close to us that every transitory *bonum* must necessarily pale by comparison.

Gratia is a key word in the Augustinian interpretation of Christianity. For Augustine, everything in our life depends on the grace of God. This is true for the natural life, as it is for the Christian life. In this perspective, everything comes to us from God and nothing from ourselves: "Before becoming man, you were dust and before being dust you were nothing" (my trans.). We exist by the grace of God and by His grace we have been saved: a gift given freely, without the requirement of deserving it. The good works that we perform are not really our works, but those of God who acts through us. Even faith, like good works, owes its existence to grace. It is said that, "If He did not love sinners, God would not have descended to earth from heaven" (my trans.). This is where Augustine departs most clearly from the Hellenistic conception where, ironically, his doctrine of grace originated. At this point, I wonder if, with this line of thinking, Augustine has broken the mold of *eros* to produce a conception that is completely dominated by the motif of *agape*. Does the predication of grace not possibly contain the statement that divine love is spontaneous and 'without motive'? This doctrine of grace also reveals another aspect that calls for our attention and changes our initial impression in a profound way. Without grace, there can be no access to God. Without grace, it is not enough to stimulate the wings of *caritas* in order to ascend to God. Grace 'precedes' every action of ours as the means 'precede' the end. The objective is and remains the ascent of *caritas* to God. What has been said of Augustine's way to salvation as an ascent remains valid; in fact, grace is part of the process of ascent, indeed, an indispensable means for the ascent itself. What did not work with laws and free will, because of our desire, bound as it is to earthly objects, works now with the grace of God since it comes to mankind with the eternal and supernatural *bonum* by awakening in us nostalgia for heaven. Grace does not erase the laws; it does not oblige us to do good but, as Nygren points out, it transforms a pleasure into a good.

Neither does grace preclude free will; rather, it gives it a new object and, therefore, a new direction, thereby perfecting free will.

Augustine does not really appear to sidestep the theory of *eros* when he emphasizes divine intervention in speaking of grace and the Incarnation. Here, too, communion with God is visualized largely as an ascent. Faith and the Incarnation are simply the means necessary for the ascent; the purpose of Christ's descent is, indeed, our ascent. God became man so that we could become gods (*Sermon* 344). That the idea of grace has limited usefulness as a counterweight to the theory of *eros* is shown by the fact that, since grace is identified with the *infusio caritatis*, Augustine is fully coherent when he defines grace by means of the image of the ladder that we can climb to ascend through life, thereby opening the way for us to attain the celestial homeland.

The essential fact of the Incarnation is that God, the Holy One, bows in compassion toward the sinner and engages in communion with him. Even from the teleological point of view, the Incarnation is considered to be the revelation of divine love, but the event supposedly occurred primarily to give us the capacity to raise ourselves up to God. In the first instance, the emphasis is on God's love, which comes from above and is given as a gift; in the second, the emphasis is on mankind and on the fact that we receive the means required to ascend and to affirm ourselves spiritually. In Augustine's doctrine of grace, we find an unusual interweaving of theocentric and the egocentric tendencies, which is consistent with both an anti-moralist and a eudemonistic position. In his anti-moralism, Augustine is definitely theocentric; we have nothing of our own. Everything comes from God.

Augustine's consistent objection to the Neoplatonists is that they do not know the Incarnation and do not accommodate grace in their conceptualization. For Nygren, it is clear that Augustine wants to introduce the Christian concept of *agape* into the discussion. This, however, does not lead him to reject Neoplatonic soteriology. Even as a Christian, he accepts the way to salvation through *eros*; he introduces this notion into his doctrine of *caritas* and develops it in parallel with the concept of grace. As love directed upwards essentially contains the seal of 'celestial *eros*,' *caritas* is the only true way to God. As long as it is subject to the law, however, it remains unproductive; it is for us an impassable path. 'A dynamic factor' must, therefore, intervene, one that overcomes our heaviness and all natural obstacles to the ascent. This occurs when God infuses grace into our hearts. Grace is the mover that moves the celestial *eros*, which is the force that allows the ascent to occur.

Augustine is remembered as the founder of the Catholic doctrine of grace. Joining together *gratia* and *caritas*, God's descent and our ascent, he achieved a synthesis of the early Christian conception of salvation and Hel-

lenistic soteriology, of *agape* and *eros*, the paths to salvation—a synthesis that would later dominate the medieval Church. In *caritas*, the two tendencies, the one upward and the other downward, are fused together. Divine grace is the foundation of a life marked by *caritas*, and, since the latter is identified with the Incarnation, the lowering of oneself, and *humilitas*, the Christian life also assumes a certain degree of *humilitas*. In this view, the objective is to reach God in his sublimity and to aspire to perfection through love; for this reason, in the Christian life, too, there is an uplifting urge. To use an Augustinian image that illustrates perfectly this dual aspect, *caritas* is like a tree that extends its roots deep into the earth, but it does so only to enable its top branches to reach up to the sky. There is no one, he says, who does not wish to raise himself or herself up, but we forget too easily that the way to elevation passes through *humilitas*. There is only one way to attain *theologia gloriae* (the theology of glory) and that is by learning *theologia humilitatis* (the theology of humility).

I have touched on the questions of gravity and upward movement. In a universalistic Christian reflection that is at once eccentric and extraordinary with respect to canonical theologies, we find these words in a rather controversial collection of thoughts by Simone Weil:

> All the *natural* movements of the soul are controlled by laws analogous to those of physical gravity. Grace is the only exception. We must always expect things to happen in conformity with the laws of gravity, unless there is supernatural intervention. Two forces rule the universe: light and gravity […]. Generally what we expect from others depends on the effect of gravity on them. (p. 1)

Weil discusses the tragedy of gravity, reflecting on the fact that everything that we call baseness is a manifestation of gravity. At the same time an upward motion appears as well as a downward motion, which is typical of metaphysical logic that appears several times in these pages. In this text, which is composed of various thoughts scattered in her *Notebooks*, we read that heaviness:

> Gravity makes things come down; wings make them rise […]. What wings raised to the second power can make things come down without weight? Creation is composed of the descending motion of gravity, by the ascending movement of grace and by the descending motion of grace to the second degree. Grace is the law of descending motion. To lower oneself is to rise in the domain of moral gravity. Moral gravity makes us fall toward the heghts. Too great affliction places a human being beneath pity: it arouses disgust, horro, and scorn. Pity goes down to a certain level but not below it. What

> does charity do in order to descend lower? Have those who have fallen so low pity on themselves? (pp. 3–4)

It must be made clear that the ascent will be all the more powerful the more one is humiliated. It is an experience of the void, and this seems to be contrary to all the laws of nature and to its will; only grace can accomplish this because it can function only where there is a void ready to receive it; and it itself creates that void. Mankind eludes the laws of this world only for a brief moment. Moments of pause, contemplation, pure intuition, emptiness of mind, and acceptance of the moral void are vehicles with which to ascend heavenward. These moments make us "capable of the supernatural. Whoever endures a moment of the void either receives the supernatural bread or falls. It is a terrible risk but one that must be run, even during the instant when hope fails. But we must not throw ourselves into it" (Ibid. p. 11). In order to achieve complete detachment, in order to be able to ascend, unhappiness is not sufficient; we need to find ourselves in an inconsolable unhappiness. In fact, there must not be any consolation at all. Only then does ineffable consolation come down to us. The process involves emptying oneself of the world to the point of erasing its divinity, reducing nature to the condition of a slave, to nothingness, to a zero point in space and time. Stripping ourselves of our imaginary sovereignty over the world pushes us toward absolute solitude, which is the ultimate goal. In this way, we arrive at the truth of the world, renouncing all that is not grace, without desiring it, however. The extinguishing of desire, which can also be found in Buddhism, self-detachment, *amor fati*, or even desire of the absolute good, always mean the same thing: emptying all content and every purpose in order to desire in emptiness, to desire without aspiration. Weil goes on to say that, when we listen to Bach or a Gregorian chant, all the faculties of the soul, each in its own way, strain and become silent in order to grasp that perfectly beautiful thing. Among the faculties, intelligence does not find anything to affirm or to deny in music, but it derives nourishment from it. Should faith not be a participatory act of this kind? The mysteries of faith break down when we make them an object of affirmation or negation, whereas they should be an object of contemplation (Ibid. pp. 116–20).

We now need to examine grace and love from a comparative perspective. In *Mysticism East and West: A Comparative Analysis of the Nature of Mysticism* (pp. 207–10), Rudolf Otto, beginning with Plotinus, examines the parallelism between Christian love, as described by Eckhart, and the concept of *bhakti*, as described by Sankara, an Indian philosopher of the 8th century and a theoretician of absolute monism or the non-dualistic school, which attempted to establish the rational foundations for the Brahmanic doctrine by demonstrating that the only reality is that of the *Brahman-atman*: the root of

all our knowledge; it is truth, consciousness, and infinity that reveal themselves to us as the most intimate part of ourselves. If *bhakti* designates a mystical tension and ecstasy, a fusion of one with the other, of the 'I' with the 'you,' in a kind of affective excitation, the author notes that Eckhart does not acknowledge such a 'pathological love.' For Eckhart, love is the Christian virtue of *agape*, which is different even from Plotinus' mystical 'love.' The Greek term *eros*, the enjoyment of sensible and suprasensible beauty, grows out of an *aesthetic* experience that Eckhart does not know at all and that, in its most subtle sublimation, is always in effect accompanied by something that pertains to *eros*, as we see in Plato's *Symposium*: a great 'daimon' that sublimates the heat of the will to generate in the divine fire, and that, however, maintains in itself a spark of this heat as such. Otto refers to Plotinus in his discussion of the splendor of beauty, which is similar to the beauty of a flower that blooms or to an intoxication of the soul. We arrive at this profound place only through the nature of *eros*; one who loves searches in the domain of the *beautiful* until he or she reaches the first principle, which is beauty itself. Only at this point is one who loves liberated from the painful aspect of desire. As Plotinus says, "the soul is always an Aphrodite […]. The souls in its nature loves God and longs to be at one with Him in the noble love of a daughter for a noble father" (*Enneads* VI. 9, 9). To the extent that we can distinguish between such a celestial Aphrodite from the vulgar, terrestrial one, the principle of "those to whom all this experience (*pathema*) is strange, must understand it by way of our earthly longings (*entauthat erotes*)" (Ibid.) is valid. Eckhart, instead, does not begin with states of emotional agitation, as does the mystic of emotional love, in order to arrive at a union with the Highest, the extreme point of an exchange of affection. In fact, for Eckhart, love unites in works and not in essence. That is to say, the union is above all the foundation of a true *agape*. As such, we cannot find in it elements that it shares with Plato's or Plotinus' *eros* because Eckhart exalts pure Christian feeling in its simplicity and chastity: the unity and unification in being and in essence are applied to faith and to the abandonment of the will. Sankara also recognizes an affective union based on essential unity. In this unity, the eternal *Brahman* is not only being and spirit, but infinite joy as well. We can add that for Eckhart, by participating in God, the soul also participates in His beatitude, although this point is not emphasized. The main point of Eckhart's thinking is not a supreme mystical will or the emotional expression of a union with God, but *agape*, which is a form of love about which Sankara and Plotinus do not speak and which neither recognizes.

Alongside theological grace, a profane grace emerges and evolves in literary and artistic representations; at times, it inevitably resembles theological grace. Rosario Assunto offers us a different theoretical perspective, which is

useful for aesthetics and criticism. In his reading of Neoclassicism, we find the template for an ideal beauty, located between Heaven and earth, between the past and the present, in an ongoing and reciprocal dynamic where the concept of time becomes involved. In this view, antiquity becomes a lost Paradise of nostalgia, a promised homeland to which we yearn to return.

The ideal of the retrospective gaze in aesthetics and in the arts guided by grace was theorized in Germany by Winkelmann and Schiller and in Italy by Aurelio Bertola de' Georgi and Leopoldo Cicognara. Alongside the motif of quietude, a nuance that is absolutely congenial and always present, we find elements of antiquity that are assumed as 'absolute' and uncorrupted models capable of suggesting new interpretations even of the sublime of the spirit, in the spirit of Classicism. In such a context, Greece is praised as an original identity.

Grace can coexist with the sublime, which also lends itself to other theorizations and possible formulations. Under the impetus of modernity, the sublime shifts attention to the domain of aesthetics, concerned increasingly with nature. In the course of its evolution, however, the sublime opens itself up to a multiplicity of forms and to an intersection of categories, to the point of giving rise to a 'sublime gracefulness' or a 'graceful sublime.' In Assunto's analysis, the centrality of the 'aesthetic categories' and the idea of beauty that is seen as a grid with emotional and conceptual lines of development have always needed to be based on grace. When he discusses the institution of nature as the expression of grace, he is engaging in a deliberate 'play' of meanings that run from 'profane gracefulness' to 'theological grace.' He reverts, however, to the essential notion of an 'absolute beauty' that can contain all of these meanings, even as it maintains a relationship with a free and spontaneous nature. The circles widen and multiply, however, because in such a multiplication of forms and ideas, Assunto also describes a *grace of nature* and a *sublime nature*. The first draws from a repertoire that, starting from Dante's *Paradise,* arrives at Neoclassicism passing through 14th-century late Gothic, thereby charting a course in which nature is led to grace because grace perfects nature and makes its sacredness appear through the profane. Sublime nature is, instead, represented by Ossian, Rousseau, and Schiller who favor a condition that Assunto calls the free play of passion, feeling, and fantasy. Both sublime nature and the grace of nature pertain to history or, as Assunto himself states more precisely, "to nature as the form of history, to history as the content of nature." Through this interpretation, we arrive at a new philosophy in which culture and civilization are profoundly and radically united.

On the basis of these considerations, we can say that grace in art, as in the forms of the human body, indicates a property, whether innate or ac-

quired, that is tightly connected to the rhythm of the composition. And it appears to be very natural to think that a light, delicate, mysterious, and inexplicable aura emanates from beauty, influenced by and brought up as we are with that sensibility that developed from the Renaissance to the 19th century, from Castiglione's *sprezzatura* (nonchalance) to the Neoclassical 'gift from heaven.' Grace reserves some surprises, however, that issue from its hidden aura. For André Félibien, for example, at the end of the 1600s, beauty was linked to proportion and grace to the expression of the stirrings of the soul; for Hogarth, in mid century, grace was attributed to the drawing of a 'serpentine line,' while to Winkelmann it seems like 'the pleasant in accordance with reason,' which rejects affectation and affirms the values 'of simplicity and quietude of the soul.' Assunto guides us through different models and 18th-century forms that are far removed from cultural and philosophical stereotypes. He leads us into places of revelation or in that more ungraspable place of beauty described by Bacon. Avoiding all that is affected and superficial, which are stereotypes of 18th-century taste, grace manifests itself in its aura of dignity and composure, which has already been mentioned in relation to Home, and which we will find again in Schiller (see Pt. 2, ch. 7).

In his study, Assunto also analyzes the unique conjoining of grace and sublimity in Italian Neoclassicism. For Bertola (*Saggi sopra la grazia nelle lettere ed arti*, 1786–1787 [*Essays on Grace in Literature and the Arts*], grace is the perfect blend of refinement, gentleness, delicateness, voluptuousness, and furtiveness, and it is the opposite of Baroque playfulness and 'acutezza' or *ingenium* (wit). Cicognara (*Del Bello,* 1834 [On Beauty], hypothesizes the union of grace and simplicity, thereby moving away from the Burke's interpretation of the sublime or the feeling of 'pleasurable terror.' He was thinking of a graceful sublime or of a sublime grace such as we might find in Canova's work. In this particular context, he cites the example of the *Funerary Monument to Maria Christina of Austria* (Church of the Augustinians, Vienna), in which grace flows over the noble, 'sublime' representation of death. We can also take another path that leads from the Baroque to the romantic, noting a development in taste characterized by the exploration of questions suggested by the work of Pseudo-Longinus, from the delight of the whimsical and the calming forms of Classicism and Neoclassicism, to the image of the agitation of passion. The philosopher paints a complex picture of ideas capable of containing the poetics of nature as well as the nature of feeling.

In an interpretive pathway that identifies nature with spirit, the European artistic culture between the 1700s and the 1800s operates through the senses and reason. At its core, we find the ideal of grace in consonance with the beautiful and the sublime, mediated through the picturesque tied to visual

discovery (optics), the eccentric description, the pleasure of ruins, the fashion of the Grand Tour (from Addison to Wordsworth and Byron, and from Goethe to Heine), as well as peregrinations and walks where perception and seeing are activated.

The aesthetic pleasure of observation that multiplies to infinity surpasses the limits of the aesthetic categories and leads us into a vivid contemplation of absolute beauty. In *The Universal Natural History and Theory of Heaven* (1755), Kant showed us that the world could be admired as a stupendous spectacle laid out for us by nature that offers it up as a gift within which nature appears to transport us with lightness, with no effort at all. This is an interpretation of grace that is still available to us in Assunto's reflections: philosophy immerses itself in the creative process and describes the movements with which art affects the domains of feeling, thinking, and doing.

3.

Eternity and Ineffability

Grace is among us; it derives from the images of a goddess and the spirit of nature, the narrative of the Incarnation as well as the apparition of the Virgin. Literature and painting, from Greco-Roman to Renaissance, offer us a series of myths and representations, and the unbroken enchantment of these depictions and descriptions.

Rudolf Otto examines ineffability and eternity as they pertain to mysticism, understood as the experience of grace (1985, pp. 195–200). He sets out from Eckhart's perspective, which is to say, from an examination of the doctrine of 'divinized humanity' or humanity seen in relation to God, as co-creator of the world and of all things, in other words, 'noble humanity'—a doctrine of grace that the German scholar refers to as 'excessive.' Otto points out that the absolute annihilation to which the creature exposes itself, and which is expressed in the statement, "Let God act in Himself" (*German Sermons*), must really be understood as an erasure. Noble mankind, united with God Himself in eternity and immersed in the most profound abyss of silent divinity, yearns for the grace that saves, without which we are inexorably destined to be cast into Hell. This reflection is prompted by the apparently self-contradictory words of Paul the apostle: "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling […]. For it is God who works in you both to will and to do of [his] good pleasure" (*Philippians* 2:12–13). In Eckhart's reading, mankind is God Himself and the eternal Son; for this reason, in comparing ourselves to God in a daring analogy, we need grace, but contrition, penance, and forgiveness as well in a personal effort to locate our true selves. The path is an absolute one, that of self-abandonment, humility, and poverty, in a process of *vacare Deo* (making space for God), a dedicating of oneself to Him so that He can, "do everything in everything." Eckhart speaks of the depths of the soul and of the fact that this profundity is mystical, in the sense of an elementary and irrepressible structure of our essence. In short, beneath the conscious psychic life lies our entire unconscious being that desires infinite profundity. For Otto this is where, "the *essence* of mankind is contained [...] the *profundity* that can exist immobile and unchanging" (1985, p. 199) even as, on the surface of consciousness, ideas, thoughts, excitations, desires, preoccupations, and hopes follow their course in an undulating dance that repeats itself and sweeps up all things. Freed of every particularity and fortuity, the soul finds refuge in this difficult-to-access place—a space where humans return to themselves and can listen to his inner voice. What image do the

depths of the soul conjure up? It is the image of a wheel that turns or a river that flows. We find ourselves at the origin of the possibility for all actions by our human faculties, to which the soul gives life and impetus; in this place, all that is received through experience is collected and becomes life. In the innermost life, in its unity and simplicity, there is no division, individualization, or fragmentation. It is a becoming 'nothing'; the bottom of the heart is the core of life that constitutes us, a power and supreme synthesis of all that God is.

Otto proceeds to compare these views with those of Sankara. The Indian philosopher recognizes the *atman* in us, but the *atman* is not the soul in the Christian and Eckhartian sense; the soul is not identical to the inner life of the heart. *Atman* is not the soul in the sense of a religious reality of the conscious mind starving for justice, an idea from which we can also see emerging Luther's interpretation with his doctrine of justification by grace through faith. For Śankara, the mysticism of *atman* is not a mysticism of grace that is justification and sanctification; it is not tied to the mysteries of the soul. It is none of these things because "it soars above the spiritual terrain of India, not that of Palestinian and of biblical religiosity" (Ibid. p. 200). The *mukta*, the freed individual who has attained *ekatā* or unity with the eternal *Brahman,* in reality, does not perform any action, either good or evil, because every act is binding. He leaves aside all those actions and *rests* in unity. In this kind of mysticism, all actions disappear, whereas in Christianity, according to Rudolf Otto, grace is a gift that is repeated several times, to the point of becoming an ethics. For Eckhart, contemplation provides a reward that we dispense in love. Otto would return to the specific problem of grace in Hinduism a few years later, in 1930, with a perspective that compensates for this limited interpretation of grace in Hinduism. In this sense, Giorgio Renato Franci's study is useful.

As has been stated, grace is related to the sacred; it involves the divine and the numenous. In the face of the decline and ruin of religion in the course of the 1700s, myth undergoes a rehabilitation, inspiring enthusiastic participation in the world with its force and primitive language (word and chant). Vossius and Vico announce this, while Rousseau and Herder develop its theoretical implications. The new thinking gives legitimacy to myths, on both the ontological and the poetic level, drawing attention to all primitive literatures (Eddas, Ossian, the sacred books of the Orient, the chants of Amerindians). A new, irresistible way of feeling culminates in the evocation of remote times. Nordic and oriental antiquity are superimposed on Homer, Aeschylus, Pindar, and Virgil, thereby generating a passion for all that is grand and untamed, vivifying and disturbing, in other words, the sublime. Considered by some as merely a pagan ornament during the 1700s, myth becomes the sa-

cred par excellence. The broad spectrum of its manifestation is transformed into a totally human passion and into a fabulous imagination. A psychological function, on the one hand, and a strengthening of the human faculties and collective actions, on the other, are associated with the sphere of the sacred. In this regard, we should consider the fact that, through a strange reversal of symbols, there is a certain rehabilitation of the sacred even in the festivals of the French Revolution. The sacralization of myth, of whatever origin, is attributable directly to the humanization of the sacred. In this double transformation, the juxtaposition of the sacred and the profane finds new applications. In this way, myth is no longer theogony but anthropogeny.

In the mid 1700s, however, there is a movement away from the principle of contemplation. Reason ceases to be the faculty that leads to transcendence. This is the environment in which Joseph de Maistre and Maine de Biran operate. Toward the end of the century, Anton Mesmer (to mesmerize) is refuted (1785) and Swedenborg is criticized by Kant and later appreciated by Coleridge, Balzac, and Baudelaire. In addition, in the early 1800s, Georg Friedrich Creuzer (*Symbolik und Mythologie der alten Völker, besonders der Griechen*, 1810 [*Symbolism and Mythology of the Ancient Peoples, Particularly the Greeks*], would be strongly criticized for having defined mythology as a timeless blueprint of human knowledge; in this interpretation, he rejected modern culture for its inability to grasp the connecting link between human values and sacredness, which had enriched the ancient world with its mystical and Dionysian experiences. Only the symbol, according to Creuzer, can reveal such a link, one that originates in the most profound part of being, and that can offer an instant understanding of phenomenal reality as well as its metaphysical foundations. For Creuzer, an excess of rationalism caused us to lose our symbolic faculty.

These considerations call for an examination of the sacred and its meaning in relation to the evolution of the categories of taste and in relation to the artistic and literary imaginary. The sacred itself becomes aesthetic feeling and it appears to interact powerfully and profoundly with our notions of grace and beauty. It may share aspects of the tragic, but the oracular subject of the god and the problem of inescapable human destiny contrast with the image of the sacred as a pacifying force, in which agitation is stilled. The sacred is close to the sublime, but it does not express 'the noble feeling,' the grandness of the spirit, neither in the interpretation of Boileau and his followers nor in that of Burke and his circle. It does not fit particularly well with the Neoclassicists, the Gothic lovers of ruins, or landscapist lovers of the picturesque. The sacred contains aspects of these various concepts of taste, but it is not identifiable as any of them. From the aesthetic point of view, the sacred is not a disquieting muse; it does not sow terror, and is not

absorbed by the dignity of the oration; it is not definable as sweetness, perfection, or harmony; it is not even a variant of the *je ne sais quoi*, that is to say, of something that emits a mysterious charm, something indefinable that is not the product of rules, elegance without affectation, or the attraction of the surprise of individual response. Instead, the sacred promotes a feeling of wonder before the splendor of the cosmos, the earth, and the elements, but also before the stirrings of the human spirit, tradition, and myth. The romantics interpret sacredness as intuition and the aesthetic life through the revelation of the 'noumenous' in its most diverse manifestations, from the extraordinary apparition to the miracle. It is no longer a religious matter, but one that pertains to the feeling of beauty that involves art, nature, and faith. It is not a category of the indefinable and the individual but a feeling of the ineffable and the universal. The sacred is, therefore, a utopia of revelation, the search for a mysterious, secret aura. For these reasons, it can provoke disturbances; it is also anguish associated with our discovery of the absolute in art.

In general, the sphere of the sacred implies the order of the ineffable, the unsayable, and the inexplicable, pertaining to an experience that is out of the ordinary, exceptional, and inviolable; in other words, the relationship with the divine. An initial way of understanding the sacred is through juxtaposition: the sacred is the antithesis of the profane, as the pure is the opposite of the impure. The closer we come to the sacred, the more we remove ourselves from the world. The sacred indicates the condition of that which is separate, but which exists in contact with the divine and with the manifestation of its power. Active here is the force that we project outside of ourselves, objectifying it, and that we subsequently intuit in order to experience it as 'external' to us and beyond our control. We can connect elements of the romantic imaginary to these issues. There is a change here, as indicated earlier, in that the object of inspiration and representation is no longer faith but the evocation of its form. The sacredness of aesthetic intuition or, in a daring reformulation, the sacred itself as aesthetic intuition, represents a radical change. Art institutes rituals, reproduces the power of its sublime object, and puts on display its secret 'daimon.' Art with a lower case 'a' becomes Art, drawing nourishment from the imaginary of religions and mythologies; it wraps itself in a divine aura and assumes an oracular quality. The whole world, like the universe of feeling, is filtered through it, since art has become the absolute interpreter. The romantics elevate art, locating it in a very secret place, in the *temenos* (sacred space) of creative inspiration. The romantic age introduces devotion or exhilarating ecstasy. Hegel would revive the spirit of that process in an important passage, writing: "[Art] only fulfills its supreme task […] when it is simply one way of bringing to our minds and expressing the Di-

vine, the deepest interests of mankind and the most comprehensive turths of the spirit" (p. 7). To understand better this relationship, however, we need to go beyond the Hegelian view of knowledge, which is sub-divided into art, religion, and philosophy.

The first half of the 1800s is permeated by a sense of the infinite that develops into a full-fledged poetics of the sacred. With the Enlightenment crisis and the end of the revolution in Europe, the image of the divine resurfaces in the world of the arts, however, I repeat, without celebrating the dogmas of orthodox religion. Essentially, romantic mankind re-experiences the presence of God even in a profound and personal relationship with the opposite of God and with nothingness. The 'daimon' of spirituality, then, expands the area of the sacred to the point of including its most obscure and disturbing facets; in the privacy of their vocation, writers, artists, and musicians are driven by what we might call a 'negative theology.' Many romantics, therefore, could relate to an idea expressed by Leopardi: "In short, the principle of things, and of God Himself, is nothingness" (*Zibaldone* [*Notebook*], July 18, 1821). The source of this thought is ancient, but the interpretation is new. Art itself is imagined and accepted as something sacred, in the way described here. This is especially the case in Germany, with the idealist philosophers and the romantic artists. Not unimportant, in this regard, is the fact that Schopenhauer, for example, spoke of a metaphysics of the beautiful.

As regards the religious approach to aesthetics, we can recall that Hans Urs von Balthasar in *The Glory of the Lord* (pp. 239–78) defines the space of a 'theological aesthetics' when he makes reference to the great change German Idealism and Romanticism brought to philosophy, art, and religion. To be more precise, in that particular moment of secularization, the focus of the question is seen to develop around the relationship between the Bible and aesthetics. In this extensive study, in which Christian revelation meets the doctrine of the beautiful, Johann Georg Hamann is seen as the exponent of theological aesthetics; he was the first to outline a doctrine in which we can find earthly, pagan beauty together with Christian beauty. He was followed by Johann Gottfried Herder who melded together poetry and theology. In *Vom Geist des Christentums* (*The Spirit of Christianity and Its Fate*, 1794–1798), he affirms that there is an organic link between divine inspiration and the human capacity for the same inspiration, and he speaks of the enthusiasm associated with an authentic reawakening that originates in God. Like others of his era, Herder is influenced by the fluid pantheistic identification of the natural with the supernatural, which humanizes Christianity. Chateaubriand's *Génie du christianisme* (*The Genius of Christianity*, 1802) has spiritual origins similar to Herder's. It argues against reason in favor of the power of feeling and imagination. As do Classicism and German idealist Romanti-

cism, Herder asserts a kind of identity between aesthetic humanism and Christianity. From his perspective, Chateaubriand supports Christianity and its dogmas as he describes the charm emitted by the Christian mysteries, its influence on art and thought; he also discusses the forms of the marvelous in ornaments, liturgies, and rituals. For Balthasar (1975–1786, II, pp. 78–79), who takes a theological critical approach, Herder is an aesthetic theologian and Chateaubriand an aesthetic apologist.

The description of our topic contains the term "marvelous." Grace has always been associated with the sacred and the marvelous. Chateaubriand speaks of the 'Christian marvelous,' quoting Dante, Tasso, and Milton, by which he means the capacity to represent the supernatural: angels, demons, the kingdoms of the hereafter. In *Philosophy of Art*, Schelling considers the marvelous to be the real discovery of the modern Christian epic, as opposed to the ancient epic. With Christianity and the separation of the divine and the earthly, the marvelous makes its appearance in history. Madame de Staël (*On Literature,* 1800 and *Germany,* 1810) admires Ossian, praises Rousseau, Bernardin de Saint-Pierre, Young, and Gray; above all, she defends the supernatural which, however, refers to the witches and ghosts in Shakespeare, along with a preference for terrifying or horrific effects, thereby suggesting another point of view.

The idea of the symbol is useful for understanding the ideals of the age of Goethe and contains the general principles of romantic aesthetics. Todorov (pp. 235–42, 249–52) provides a description of this. As Goethe also emphasizes in a 1798 work titled *Über die Gegenstände der bildenden Kunst*, the symbol has an inexhaustible quality, is like the unsayable, and conveys its meaning indirectly; it is an image. To clarify, I would like to cite the words of Wilhelm August Schlegel (*Die Kunstlebre*, 1801) who, in reference to Schelling, states: "the beautiful is a symbolic representation of the infinite." In addition, the infinite can be brought to the surface only symbolically. The symbol is not a facet of abstract reason; rather, it is an intuitive and sensitive way of grasping things. Schelling, on the other hand, argues that art, precisely as symbol, has special access to the absolute, the divine, and it points to the visible reality of ideas; it is able to capture the ideal and the universal aspect of objects hidden within each sensible form. The task of art is to provide universal forms that are at once ideal and real. Such forms are called ideas, which are expressed in a way that involves mythological figures. Even the Schlegels evoke a sort of new mythology that is the hieroglyphic expression of nature, which enables consciousness to experience satisfaction in contemplation. The German line of thinking is clear and it includes the notion of grace.

The figures of the sacred presuppose a poetics of the ineffable, of something that is untranslatable. It is art, however, that expresses something that cannot be said in any other way. Figurative art and music express that which words cannot or an aspect of mysticism. The ineffable is clearly present in various romantic works of literature, painting, and music. Many writers, artists, and musicians solve the problem of the ineffable through the evocation of images; the sacred cannot be spoken, but it can be represented. Poetry succeeds in communicating the unsayable via the aesthetic properties provided by rhetoric and born of the imagination. Poetic language is pressed to engender in us a multiplicity of similar representations. The ineffable is expressed through this multiplicity. Wackenroder, a defender of art as the expression of the unsayable and of the invisible through the language of the marvelous, has given us an account of this process. In more general terms, for the romantics, dealing with the deities means entering into the hidden principle of things. Friedrich Schlegel (*Dialogue on Poetry*, 1800) explains that the divine cannot be expressed in any other way, precisely because it is inexpressible. In general, the use of symbolic language is the fundamental principle of poetry. The divine can be conveyed only indirectly. God can be expressed in art only symbolically.

Behind the ineffable, the symbol, and myth, we find the secret of the sacred, derived either directly or indirectly from German sources, in the works of French and Italian romantics as well. With this in mind, they eulogized aesthetics in a solemn oration that illustrates the transmission of the treasure of religions to their own spirit, which was free, without dogmatisms, and rich in precious, plundered beauties. In so doing, they created a cosmic embrace with precepts, a new sense of enchantment and of the marvelous, and a new source of consolation.

In its final historical phase, grace transferred its semantic content into these contexts. However, if, from a religious iconological point of view, we want to find a pertinent image or figure, we must refer to the Virgin. For the meaning of this image, we can consider the *Magnificat*, which is celebrated in literature, the arts (from Botticelli to Pontormo), and music (Bach, Vivaldi, and Pergolesi). The arts inherit the doctrines of grace and release the meaning of the sacred by adapting its language.

In the Gospel of St Luke (1:39–56), we read that Mary visits Elizabeth at Zechariah's house, after she has been visited by the angel who told her: "Fear not, Mary; you have found grace with God." In the *Magnificat*, grace is truly the extraordinary gift, the aura of God that magnifies or exalts her soul; it is the heavenly gaze that enters into her being. The grace of divine splendor is clearly different from pagan grace. In the story we have a fully developed Judeo-Christian message. Mary is united with the splendor of God; we see

them joined together in compassion, charity, and the gift of assistance to their people.

> My soul magnifies the Lord, / And my spirit rejoices in God my Savior. / For He as regarded the low estate of His handmaiden, / For behold, henceforth all generations shall call me blessed. / For He who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is His name. / And His mercy is on those who fear Him from generation to generation. / He has shown strength with His arm: / He has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts. / He has put down the mighty from their thrones, / and exalted those of low degree. / He has filled the hungry with good things; / and the rich He has sent empty away. / He has helped His servant Israel, in remembrance of His mercy; / As He spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to His posterity forever.

The *Magnificat* is one of the narratives and doctrinal nodes of Christianity.

For commentary on the Gospel of St Luke, especially on the Annunciation, to which the Visitation is intimately linked, I refer to a recent study by Paolo Ricca who has read the event of becoming a mother in an extraordinary or miraculous way, which is to say, as the birth of the impossible. This is a useful extension of our discussion because the question of grace is emphasized as salvation in the two moments of the narrative. We are confronted, he writes, with two couples: one composed of elderly people and the other of young people. The elderly couple is too old to have children. In addition to being 'advanced in age,' Zechariah and Elizabeth are also 'barren.' The young couple could have children, but they are only engaged and not married and, in those days, conceiving a child was not possible in such a circumstance. God, therefore, sends his angel to announce to the couples two impossible births: that of John the Baptist, which is impossible since Elizabeth and Zechariah are too old and no longer fertile, and that of Jesus, which is impossible because Mary and Joseph, although able to have children, are not living together and so conception cannot occur. And yet, these two impossible births happen; these two children, who could not be born, are born: the impossible becomes possible. This is the work of God, as described by tradition. Jesus is born. He does not "come down from the stars," as the words of a Christmas carol suggest, but emerges, like any child, from the womb of a young woman. He is born as we are all born and as every child on earth is born. It is true, Ricca goes on to explain, that Jesus "comes from on high" (John 3:33), but he is born on earth. As Isaiah prophesied, for once "salvation bears fruit" (Isaiah 45:8): the earth does not open up, as it has always done, "to receive the blood of Abel" (Genesis 4:11) and the blood of all the victims of history, but to produce a son of man capable of beginning a new and different history. The birth of Jesus is often called miraculous, but

miraculous was the conception, not the birth, Ricca adds. The birth was ordinary, like all the others. Every birth, even the most ordinary, is also extraordinary. Jesus is born, then, of Mary, but not of Joseph, let us not forget.

But in what way can the impossible become possible? The angel tells us in his greeting of Mary. Without calling her by name, he says to her: "Hail, favored by grace; the Lord is with thee" (Luke 1:28). The Greek term, Ricca emphasizes, is *kecharitomene*, from the verb *karitoo*, which in the active form means 'to show favor' and in the passive form used here means 'to receive a favor.' The angel, therefore, greets Mary in this way, calling her 'favored by grace' or 'subject to divine favor.' The traditional Catholic translation "Hail Mary, full of grace" (as in Jerome's Latin translation of *Ave, Maria, gratia plena*) does not render the text correctly because it makes Mary the repository of grace, while she is its object. To be precise, this is the divine choice. Mary, who, like Zechariah, was not from a sacerdotal family or from Davidic ancestry, like Joseph, and had no legitimate right to carry out the most exalted mission to which a Hebrew woman could aspire (to be the mother of the Messiah); it is she, who is nothing to anyone, a simple girl chosen for this singular task. Only because she is 'favored by grace,' this impossible event becomes possible. Grace is the key word in the angel's annunciation and it is the word that contains the quintessence of the new and different history that is about to begin. The extraordinary, impossible thing that becomes possible lies in the fact that everyone has the more or less clear impression that this history concerns them somehow. Essentially, the angel's Christmas greeting to Mary is directed to humanity in general. It is as if the angel said: 'Hail, humanity, favored by grace.' A common, ordinary event is extraordinary. Every birth is extraordinary. Each birth, Ricca goes on to say, is a miracle, the greatest miracle in the world. We celebrate the miracle of life and we celebrate the God of life.

The idea that we are the object and not the repository of grace is important in my approach to the subject since being born and dying can be interpreted as a coming out of and a going into nothingness. But in what sense? Meister Eckhart reflects on this matter, indeed, demonstrating the sublimity of detachment (taking leave of oneself) in the absolute humility and openness of the soul (p. 199, p. 131). Wondering what the highest and noblest virtue through which mankind can unite with God might be, Eckhart affirms that it is, indeed, pure detachment, which he praises more than any other form of love, because it obliges God to love us. God can, in fact, unite with us more intimately and better than we can with him: "Detachment is so close to nothingness that nothing is so fine as to find refuge in detachment […]. Only he is so simple and so fine that he can find refuge in the detached spirit. Detachment, therefore, is not open to any other than God" (Ibid. p. 136). Eck-

hart goes on to say that, when it finds itself in true detachment, the free spirit obliges God to come to it and, "if it could remain without form and without accident, it would assume the being that is proper to God." In addition, the person who remains in such a state of total detachment is rapt in eternity to such an extent that nothing transitory or vile can disturb him or her. So that this can happen, which is to say so that equality of God and human can be realized, it is necessary to have the effect of grace, which removes mankind from all the material things and purges us of the ephemeral. Grace infuses that receptivity in humanity, through which God can truly operate; this receptivity or openness represents an uncommon encounter, the culmination of detachment, and God himself; this is the place of nothingness and beatitude where, beyond prayer, having abandoned all images, we can unite with formless Being, which is the only authentic consolation.

In terms of the eternal, grace cannot be explained and, for this reason, it is ineffable. This has already been stated even in reference to the figure of Mary. It does not come about as the result of an effort of the will. It does not come from above as something alien, but rather as something within us, in the depths of our being. It is not a new idea or way of perceiving, nor an original representation of the world; it is, instead, a new way of seeing things, a new way of being that is confident of the existence of the good beyond any egotistical volition. It is love without passion, indeed without a specific object. With such a detached spirit, grace leads us to the light, the pure light that requires no form because it is a movement from the heart of mortals to the eternal and from the eternal to mankind. The will and the intellect do not appear to be free, but servants that depend on external objects and on the opinions we form of these. Grace does not come from effort or achievement; it is like a second nature, the true one; the first is based on being and the world, while the second is based on desire for the absolute, the infinite and it counters *amor sui* (self-love) with *amor dei* (love of God). It does not radiate out from a hidden God, like a *deus ex machina*, but from a single light where all dualities disappear. Grace is free, free from all opinions, all ties; it is able to dissolve all contents. It asks for nothing; it does not demand or institute anything. It is a non-knowing in the form of an educated ignorance; it causes evil to cease; it is the absence of iniquity, suffering, and death. It is a gaze without expectation or regret. And it is free in the sense of pure spirit, in the sense of God himself. Everything is grace, then, when necessity disappears and when egoism has retreated. Grace is a gift of extraordinary beauty, a miracle for the living. Aesthetics and theology can come together and art redistributes this sense of the ineffable and the eternal in the life of forms.

4.

Metaphysics of Love

The expression 'metaphysics of love' can be taken to mean everything that pertains to passion in its passage and transformation from human experience to the domain of writing. As Denis de Rougemont asserts (1977, p. 295), the instant that they become literature, myths lose their esoteric quality and their sacred function; figures of speech and metaphorical disguise replace mysticism with the need for the *ideal*. The courtly love myth and the dissolution of its elements with the passing of time are an example of this. Both Classicism and the poetics of Romanticism attempted to give an *art form* to the various components of love and to the vestiges of historical memory, which are central elements of Western civilization. The history of amorous passions, from the 13th century to the 20th, is essentially the history of the decline of the courtly love myth within a more profane and ordinary model of life. It is the narrative of the many attempts on the part of *eros* to replace mystical transcendence with the intensity of emotion. We find frequent metaphorical shifts in creativity and in the literary imagination as rhetoric differentiates itself from religion. Whereas the conventional expression of sensuality and sensual pleasure originally took the form of sublimation, inheriting the mysticism of sacred language, in the disappearance of the courtly love myth, we see, instead, changes of meaning in a different process of prosaicness. The courtly discourse had constructed figures that would then characterize it, starting from the more ancient patrimony of sacred images. With de Rougemont, we can essentially say that these representations, in the historical perspective of Western narrative, are merely 'singing the praises of a twilight.' They depict the decline of the original, symbolic light; ambiguity and illusions that would increasingly take hold of the language, style, and strategies of storytelling creep in more and more. The grace of the Incarnation mixes with that of carnal passion. There is, in a word, an 'amorous sickness' at the very root of courtly love. Chrétien de Troyes said: "My sickness is different from all the others; for to tell you the truth, it brings me pain and joy**,** and in my misery I find delight" (*Cligés* p. 131). De Rougemont recalls this idea for the purpose of illustrating the issue of the 'metaphysics of love' in the Middle Ages. As regards this topic, however, we should not lose sight of the lesson contained in the *Symposium* and the thoughts of Leone Ebreo; specifically, we should note that attention shifts to another type of illness. Behind these examples we find a lively aspiration to unity or a desire to embrace totality. The course traditionally charted by *eros* is an unending one that goes beyond ordinary existence.

In Plato's *Symposium* there is a discussion on Love that is found in the feelings and souls of the gods and men; there is praise for its harmonious and fluid nature, which is proof of the "grace, a property which is universally held to belong to Love in particular" (196A). Agathon says that:

> Most importantly, in all his dealings with gods or with men Love acts fairly and is treated fairly too. For oppression and Love are incompatible, so Love is never dealt with harshly when he's at the receiving end, and never acts oppressively either, because everyone is happy to carry out any of Love's commands, and situations which involve agreement and the consent of both parties are defined by 'law, society's king' as just. Love is characterized by a high degree of self-discipline, as well as by fairness. Everyone accepts that self-discipline is the control of pleasure, and they also accept that there is no pleasure better than Love. So if pleasures fail to match Love, they are defeated by Love, and Love is in control, and if Love is in control of pleasure and desire, then he is particularly self-disciplined. As for courage, not even Ares can withstand Love. I mean, it wasn't Ares who captured Love, but Love who captured Ares—love of Aphrodite, in the story. Since a captor is superior to a captive, then if A defeats B, when B is otherwise the bravest in the world, it follows that A is absolutely the bravest in the world. (196C–D)

Consequently, Love is justice, temperance, fortitude, and wisdom. Furthermore, because he is very accomplished in each of the arts of the Muses, this god can turn anyone into a poet, if he wishes. Agathon goes on to say that even the tasks of the gods were carried out when Love made his appearance, love of beauty naturally, because the god steers clear of vileness. Before then, according to legend, there were terrible battles among the gods, battles fought under the impetus of necessity, but, as this god emerged, all the goods showered by the gods on mankind originated in the love of beauty. What is more, Love empties us of every form of savageness, fills us with a sense of intimacy, arranges many encounters among us through which we can rediscover ourselves since it acts as our guide in feasts, songs, and sacrifices; he inspires sweetness and repels crudeness; he is a miracle of benevolence that negates malevolence; he is our companion and savior in suffering and fear.

The issue of love is, however, taken up and explained by Socrates through the words of Diotema:

> "What is Love, then," I asked. "Mortal?"
> "Of course not."
> "What, then?"
> "He occupies middle ground," she replied "like those cases we looked at earlier; he lies between mortality and immortality."
> "And what does that make him, Diotema?"

> "An important spirit, Socrates. All spirits occupy the middle ground between humans and gods."
> "And what's their function?" I asked.
> "They translate and carry messages from men to gods and from gods to men. They convey men's prayers and the gods' instructions, and men's offerings and the gods' returns on these offerings. As mediators between the two, they fill the remaining space, and so make the universe an interconnected whole. They enable divination to take place and priests to perform sacrifices and rituals, cast spells, and do all kinds of prophecy and sorcery. Divinity and humanity cannot meet directly; the gods only ever communicate and converse with men (in their sleep or when conscious) by means of spirits. Skill in this area is what makes a person spiritual, whereas skill in any other art or craft ties a person to the material world. There are a great many different kinds of spirit, then, and one of them is Love." (202E, 203A)

Socrates inquires about his father and mother and learns that, when Aphrodite was born, the gods held a banquet, which was attended by, among others, Poros (Expedience), son of Metis (Wisdom). When they had feasted, Penia (Poverty) came begging as she stayed by the gates. In the meantime, Poros, who was drunk on nectar, went into the garden of Zeus where he fell asleep. Then, thinking that she might relieve her lack of resources by managing to have a son from Poros, Penia lay beside him and got pregnant with Love. And so, Love became the companion and servant of Aphrodite, because he was conceived on the day of her birth and this is why he is by nature a lover of beauty, since Aphrodite herself is beautiful.

This, then, is the destiny of Eros, son of Poros and Penia. First of all, he is always poor and very far from delicate and beautiful, as many think he is; instead, he is rather wild, barefoot, homeless, accustomed to sleeping on the ground, at gates, on roadsides, and in the cold of night. But, having his father's nature, he is a schemer who seeks the beautiful and the good; he is brave, impetuous, and resolute, a proud hunter who is always ready to weave all sorts of clever snares, resourceful in his pursuit of learning, a lover of philosophy throughout his life, a great trickster, a genius of enchantments and potions, and a sophist. The result is a hybrid nature, neither immortal nor mortal; at times, he springs to life when he gets his way; at other times, instead, he dies and then is reborn due to the influence of his divine father; whatever he acquires always slips through his fingers. For this reason, Eros is never poor or rich. He occupies a position midway between wisdom and ignorance; none of the gods are philosophers or wish to become wise because they are already so, and one who is already wise does not apply himself or herself to philosophy. Those who find themselves in such a state dedicate themselves to philosophy, and Love is one of these figures. Since

knowledge is knowledge of the most beautiful things and Eros is love of beauty, it follows that Eros is a philosopher and, as such, he is in between wisdom and ignorance. The cause of this, too, lies in his birth: he is born of a wise and ingenious father and an uncultured and naïve mother. This, Diotema points out, is the very nature of the 'daimon' Eros.

Socrates asks, since Eros is love of beauty, what use is he to humans (204D). One who loves beauty, loves to possess it, loves that this good, because the beautiful is also good, can become his or hers. Diotema asks: "What happens when he or she succeeds in possessing the good?" Socrates' answer is that the person becomes happy. Happy people are, in fact, happy because they possess the good, and it is no longer necessary to ask ourselves what the intent is of those who desire happiness since his answer seems unequivocal.

> "Now, do you think this desire, this love, is common to all of us? Do you think everyone wants good things to be his forever, or do you have a different view?"
> "No," I said. "I think it's common to everyone."
> "But if everyone loves the same thing, and always does so, Socrates," she said, "why don't we describe everyone as a lover, instead of using the term selectively, for some people but not for others?"
> "Yes, that us odd, isn't it?" I said.
> "Not really," she replied. "What we do, in fact, is single out a particular kind of love and apply to it the term which properly belongs to the whole range. We call it 'love' and use other terms for other kinds of love."

To explain, Diotema provides the example of creation and poetry:

> "Can you give me an analogy?" I asked.
> "Yes, here's one. As you know, there are all kinds of creativity. It's always creativity, after all, which is responsible for something coming into existence when it didn't exist before. And it follows that all artefacts are actually creations or poems and that all artisans are creators or poets."
> "Right."
> "As you also know, however," she went on, "artisans are referred to in all sorts of ways, not exclusively as poets. Just one part of the whole range of creativity, the part whose domain is music and metre, has been singled out and has gained the name of the whole range. The term 'poetry' is reserved for it alone, and it's only those with creativity in this sense who are called 'poets'."
> "You're right," I said.
> "The same goes for love. Basically, it's always the case that the desire for good and for happiness is everyone's 'dominant, deceitful lover.' But there are a wide variety of ways of expressing this love, and those who follow

> other routes—for instance, business, sport, or philosophy—aren't said to be in love or to be lovers. The terminology which properly applies to the whole range is used only of those who dedicate themselves to one particular manifestation—which is called "love" and "being in love," while they're called 'lovers'."
> "I suppose you're right," I said.
> "Now," she continued, "what of the idea one hears that people in love are looking for their other halves?' What I'm suggesting, by contrast, my friend, is that love isn't a search for a half or even a whole unless the half or the whole happens to be good."

We can, therefore, say that humans love the good and that they also love to possess the good and not only possess it, but possess it forever. Eros is this desire combined with doing what is beautiful with harmony and grace.

Let us now turn to uncreated wisdom and beauty in the *Dialogues of Love* (1535, posthumous) by Leone Ebreo, who took up Philo's syncretism and alexandrine Judaism in an attempt to reconcile 'Mosaic revelation,' and its distinct ethics, with Neoplatonic aesthetics. The Hebraic cultural component should not be played down vis-à-vis that of the Italian Neoplatonists. We would do well keep our distance from Bembo and Castiglione, as well as Varchi and Piccolomini, as Carlo Dionisotti and Giovanni Guanti have shown. As regards the lesson offered by the *Symposium* and the *Phaedrus*, Leone himself indicates that he has discussed love of the universe "more universally than Plato did," drawing a distinction between the love of all creation and love between human beings. According to Guanti (1987, p. 78), an apologia for the most rigorous theocentrism includes the yearning of the soul, which loves beautiful objects that are increasingly less illusory, as well as the correlation between thirst for beauty and longing for the knowledge of truth; the *telos* of mankind's aspiration to ascend no longer consists in the vision of immutable archetypes, but is made to coincide, on the basis an 'unbiased' reading of the texts of classical philosophy, with the highest hope "of those who believe in the sacred Mosaic law," for the sake of raising oneself to God wholly, that is in body and spirit, and entering into sweet dialogue with him as they contemplate his divine inaccessibility "with clear intellectual vision, without dreams and riddles" (Leone Ebreo p. 262). The starting point is obvious; it is where he says that corporeal beauty is formal grace" (Ibid. p. 302) and that all abstract forms are united with the spirit of the world, of which our own rational soul is an image, in the sense that its essence, being an original template, appears as a latent figuration in all spiritual forms. Plato called this 'latent figuration' reminiscence (*anamnesis*), and Aristotle called it potency. The *Dialogues* were intended primarily for Jewish refugees and not for a courtly society. Leone takes up an idea that has four

sources: Hebraic, Christian, Muslim, and classical; this is the idea of an impersonal messiah, seen as eternal wisdom, "the first beauty […] Idea of the universe" (Ibid. p. 321), the only force capable of resisting the dominion of evil in the world and of restoring to God a "most beautifully imagined" creation, as it was when it came out of his hands.

The last dialogue contains speculation, as noted above, which deals with beauty and wisdom. The author puts aside the notion that the variety of the universe can be explained by a single abstract and rational principle. There is no real difference between beauty and wisdom: "supreme beauty is supreme wisdom" (Ibid. pp. 323–24). Divine wisdom embraces all the effects of its activity in a unique, creative 'vision' that has no divisions or multiplicity. The universe is considered to be the product of perpetual attraction and amalgamation; however, in such a view we do not find reasserted the immanence of God in creation, but rather the argument that everything created by the Father necessarily inspires filial devotion towards Him. According to this interpretation, in fact, the causality that binds together all cosmic phenomena cannot have a *logical* aspect; it can have only a *loving* one whereby the process of cause and effect is perfected in that every effect is the child of its own cause which, having generated him, loves the child the way a father does. It is acknowledged that only God can be truly happy and that we all need him, while he needs no one. The cause of all things, however, is love; once again, we have a theory of love and beauty that calls for the intervention of grace. The path runs through *imitatio Dei*: the human does not know God intellectually but by possessing Him with his or her entire being when moved by love to replicate God's actions, even on an infinitely smaller scale. In this perspective, which is always directed toward the beauty of creation even as it causes the opposing flow of knowledge and will to disappear, emerges the idea of a 'harmonious consonance' that renders the human being, who is intimately bound to divine goodness, an angelic figure unaware of conflicts and pain, and a willing partner of God in the "beautification" of the universe.

In this way, man pursues wisdom and beauty, while ugliness promotes discord and negativity and can be attributed to the absence of love. In the face of the disintegration of creation under the weight of sin, the living unity of divine being reappears as the affirmation of beauty. Whether it be the universe created by God the architect or any artistic product, its beauty is determined by the organicity, naturalness, and grace with which it is united in the analogy drawn above, in a circle of love that becomes perfected as it progresses from exemplary to unitive knowledge. Grace manifests itself precisely in this return to divine knowledge that was the source of Edenic splendor, of which every manifestation of beauty is an allusive element capable of evoking the most remote origins of the cosmos in uncreated light, dispelling

the tenebrous abyss of chaos. Beauty is like this when it increases the sanctity of those who contemplate it by arousing in them the powerful desire to ascend to its purest and most recondite origin, along with nostalgia for the lost Paradise. Our good and our beatitude compel us to return to that original beauty, to that homeland of our wisdom so that we may be happy once again in "sweet sight of and delightful union with them" (Ibid. pp. 330). As in the Gnostic cosmologies, Guanti (1987, pp. 87–88) writes, intellective souls set off on a daring journey of reconnaissance in the abysses of matter, having abandoned their perfect abodes among the stars. According to Leone Ebreo, the souls of lovers, although there is no benefit to their fragile corporeality, also devote themselves only, "to the love and service of the supreme creator of the world, drawing life and intellective knowledge and divine light from the eternal world above to the corruptible world below so that the latter might not also be without divine grace and eternal life" (p. 164). The attraction of these souls to what is corruptible mirrors the paternal love that prompted God to pour his life into nothingness, offering us the rays of his splendor.

Love, whose nature is discussed in the context of divine beauty, could redeem the universe just as it can threaten its existence when it is perverted into self-love and appetite for 'vile things.' The original synthesis of intellect and will is thus obscured, but not completely destroyed by the fallen creature. The most important thing is the mental attitude which regulates desire and not desire per se. In fact, Leone says (Ibid. p. 81) that in lower 'non-sentient bodies' and in simple elements there exists a sort of *cognitio abdita* (intuition of primary ideas) that causes fire to rise skyward. These 'dead bodies' do not have in them intellective powers; rather, they are directed by a knowing nature that governs lower objects, which is to say, the soul of the world: "these lower bodies look for their own places and end, not because of their own knowledge, but because of the right knowledge of the prime Creator, infused in World Soul and the universal nature of lower things" (Ibid. p. 82). The created entity in the world is pushed towards what is dissimilar to it by abstract knowledge or mysterious inclination, but it is in the care of God, the love of both a father and a teacher, who wants his son and his disciples to attain the highest level of perfection and beauty, creating a union in which the beloved and the lover delight: "The goal of the lover's love is the enjoyment of the perfection and beauty that the beloved attains" (Ibid. p. 340). In effect, from the time that the sin of our ancestors resulted in the loss of the beatific vision, the wisdom and beauty of God now appear only "in enigmas of the corporeal universe"; but to the wise, this corruptible world does not seem to be completely lacking in grace because it still has the possibility of elevating itself once more to the incorporeal essences through the corporeal

entities. In this way, Guanti affirms (1987, p. 92), the *Dialogues of Love* provide convincing and well-organized aesthetic proof of the existence of God, the only one possible within the purview of Western philosophy up to the 20th century: the presence of beauty is indistinguishable from an increased joy, vitality, and gratitude, in other words, the divine in the world, while its disappearance entails an immediate concealment of God from mankind. The universe is a gift of wise divine love that unfolds in a complex and dynamic structure not grounded in necessity. This is how we can explain the relationship that emerges between necessity and liberty in Leone's ascension circle of love. Every entity is free in relation to all entities ontologically inferior to it, whose needs it can satisfy and whose growth it can promote; every entity is also necessary with respect to entities that 'exceed' it, surpassing it because an entity that possesses a higher degree of being, by virtue of that being, possesses all the lower grades of being. Only God, therefore, is absolutely free while that which is more distant from him, namely chaos and raw matter, is pure necessity. From this derives the excellence of love and beauty, which is always proportional to its gratuitousness: that which is inferior exists because it is loved and, in a sense, obliged to reciprocate the love in order to continue to exist, whereas that which is superior exists in order "to validate inferior entities."

Let us examine this act of incommensurable love through which God 'withdrew' into Himself in order to allow Nothingness and the love of created entities, which are labile approximations, to exist. This love reduces the distance that sin has interposed between the cosmos and God; Leone affirms, however, that this return to God would be impossible without divine help. Like the creation of the world, God's "withdrawing into himself" is imaginable only as a freely given gift. This applies to the Hebrew Genesis, which occurred precisely "because of free grace and splendid benefit." Consequently, on the level of art, it is hoped that a creative process will ensue, a process that generates exemplary beauties only after having experienced all the risks of freedom from preconceived models and that achieves a harmonious synthesis of differences after having traveled along the pathways of love and hope.

In discussing aesthetics and art, Guanti explains the new approach taken here with respect to the precepts of Leon Battista Alberti, who was inspired by Vitruvius: *proportio*, *claritas*, *simmetria*, *conseguentia*. Beauty does not depend on the proportional relationship among the parts. The form of both natural and artificial beauties consists in the splendor of the ideas of natural and artificial beauty, in the spontaneous, graceful giving over of oneself from the perfect to the perfectible, and in the manifestation of the celestial exemplar in earthly matter. To the reasonableness of the canon Leone juxtaposes

the work of love, which is a perpetual becoming in which is reflected the absolute gratuitousness of the creative act that transcends it as eschatological, rather than archaeological, value. In this ontology of action and value, the principle is no longer based on the intelligible, as it is for Plato, but on love.

The beauty of a work of art, as Guanti also notes (Ibid. pp. 102–03), does not reside in the object created, but in an ideational process developed in the soul of the craftsman and 'imparted' by him or her to the viewer through a material medium, and directed not at the senses but the soul. The beauty of a work of art consists in the scope and quality of the many, different formal possibilities that exist within it. Leone Ebreo interprets the famous statement in the *Tabula smaragdina* (*Smaragdine Tablet* or *The Secret of Hermes*), that what is above is what is below and what is below is what is above, in such a way that the two worlds, the one of the 'ideal forms' and the other of indeterminate matter, far from mirroring each other in their immobility, are moved by mutual love towards each other to the point of attaining a perfect 'union.' In order to be able to bring to the earth a fragment of uncreated wisdom, the artist must imitate divine work, which unfolds, as noted earlier, in a paternal fashion. It originates in the love of the Craftsman through the living images that he sees within him and that he wishes to direct outward. But when man initiates a similar creative process, because of its opacity, matter erases the ideal image that inspired it and of which only desire remains. Having become aware of the 'weakness' that subtends his own action, the artist attempts to compensate for the loss of the original perfect model with a "new love," which flows into amorphous matter, causing it to assume intelligible form. The artist thus participates in the divine project of universal redemption. He cannot but pursue that result "to the highest degree possible of beauty" (Leone Ebreo p. 371).

5.

Ecstatic Visions

Visions are like gifts from another world, that is, from an alien, unspeakable world. It is the grace of seeing the things beyond things because the former appear as incorporeal realities that pass from an invisible to a visible form. At the highest level of human experience, contemplation becomes ecstasy or an exceptional, mystical meditation. To see the gods or to see God is an aspiration that runs through human history and fills the human imaginary throughout the centuries where different faiths intersect. It is seeing through a veil of pain; the gaze must pass along a difficult road, one that is full of exemplary sacrifices, as we learn from legends. Through these gifts a magical epiphany shines forth in the spirit of transcendence. To the Greeks, 'seeing the gods' was a familiar experience, as Giovanni Filoramo underscores (1993a, pp. 77–91), both in Homer's world and in the reality of the *polis*, right up to the first centuries of the empire. Apparitions were part of a paradigm of culture and tradition expressed in the tales, rituals, and customs. In the collective conscious, two types of experience had cognitive value for a long period of time. The divine was experienced in the forms of oneiric epiphany and epiphany in the waking state, which were connected to magical practices, for the most part. We have a dream with 'the eyes of the soul,' on the one hand, and perception with 'the eyes of the body,' on the other. The god/daimon, half cosmic god and half personal god, appears in various cults as the interrogation of oracles—an encounter in which the sorcerer or the individual receives the power and nature of the divine in his quest to be assimilated with the god. In addition to these practices, there are also encounters with the evoked superhuman being according to which the vision occurs in an ecstatic state, in the image generated by the *phantastikon pneuma* (imaginary spirit), as in Porphyry. For Filoramo (Ibid. pp. 90–91), the vision of the god is a pneumatic one, produced by that special imaginative force that is *phantasia*, which is located in the soul. From the Greek magical papyri and from Porphyry emerges a cognitive model of 'seeing the gods,' which then becomes widespread. Through the mediation of Augustine, Porphyry's *visio imaginalis*, reformulated in a Christian sense, thought to have influenced the ensuing history of visions.

We must, however, concentrate our attention on Plotinus and on the idea that the image is a mirror of the thing represented and that the image is, therefore, part of his model by virtue of the principle of 'simpatia universale' (universal sympathy); it is a mirror that reflects not only the appearance of

material objects, but one that captures the universal soul, that is, the spiritual essence of things, their 'divinity.' For Plotinus, the superior intelligence, or the *Nous*, brings about the union of all worldly realities, while the phenomenon of sympathy, which unifies the various parts of the visible world, is the undiluted perfect image. The universal soul, which is present in all material objects, is merely the reflection of the *Nous*, and this reflection is the only real thing there is. The rest is matter that is justified and valorized precisely through this reflection. We comprehend immediately the importance of such a concept in the history of Byzantine and medieval art, in terms of the practice and symbolism in the figurative arts, within the framework of a theory of imitation. What I now want to shed light on, however, is the element that subtends the problem of the image. The phenomenon of a contemplative vision is privileged here. In the course of the representation of the Intelligible, by the end of antiquity both pagans and Christians expressed the need for a type of image that could be seen through the 'eyes of the soul.' After Plotinus, this means that the phenomenal vision presented to the physical eyes allows the attentive spectator to contemplate noumenal reality, the only one that truly exists, that is to say, the Intelligible or God. This transition seems evident if we consider an idea of Basil of Caesarea from the 4th century:

> If you want to know God, separate yourself from the body and the senses; abandon the earth, the sea, the air; forget the passing of the hours and the regular rhythm of time; soar up to the sky and the stars, with all the beauty, grandness, order, and splendor of repose and movement, which regulate the relationship among the stars; cross the sky with your spirit and once you've reached above it, contemplate the beauty that is in that place solely through the spirit: the heavenly armies, the choruses of angels and archangels […] (finally), after lifting yourself up above all creation and having taken your spirit way from it, experience the nature of the divine, which is motionless, immutable, and simple: light, virtue, greatness, glory, goodness, beauty […]. Here is the Father; here is the Son; here is the Holy Spirit. (*De fide* [*On the Faith*], Migne, XXXI, col. 465)

Ezechiel, one of the four major prophets of the Bible along with Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Daniel, describes the apocalyptic visions he had in Babylon, probably while he was praying near the river Chebar. In some respects, the images seem to convey aspects of Babylonian mythology. He saw God enthroned, a seated man surrounded by splendor and, beneath him, four creatures, the soles of their feet like those of a calf, each with four features, those of a man, a lion, an ox, and an eagle, and each having four wings (tetramorphs or 'living beings of the apocalypse,' also described in the *Book of Revelation* adopted and by the medieval Church as the symbols of the four evangelists). Beside each of the four creatures, with wings outspread, amid

burning coals there appeared a wheel that shone 'like topaz' and circles filled with eyes that moved in the four directions of the compass together with the circles. Above their heads there was a kind of firmament of crystalline light. The sound of the wings, like the crashing sound of waves or loud shrieks, is described as similar to the voice of the Almighty. There are elements in this depiction that would be repeated in the Byzantine and Gothic iconography of angels. Generally speaking, in these representations the prophet may have as an attribute a double wheel, which symbolized the Old and the New Testament. The surprising thing is the spirit, which, after hearing the word of God, leads the prophet away to show him the tragic destiny of Israel. In addition to the images, we find the the Lord's promise: "I will give a new heart to my people." The exceptional moment, however, is the first, when Ezechiel says that the hand of God was upon him and that he heard the hurricane wind from the North and then a great cloud and a spinning fire appeared before his eyes. In this case, the grace of the prophetic vision can also be a sign of power that is at once terrible and marvelous.

In Christian practice, Paul and Dionysius the Areopagite already use mysticism that had had a variety of esoteric formulations derived from the doctrines of Pythagoras, Plato, and Plotinus, and from Chaldean and Orphic oracles, providing access to the absolute and the unknowable, and then identifying this with the triune God. Such an extraordinary experience works through grace that comes from above, in particular after Gregory Palamas' (1296–1359) theorization of the 'divine energies' that can be communicated to mankind through contemplation and the ecstatic experience. Hesychasm represents an ascetic and monastic movement born in the Greek-Byzantine Church, which spread to the Slavic Orthodox Church between the 12th and the 16th centuries. Gregory Palamas argued in favor of the possibility of a real participation in the life of God through the effects of divine grace, even if these effects ultimately must be distinguished from the unknowable and impalpable essence of God. According to a very ancient custom and revived by Palamas, the aim of hesychasm is to achieve a state of *hesychia* or solitude and quiet for the purpose of entering into communion with God. Noteworthy is the psychosomatic technique used, consisting of an oration to accompany 'the prayer of the heart'; the repeated invocations of the name of Christ, pleading for his mercy, which was already in use in the 5th century, are accentuated by a regular rate of breathing, which allows the monk to concentrate on his meditation (*prosoché* or attention), thereby opening up his mind to divine illumination. By this process, after the cleansing of sins, we have the vision of the light of Mt Tabor in the most extreme versions of the cult. In Rigo's *Antologia gnomica di filosofi zelanti* (*Gnomic Anthology of Zealous Philosophers*), we find the following thought expressed by Elias

Ekdikos, a thought that relates to such a form of contemplation: "The mind, once separated from its home, has forgotten its splendor. And so, it must return there through prayer after having forgotten, ironically, the objects of this earth" (Quoted in Rigo, p. 207, v. 90, my trans.). In another passage, he contends that the contemplative person "possesses a nature similar to the will and moves effortlessly, as though carried by the current" (Ibid. 217, v. 157, my trans.) and, in the tradition referred to above, he defines the act of contemplation in the following way: "Contemplation of intelligible realities is paradise. Through prayer, the Gnostic enters it as though it were his home" (Ibid. p. 218, v. 168, my trans.). This idea of living in the house of God is an ancient one. We may recall the words of Jesus: "In my Father's house are many dwelling places; if it were not so, I would have told you; for I go to prepare a place for you. If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to myself, that where I am, there you may also be" (John 14:2–3). Contemplation transports us to this place.

Speaking comparatively of the practices of ecstatic vision, yoga too can be very valuable and such a practice, with the great teachings of Pantajali, could be in some ways added to the modes of attainment of the state of grace as a liberating gift. Let us recall, in general terms, the perspective of a psychoanalytic reading, especially that of Elvio Fachinelli, in which ecstatic visions and mystical rapture can be explained as a particular state of abandonment experienced by the body and the soul, or as the elimination of pain and the passions, from which one emerges completely calmed precisely through contemplation of the emptiness (or fullness) of being. This is a state characterized by 'the erasure of the self,' but such a state is not a leaving of oneself in the sense of a journey that the conscious mind takes to an imaginative or oneiric place. Fachinelli invites the reader to *transcend* denial of the ecstatic to see it, speaking anthropologically, as an original movement that incorporates a variety of experiences, especially the most creative ones. If, as in this case, we are talking about the imagination, we must refer to the origin of the term, as *Urphänomen* (primary), which pertains to archetypal images. As Henri Corbin has also observed, there is an objectivity of the 'imaginal world' that is suggested by figures and symbols (cabala, *mandala*), and such depictions can produce magical effects on mental images, to the point of becoming reality or objectiveness. By extension, we can find along these lines a profound connection between prophecy and illumination; our journey assumes the form of a passage to the highest knowledge of the self as a leaving of oneself. Consciousness disperses itself, directed as it is toward activity and daily life, and it moves us outside of our selves, predisposing us to an encounter with the absolute. In this regard, the Jungian problem of the eternal transcendent emerges. At this point, I am assuming the perspective of an on-

tological analysis of the image where the *inner image* appears as an archetype of the human mind and not, as Sartre thought, a fortuitous fact, or, as Merleau-Ponty might suggest, a purely experiential fact of the whole body in a complex synaesthetic act. This is a perspective from which the complex symbolism of the landscapes of the unconscious undoubtedly manifests itself—landscapes that are the object of careful study by Jung. What I would like to affirm here, in general terms, is the force of the Jungian arguments and the importance of the visionary experience in terms of the archetypal objectiveness described by Corbin.

Among other possible comparisons, we can examine the topic from the perspective of Hinduism, starting with a few pages from Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy's *The Transformation of Nature in Art* (pp. 121–38) devoted to the term *paroksa*; in particular I refer to the pages in which the scholar distinguishes between, on the one hand, *paroksa* as a quality proper to angels (*adbidaivata*), who are then called *paroksa-priya*, or 'tending by nature' to the symbolic or the arcane, and, on the other hand, *pratyaksa* as a quality proper to man (*mānusa*) as an individual (*adbyātma*) who (although this is not stated explicitly) cannot but be *pratyaksa-priya* or 'lover of that which is clear and evident.' These references lead us into an unlimited universe of images. Vedic literature provides countless examples of the relationship between angelic knowledge and knowledge accessible to man. The assertion of the existence of such relationships implies the idea of the analogous relationship between macrocosm and microcosm, as is made clear in a passage from the *Aitereya Brāhmana*, where the two worlds, 'this' one and 'that' one, are defined as *anurūpam*, each being 'the image' of the other. The idea of an angelic language different from human language is present in various places in Sanskrit literature.

We should also consider the fact that in ecstatic visions there are complex networks of intersensory relationships: colors, forms, sounds, smells, feelings, etc. What role can memory play in these? In this light, it does not seem far-fetched to attempt to reconcile recent scientific studies and the theory of the unity of all things that emerges in opposition to dogmatic theologies, along a fundamental line of thought that includes Pythagoras, the Eliatics, Neoplatonism, John Scotus Eriugena, Zen Buddhism, Christian mysticism, Sufism, Meister Eckhart, Giordano Bruno, Spinoza, Kant, Schelling, and Schopenhauer.

Let us begin with the unity of all things, cosmic energy, or being that we can see in all living things (and not all the objects that we see in being). The foundations of such a principle are life and the functions of inner vision, meditation (especially the post-classical), and the ecstatic reflection in prayer. To follow Schopenhauer along the path of Buddhist Hindu thought in the

fundamental line of thought mentioned above, such a condition is the expression of contact with what is, and not with what gives the illusion of being, in an effort to unify appearances. The path through the illusory world, which is so because it is subject only to thought, entails transforming that world into *concreteness* by transcending it in a journey through nothingness, outside of the artifice of presence and the deception of what surrounds us, to achieve contact with the infinite. Corbin's archetypal *objectiveness,* where inner seeing is not simply introspection or the effects of empathy, resurfaces here.

In terms of the ecstatic imagination, in which interiority dominates, we find clear analogies with aesthetics. William Blake writes: "To see the world in a grain of sand, / And a heaven in a wild flower, / Hold infinity in the palm of your hand, / And eternity in an hour" (*Auguries of Innocence*). Shelley states: "Life, like a dome of many-colour'd glass, / Stains the white radiance of Eternity" (*Adonais* LII); and Goethe declares: "Behind me therefore let the sun be blazing! […]. Now lies the world revealed in twilight glimmer" (*Faust* II, I, vv. 4715–27). We could also refer to his spiritual testament, *Wilhelm Meister's Travels, Reflections in Spirit of the Travelers* (1829), to illustrate how there is a diffused grace in the gaze by which an active principle is instituted whereby new relationships and connections are continually being established. The poet, in fact, says that there are many isolated beauties in the world, but it is the spirit that has to uncover the connections and create works of art with these. A flower receives its first stimulus from an insect that lands on it, from the dewdrop that waters it, and from the vase that provides it with its final nutrients. Shrubs and trees have meaning for us because of their proximity to a cliff or a spring. This also happens with humans and animals of all species. It is a gift of life that is everywhere. Other kinds of visions are related to delicateness and are probably more frequent. Wilhelm Heinrich Wackenroeder (1967, pp. 3–8) informs us that Raphael saw the Madonna in a dream and for him this was a source of inspirational grace. In *The Vision of a Knight*, Raphael imagines that a text by Bramante on his friend's extraordinary experience is found in the library of the monastery of the "monk who loved art." It is said that, as a child, Raphael loved the image of the Virgin Mary; day and night his soul sought her out and in his imagination he looked in the shadows, in the vague lines of the figure, for an ideal realization, but her diaphanous form eluded him. He would occasionally capture her with clear lines, render her form with lines and colors; however, she always vanished. One day, as restless and agitated as he was determined, he finally tried to paint her. Then, at night he prayed to the Madonna in a dream. Suddenly, he got up and next to his bed a light appeared, a bright light in the shape of a woman. It was the Virgin that he had painted, a finished painting and a delicate apparition. He was struck by the sweetness of her gaze. She was exactly

as he had imagined her and with even greater splendor. He fell back to sleep and, when he awoke in the morning, he felt as though he had been born that very moment. The vision had impressed itself upon his soul. From that moment on, he was able to paint the Virgin as she appeared that night to his soul. From that moment onward, he constantly felt the presence of the divine. He believed that, even in the language of the world, it is possible to perceive the word and image of God; due to its 'imitative' qualities, art is a divine miracle, which is to say, a gift from God, grace that reveals itself in the life and in human experience.

In such a mental exercise, shaped by aesthetics and art, we are distanced from the external eye and its apparent forms in favor of the inner gaze, which engages in deep meditation, according to Schopenhauer; stimulated by other colors and forms, the gaze goes beyond experience and the resulting abstract concepts, as dreams do, to effect contact with the will, the formative energy of the vegetable and animal world of bodies, human beings, and civilization, and to reach a concealed point where the core of every individual and every object is located, the will (seen from within) and the perception of the *Brahman* that coincides with the Self (*atman*) of every being. Freed from conceptual duality, each person is directly conscious of his or her individuality in an experience wherein the knower and the known are one and the same thing, where the fear of death disappears along with desires and pleasures. Here, an awareness of the degree of illumination through a process of erasure and abandonment of the self emerges. In the face of the multiplicity and variety of individuals that are mere figures in the world scene, the product of *my way of thinking*, I experience *my self-conscious self*. The temporal individual is silenced in order to make room for an autonomous consciousness; the laws of time and space or those of cause and effect, no longer exist.

Are the ideas being discussed here simply a mind game, free and spontaneous play of the imagination? Are we being asked to establish contact with an ephemeral aesthetic joy through the stimuli of the senses? On questions such as these, literature and the arts have been influenced in recent centuries by technological and scientific discoveries. These, however, do not concern our inner sight, which cannot be confused with phantasmagorias related to electromagnetic phenomena, whether real or imaginary. What needs to be emphasized is a different concept of nature accessed through a flight of contemplation, which is an activity that cannot be compared to supernatural experiences of artificial paradises caused by drugs. The fantastic and hallucinogens are cultural factors of the aesthetic/artistic imagination through which to see the invisible, it is true, but their nature, which is for the most part ludic and existential, is different from that of the illumination discussed here since it revolves around Schopenhauer's ideas.

At the heart of these raptures, be they Oriental or Western in form, is mysticism in which powerful primitive movements of the human soul are at play, as Franco Fornari has also pointed out in his discussion of cosmic ecstasy in his work *Riscoperta dell'anima* (*Rediscovery of the Soul*). Here, inner vision is not an activity of the imagination, but a kind of alienation, as claimed earlier by Leone Ebreo, Equicola, and others—an alienation produced by the contemplative state in the form of immersion into the subconscious and into the spring of creativity, in our context. In this unlimited mental space toward which we are directed by a consciousness dissolved into psychic images, the soul (described by Jung as a personification of the unconscious) unites with the divine. Analogously, as Rudolf Otto informs us, *Brahman* unites with *Atman*.

Finally, we need to consider the landscapes of ecstatic visions (see Pt. II, ch. 7, on nature as Paradise). From this emerges the image of a *network of cosmic energy* of which mankind is a part. Through our inner visions, we sense that the external world does not exist independently of us, that there exists a complementariness of opposites and the dissolution of the mind/body and subject/object distinction, which reveal to us a spatiotemporal relativism and make us aware of a sort of fourth dimension. In deep meditation, furthermore, we feel that the void contemplated is perhaps comparable to the quantum field of atomic physics. Like the quantum field, the void of Oriental mysticism generates an infinite variety of forms, which it maintains and eventually reabsorbs, according to Fritjof Capra. A very important Buddhist maxim is particularly apt here: form is emptiness and emptiness is, in reality, form. From these observations, we can now begin to see a common path of human aspirations because the visions being discussed are born in the beauty of a profound sleep that is beyond the sleep in which gods visit us.

In the *Republic*, Plato tells the story of Er, the son of Armenius. He had died in war and, when the decomposing bodies were collected ten days later, his was still intact. He was taken home and, on the twelfth day, he was to be buried. He was already on the funeral pyre when he returned to life and began to tell what he had seen in the world beyond. This is his tale: having left his body, his soul traveled in the company of many others and arrived at a marvelous place where there were two openings near each other in the earth and, against these, two others high in the sky. In the space between sat judges who, after the judgment, invited the just to take the road on the right that rose to the heavens, after the symbols of their sentence were placed upon them; the unjust were asked, instead, to take the road on the left, which descended. They also bore the symbols of all their past deeds, but on their backs. When Er's soul approached, they told him that they would describe the afterlife to

mankind, and urged him to listen and to observe carefully everything that was in that place.

> Then he beheld and saw on one side the souls departing at either opening of heaven and earth when sentence had been given on them; and at the two other openings other souls, some ascending out of the earth dusty and worn with travel, some descending out of heaven clean and bright. And arriving ever and anon they seemed to have come from a long journey, and they went forth with gladness into the meadow, where they encamped as at a festival; and those who knew one another embraced and conversed, the souls which came from earth curiously enquiring about the things above, and the souls which came from heaven about the things beneath. And they told one another of what had happened by the way, those from below weeping and sorrowing at the remembrance of the things which they had endured and seen in their journey beneath the earth (now the journey lasted a thousand years), while those from above were describing heavenly delights and visions of inconceivable beauty. (X, 337–38)

The story then continues in great detail with the vision of Ananke (Necessity) and her spindle, which caused the revolutions of all the spheres; next to her, the Moirae (Fates) sang in harmony together with the Sirens, invoking the cycles of metamorphosis. With Plato, we can say that the myth has survived and has not been lost.

There are also salvific visions that we need to take into account. One of these comes to us from Hermes Trismegistus and particularly from the *Poymander* chapter of the *Corpus hermeticus*, which was translated into Latin by Marsilio Ficino. The vision plays an esoteric role like the one offered by both Orpheus and Orphism, as well as by the Gnostic system of enlightenment. Within the framework of a profound cultural and political change in the Hellenistic and Roman era, from the imperialism of Alexander to that of the Romans, and considering the fact that the world was dominated by fate (*tyche*), necessity (*ananke*), and destiny (*heimarmene*), an idea is born and propagates: that of an image of salvation based on a Greek reiteration of the Egyptian god Toth. It calls for a god who is a savior or *soter* above all. In this scenario, the figures of Hermes Trismegistus and Aesculapius are especially important. According to several scholars, we find in the *Poymander* a doctrine that can be related to Neoplatonism. Poymander, who is commonly said to be a "shepherd of men," as Paolo Scarpi tells us, is none other than *Nous* or supreme intellect, the Father, and essentially the divine, which reveals itself unexpectedly to the believer in a sort of trance. Under the guidance of Poymander, the believer, in all probability Hermes Trismagistus, undertakes an unusual journey among the stars, which is to take him through a cosmogony, an anthropogony-anthropology, in order to attain an eschatol-

ogy where man regenerates himself in the divine, thereby becoming a god himself (Hermes Trismegistus 1987, pp. 25–26). In this view, in which being in this world is a negative thing because the human being travels through life as though it were a death, salvation is available if he obeys the words of Poymander, whose spokesman is Hermes Trismegistus. Once it has freed itself of the incrustations acquired as a result of the fall of Anthropos, the human soul can be reunited with the divine without passing through death, and it can become one with *Nous*. A journey through the seven planetary spheres leads the soul to Ogdoade, the celestial plane of the fixed stars, from where it ascends, together with the other blessed souls, to its ultimate abode where it can 'settle'; this is a journey through gnosis or intuitive knowledge. Hermeticism had a profound influence on Renaissance culture. Poymander suggests to Hermes: "Well then, concentrate your spirit on the light and try to understand it." Hermes adds that, having said this, Poymanders stared at him until,

> a trembling overcame me as I gazed at him. Then he lifted his eyes and I contemplated in the Nous the light as it divided into an incalculable number of powers, the light having also become a limitless world. And I saw that the fire, enthralled by an enormous power, had attained a stable position dominated by that force.

This is the vision that Hermes contemplated, guided by Poymander: an ineffable sanctity whispered only in silence.

In the course of history, there are great 'mystic visionaries,' from the apostle John to St John of the Cross, 'visionary poets,' like Dante and William Blake, as well as 'visionary thinkers,' like Jakob Böhme and Emmanuel Swedenborg. They show us how the mind enters into a state of rapture or contemplative ecstasy. Their visions are often associated with divine grace. In such a psychological condition there is, naturally, talk of heaven and imagined heavens. The common expression, 'to be in seventh heaven,' is based on the ancient Aristotelian and Ptolemaic system in which the vault of heaven is divided into spheres and the seventh was located at the limits of the divine, a domain not accessible to humans. The Hebraic tradition speaks specifically of a cosmos divided into three strata (air, stars, and empyrean). God and the redeemed soul dwell in the last of these. As a former Jew, Paul refers to the 'third heaven,' which he also describes as a Paradise, a place where God is 'everything in everyone.' In the second letter to the Corinthians (12:1–10), he discusses extraordinary visions and the revelations of the Lord. He tells of a man, he himself, who was uplifted to the third heaven, to Paradise, perceiving with his physical body, even as he left it, the ineffability of the figure and the word of God. Far from perfidious flattery and acts of pride,

Paul intends to express in all humility the greatness of the revelations and to transform weakness into strength, in accordance with the word of God. After his prayer, he repeats and communicates to others the answer given to him, so that he might be cleansed of the vice of pride: "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Through the Christian beatitudes, we become powerful.

Bernard of Clairvaux describes the nature of the mystical experience and the way in which the Word descended upon him; it did not enter through the eyes because it has no color, nor through the ears for it has no sound, nor through the nose because it does not combine with the air but with the souls, and not even through the sense of touch because it is impalpable, nor through the mouth because it cannot be swallowed. It did not arrive through an external place. The truth, says Bernard of Clairvaux, is that we live in God; blessed is the human being that lives in Him. The domain of the spiritual and of the ascetic opens up to us, where inner beauty is superior to any external ornament and to all that is ephemeral.

6.

States of Grace

We may refer to the grace of creation or elevation, adoptive, actual or sanctifying grace that falls within the framework of a theory of supernatural justice and that is indispensable for eternal life. There also exists, however, a *state of grace* with which we normally indicate a 'mystical daydreaming' accompanied by an exceptional vision or perception of objects and the world. I do not, therefore, draw so much from the words of Augustine on the splendor of the things created by God (*Enarrationes in Psalmos* [*Explanations in Sermons*] 4, 7 and 144, 15) for this aspect of this topic, as from the descriptions of an Italian writer of the last century.

In *Feria d'agosto* (*August Holiday*), Cesare Pavese describes the 'state of grace' that all human beings essentially possess. The reflection centers on the fact that each individual has his or her own personal wealth of images that can be reduced to a few important themes or symbols that represent the essence of awe. Nurtured within us, these symbols appear unexpectedly in the world and are recognized by the startled individual. They are authentic memories experienced as a living part of ourselves. But what are objects like when they are translated into visions? We do not really see them the first time but rather the second time we perceive them. Only then do we discover and remember them. An encounter, a gesture, or a moment of distraction is enough to find ourselves before these objects. It is as though they penetrate our gaze, as when we study ourselves in a mirror. It is almost as if the object observed observes us. The author tells us that it activates the awareness of a strange doubling within us. Such mental representations are enigmatic and at the same time familiar realities that are powerful and capable of manifesting themselves without becoming concrete. They appear to originate outside of us; however, they do not because they are not recognized the 'first time,' only the 'second.' Their ambiguity comes entirely from this fact. They are images that begin to exist, as sedimented memories only the second time we perceive them.

We may ask ourselves why we feel a kind of extraordinary involvement in some representations and not others that are closer to us and are encountered more frequently. Our attention is focused to a greater extent on some images almost by accident, it seems, and our very life appears to concentrate on them. It is not the intensity of the perception, however, that causes some objects to form secondary, ecstatic images in the mind, thereby producing strong and moving memories. In addition, it is not habit but instinct that makes us what we are by presenting 'visionary' priorities to our field of con-

sciousness. Memories are concealed in the sphere of the irrational where a before and an after do not exist, where they remain in a non-time in which being and ecstasy occur in a single instant, as in eternity. Moved by the recollection, we experience the awe of finding ourselves in it and we are no longer able to perceive the passing of the hours, days, seasons, or years. It is the profound experience of observing ourselves as symbols of a reality that we instinctively feel has never had a beginning, simply because such a reality is. We cannot return to that place or understand it, except on rare occasions. This reality seizes us completely and absolutely, indeed, when we least expect it. It is a sensation similar to the one we experience when we touch an object or see a flash of light in the dark. We are caught by surprise and are startled. We did not choose or do anything to be there, in that reality, but we are there. An extraordinary and unmistakable way of knowing, the experience of touch and sight has suddenly opened up a new dimension. The unexpected image that has no beginning lies beyond the conscious mind, beyond concepts and time. It recurs "each time, on the level of being, through grace, inspiration, in order words, ecstasy" (Pavese p. 195, my trans.).

Pavese says that we can call memories of this kind the symbolic part of our being, but they are different from the 'ideals of life,' which some people may see them as being. In fact, we immerse ourselves every day in images and stories of a life that we imagine the way we would like it to be; we fantasize about the past; we are nostalgic for what has gone by and we project it into the future with our imagination. We should not, however, confuse this consoling activity of the mind with "the mythic symbols of our perennial absolute reality" (Ibid. p. 196, my trans.) even if it has elements of the ecstatic in certain respects. In effect, these images are recognized by a surge of the spirit that they themselves provoke, as our whole being strives with keenness and intensity to grasp, incorporate, assimilate, and, therefore, know them. In a spontaneous burst, the images emerge from the unconscious mind to the light of consciousness in a process wherein the mind is appeased only when these images are illuminated by our contemplative gaze; but, the elusive images fall back into indistinctness together with the most precious part of our selves.

Ideals of life often grow together with these memories, which we conserve as symbols and develop, like sister tropes, into colorful dreams in which we preserve elements of daily occurrences and reflected inner experience. If we are fortunate, due to something unexpected, we have the possibility of deconstructing even our most elaborate dreams to reach what remains of memory, where we can recognize our most intimate truth. What is extraordinary is the fact that the something that remains is often seen as a minute, insignificant thing. A simple window on a staircase, open to the empty

sky can lead us to a state of grace. We can only imagine how many open windows there are in the life of a human being, but that particular image, with its access to infinity, also affects us in the same way, generating illumination and spontaneity within us. Pavese wonders why a window and not a row of plants or the outline of a balustrade that overlooks the sea and the horizon. In reality, this is not the correct viewpoint. We are all responsive to the idea of the infinite, as Leopardi stated; however, the poet can make us think that these unexpected discoveries in the realm of the symbolic, their very existence, come about as a result of the influence of art, literature, and reading, in the exercise of the attentive gaze and ecstatic perception. We need to recognize that we are indebted to poets who have put the imprint of infinity on our souls because we are enraptured by these symbols. Poetry educates us about sensibility and the imagination. We cannot deny, then, that the first contact with spiritual reality comes from education and that people learn to know objects because they have come across them in their daily lives within the sensible world. An ecstatic perception common to us all surges to the foreground since it is present in the nature of the human mind. Pavese explains that this is to be understood in the broadest possible terms; even a simple peasant, a person lacking formal culture, whose education is limited to the songs, anecdotes, and festivals of the village, has the experience of the 'second time.' We are confronted with a paradox here. We contemplate only what we once admired in reality; we discover that it presents itself to us through symbolic expressions so that we can read its images within ourselves. These expressions can be traced back to the time when a kind of initial narrative of every representation was formed in our minds; such expressions, then, can be traced back to an extraordinary "moment veiled by a fable-like atemporality" (my trans.), to that instant when we received "the imprint that was to dominate our future with a mythic aura." A connection is created between instinctive memory and the dawn of aesthetic perception, between the human being in his or her individuality, and humanity at the dawn of representational thought. Thus, what was obscure the first time can be understood in a way analogous to prehistoric myth. This moment, which is tied to the state of contemplation, appears enigmatically as that which occurs once and for all.

We learn and never cease to learn, impacted as we are by this first and second time. It seems clear, however, that the revelations brought powerfully to the soul by poetry gradually enlighten us, helping to reshape the ecstatic matter that lies dormant beneath the surface. The moment arrives when the structure of our being, which forms on the basis of mode, style, and gaze, shines through, emerges, and vanishes, as though fated to do so, drawing us toward a comprehension that is also expression. In this contemplative state

we all grasp the moment that precedes the work of art. We ourselves are creators in in this moment, in the sense of being interpreters of ourselves and of the world. The legacy of discovery and memory, the myths of our inner being, are also elements of taste, an active taste that constitutes the response of our instincts. The staircase/window mentioned above, says Pavese, could transport us to a completely personal memory, for example, to the school where we spent so many years, perhaps pain-filled years, and in which we read poetry; but, what matters goes beyond merely subjective memory. What really matters is, "the empty and immemorial sky" (Ibid. p. 198, my trans.) that lies outside of time.

This inexhaustible mine of symbols may be extraneous to the highest value of poetry, even if it is indispensable to the writing of poetry. The symbols are a "supremely human baggage, which is necessary to preserve the consciousness of the self and indeed to live" (my trans.). Peasants generally do not have a great deal to say; however, they too speak, construct worlds, and transmit and create reality. For them, too, beneath the word lies, "an immobile eternity of signs that, if it does not torment them with its enigmatic nature, satisfies them nonetheless in their instinctive reality" (Ibid. p. 198).The mythical images, behind which such symbols are concealed, are not based so much on bookish or academic encounters as on the elementary discoveries that occur in infancy and on the daily, humble, and unconscious transactions with the world around us. We are not dealing with lofty poetry but with a fable, 'querelle,' or prayer; not great painting but the almanac and the print, not science but superstition that makes this state of grace possible. Here, "all human beings are consorts"—even the most cultured and creative disappear. Only the emphasis that inner life gives to these symbols in the future is different. Someone will feel the distant memory become great and powerful in his or her soul to the point where the sky and the earth become one.

Experience invites us to enter into the promising obscurity of origins where we will be embraced by the human universal, upon which our feelings will project a new incarnation, exploring pleasant and difficult pathways because this universality does not allow itself to be grasped and communicated easily. We live in a second dimension, not only in a second vision, and we would like the extraordinary event to be brought to the surface. Although we run the risk of seeing it dissolve, we feel certain that we are experiencing another spirit, in ecstasy and eternity. This is the state of grace; let us pause to contemplate for a moment the rarefied and vital atmosphere of the universal human in its symbolic disguise, comforted by the fact that there is no difference between our soul and the soul of the humblest peasant. This awareness stimulates us to penetrate even the highest fantasy that our mind

can produce, stripping away all adornments and isolating its essential features.

The second image that Pavese discusses develops a particular idea that is already present in Leopardi and goes beyond his famous definition of the infinite and the ecstatic observation of nature. The reference is contained in the *Zibaldone* (*Notebook*, 30 November, 1828), where it states that we see a tower or the countryside with our eyes, we hear the sound of a bell with our ears, but at the same time we see a different tower and a different landscape with our imagination, and we hear a different sound of the bell. By describing a field of 'transcendence' in such a way, the poet says that the beautiful and the pleasurable reside in this second kind of objects.

To understand these phenomena, we could attempt to engage in a psychology of the ecstatic mind. Elvio Fachinelli, for example, describes the movement that opens up to the mystical; it is a process of emptying or erasure of the self and detachment. In every creative or imaginative situation that recreates the world, there is a moment when the things that matter to the individual tend toward erasure. This implies a crisis of transition or a defeat. We often find this progression in artistic innovation and in scientific discovery, for instance. It also implies a sense of the miraculous or an event that exceeds all expectations, which is similar to mystical ecstasy. This is ecstasy as consciousness that explodes in discontinuity with respect to what comes before and what comes after, and ecstasy as emptiness or an energy field to cross. We notice the filling up of the void in an instant; it appears to involve both maximum acceleration and total stillness. In this instant, the time that precedes it, which is a time of trial and error, and the time that follows it are suddenly consumed. Fachinelli (p. 31), explains that the ecstatic condition of the mind is caused by a meeting of a time of filling and the *not in time* of the instant that Plato talks about in the *Parmenides*; thus, a 'strange thing' or a "change in two inverse motions" occurs. That instant appears "between motion and rest, though not in time" (156b). He adds, however, that the special sense of emptiness experienced in ecstasy is the bridge over which change passes. The unexpected and exceptional instant that takes hold of us has a strange nature capable of containing time and non-time, and it mirrors Plato's example, as the subject of change; its light comes from a pair of opposite 'qualities,' namely, motion and rest, or being and non-being, the one and the many, etc. If there is a becoming, it involves two terms characterized by a relationship of reciprocal contrast.

The ecstatic moment is self-contained and unique, and it suddenly tends to pervade everything. When we try to describe that instant, we generally choose a dry, serious language located at the edge of silence. Together with the void, this instant is part of the process of the reduction of reality for the

purpose of embracing truth, by removing what seemed of fundamental importance prior to that moment. Ecstasy, however, does not consist solely in the epiphanies associated with the phenomenon; it also consists in the energy it emits. This means that it affects the world and our experience of it. Where the boundary between subject and object vanishes, the sense of a whole that is at once nothingness emerges. This is our experience of the all/nothingness, of the fullness/emptiness, with some oscillation between the two extremes, and it is the experience of the whole, of fullness, where a relationship with a personal god through an imagination rich in symbols is realized.

According to Fachinelli (p. 34), ecstasy precedes the sacred, but it is also present in the distinction between the sacred and the profane from which it stems. It is sometimes possible to perceive the transition from one to the other, understanding it primarily as a passage from the defective to the perfect or from the impure to the pure, and, in religious terms, from Satan to God. We could add, however, that sometimes there is an obsessive attitude in the quest for ecstasy, which always involves loss of the center, ideality, and the principle of identity. This is because ecstasy appears in the complete suspension of life, almost with the loss of one's breath. We must, nevertheless, distinguish this phenomenon of the subject's vertigo from the attempts at re-sacralization made in recent years to restore the institutions and hierarchies of religious potentates, and to erase or reduce the "disenchantment of the world" about which Max Weber talks, along with the collapse of all theological and metaphysical assumptions on which universal value judgements were grounded in the past, the end of all illusions based on the realities and ideals of history, as well as the decline of the world's magical properties themselves. At the same time, we cannot fail to note that the *absence* of God can give rise to the experience of the divine.

The ecstatic mind essentially precedes the sacred/profane dichotomy, which represents a pair of elements that at times merge with one another and at other times are opposites; these elements, however, appear to be a reflection of human action and thought in the form of mythic representations and social relationships as they are determined by cultural contexts and by individual experiences. The taking leave of the world, which is at the root of the sacred-profane dichotomy, is individual *Erlebnis* or insight of the emotional type, as described by Fachinelli. It is something that all humans share in extraordinary situations, prior to what different cultures call *sanctus-sacer*, *qadōš*, *aghios-ieros* or *heilig-holy*, on the one hand, or *mana-tabu-manitu-orenda*, etc., on the other hand. In this anticipation of the concepts and discourses pertaining to the power of energy is located the ecstatic mind, which is capable of preserving what, broadly speaking, we have been calling a 'state of grace': a vision of the foreign in the *noumenal* forms, to use Rudolf

Otto's term. Man finds himself before the absolutely other and the mysterious. And this exceptional fact that occurs within him is captured, as described above, in the intensity of the ecstatic moment, regardless of its duration in time. This intensity makes it seem like a flash of truth or absolute certainty to those who live the experience; hence, as Fachinelli states, the temptation of Prometheus "to be like God—to be God Himself—beyond mortal life" (Ibid. p. 36).

In *ekstatikon* (ecstasy), Martin Heidegger saw the fundamental nature of temporality in its three dimensions (*Being and Time*) and, later, the essence of existence itself. In "Return to the Foundation of Metaphysics" (in *Che cos'è la metafisica*, pp. 75–94), in fact we read of a 'holding-on-to' that we experience as a 'taking care of,' from which what we call the ecstatic essence of the being is thought to come. Heidegger analyzes a key point of our discussion, even though he treats the problem of grace only indirectly; this can be seen in the fact that he quotes from and comments on Leibniz's *Principles of Nature and Grace*. This ecstatic aspect of existence is not to be understood strictly as a being outside of the inner immanence of awareness and the spirit; in this case, existence would still be seen from the standpoint of 'subjectivity' and 'substance,' which is to say, the 'ontic' perspective; it is to be instead understood as, 'that something outside of,' which is a distinction pertaining to the opening up of being itself; the "static-ness of the ecstatic," strange as it may seem to speak in these terms, consists in being both inside and outside of "non-hiddenness in which being itself appears" (Ibid. p. 75, my trans.). Presupposed here is existence that is thought ecstatically as the *essentia* of man, where *essentia* is what man is *qua* man. In the relationship between the truth of being and the essence of the human being, I am proposing a model of understanding based on the standpoint of the non-hiddenness of being: "it is the ecstatic self-projection, which is to say, thrown intrinsically into the sphere of openness" (Ibid. p. 80, my trans.). By declaring that existence as a whole is ecstatic, however, it is difficult to consider the specific details of individual ecstatic experiences. There is the risk that the general absorbs the particular, rendering invisible, if not inexistent, the instant that instigates the state of illumination in silence and emptiness. As we have seen and as we shall see, this is a precious emptiness relative to what I have been referring to as the 'state of grace.'

It is appropriate and necessary to study both the peaks and the valleys of the ecstatic experience, where we do not expect it, in unforeseeable moments, just around the corner, in unsuspected areas. It is in this psychological state, rather than in an obsessive mental quest, that we ourselves are transformed by an experience of the void and silence; this is essentially the issue examined by Pavese, described by Fachinelli, and interpreted by Heidegger.

This is also where detachment in an instant of eternity fits in, as we have seen. This is because the Greek verb *ex-istano* (*existao*, *existemi*), from which the term *ex-stasis* derives, conveys the idea of a taking out, a moving or changing something or the state of things, as well as a going out, a leaving, or a being subject to perturbation and delirium. The semantic field of this word includes disjunction or separation. As we have seen, this exceptional experience has been described by Plato (the story of Er in Bk. 10 of the *Republic*). It is the instant that communicates this flash of extreme sensibility capable of illuminating our consciousness. As Schiller states, in "The Favor of the Moment" the spark is ignited; it is from the clouds, the abode of the gods, that fortune must descend, "Since the creation began / All that mortals have wrought, / All that's godlike in man / Comes—the flash of a thought!" (p. 113). We can summarize these reflections on the state of grace, which is highly poetic and at the same time highly philosophical, in the following way: "What there is of the divine on earth / is but the flash of a thought." We experience ecstatic perception in the face of nature and our feelings.

Comparing Oriental and Western mysticism, Rudolf Otto (1960, pp. 212–13) discussed an important aspect of this question, namely, the uniformly luminous character of the objects we experience, though they may be quite different: on the one hand, the depth of the soul in relation to mankind and to God rediscovered in one's heart, and, on the other hand, the discovery of the depth of the world. In their 'unity' and their 'oneness,' they are wonders. Such is the luminous grandness I have attempted to define. To express this in simpler terms, and running the risk of oversimplifying, we can say that both *Brahman* and *atman* pertain to the "magical' sphere; and contemplation of the One is a marvelous, magical vision. Seen as 'one,' what is contemplated is awe-inspiring, and the 'unity' is really nothing other than the formal element that is especially characteristic of an inexpressible experience of the marvelous. As we have seen, both ways are characterized, in equal measure, by the mutual implication of subject and object. One who contemplates unity also contemplates himself as part of the One. But one who looks inward also recognizes his inner self as one and united with the divine. In both cases, lines disappear, as does the idea of an *original duality*. The person who contemplates unity, contemplates space and time above all. But this applies also and especially to inner vision, that is, when it returns to itself, sinks into itself and into its depths, the soul feels and intuits itself in God and one with Him at the same time as it senses itself being drawn away from space and time in an eternal present.

We can conclude this part of our discussion with a comment on the symbolic feature. Schelling thought that the work of art was explicitly symbolic,

in the sense of hypotyposis, presentation, or analogy, whereby an image is symbolic if its object not only signifies the idea, but is the idea itself, so that the symbol becomes the very essence of art, a ray that moves directly from the dark depths of being and thought to the center of our eye, cutting across our entire nature. This ray, which shines in the darkness, is tied to what has been said about the 'instant of light.' Expanding on this notion, we have a schematic vision in which the scientific symbolic dominates and where the general allows us to arrive at the particular, on the one hand, and we have an allegorical vision in which the particular leads to the general, on the other hand. In the aesthetic symbol, however, we have the simultaneous presence of the play between these two processes, the particular and the general. Goethe discusses the symbol and allegory in this light, saying: "the allegorical is different from the symbolic because the latter designates indirectly while the former designates directly"; the allegory is transitive, while the symbol is intransitive; the allegory addresses the intellect, while the symbol addresses perception; the allegory is arbitrary and conventional, while the symbol is immediate and motivated. It was once believed that the object existed for itself and we have learned, instead, that it has a secondary sense. In *Maxims and Reflections* (1809–1832), the poet states that the symbol is a natural image (*Bild*), which is comprehensible to everyone. While the allegory uses the particular as an example of the general, the symbol captures the general through the particular. In allegory, meaning is highlighted; experience is transformed into a concept and the concept into an image but in such a way that the concept is always defined, contained in the image, and expressible. The symbol works through hidden avenues that lie beyond cognitive consciousness and accommodates successive interpretations. It manages to communicate opposites, to mean many things at once, and to express the inexpressible, even as its content eludes reason's monitoring activity, Goethe says that symbolism transforms experience into an idea and the idea into an image so that the resulting idea stays forever active and ungraspable, and it remains inexpressible even though it is expressed in all of the languages.

This is the key point: to capture in the aesthetic experience the unsayable and the inexpressible of the image that blooms as it eludes the conscious mind. At the same time, we should be mindful of the views and descriptions that mankind has given itself across the centuries in an attempt to name and define this domain of the inexpressible. A state of grace finds its way into the arts as though originating in a vision that precedes the work, from an exceptional form of perceiving and seeing that is at once aesthetic and ecstatic. Although it is also present in allegory, the symbol is more consonant with grace.

7.

Canons of the Aura

In art history, the canon represents the fundamental rule, the norm that is universally valid, the absolute criterion and the principle that underlies artistic activity. In classical art, the canon determines the relationships, the symmetries, and proportions of both architectural and sculptural works. It represents the theory of proportions of the human body for the purpose of transferring this ensemble of harmonious relationships onto the figure represented. This model also applies to the theory of imitation and symmetry in music. The discipline of the canon dates back to the Greeks and the treatise of Polycletus (5th century), about which we have fragmentary information from Plutarch, Lucian, Vitruvius, and Galen, and which spread in the Middles Ages and the Renaissance, thereby contributing to the excellence of the arts and thought. Polycletus' *Doriphorus* or *The Spear-bearer* remains the model of the classical concept. It could be argued, however, that like those that came after, including that of the golden ratio, this canonical artwork does not succeed in communicating the mysterious charm of the supreme elegance we see emanating from an indescribable *quid* in some works, due to the order it attempts to institute. In relation to what we feel emanating ineffably from it, grace can be understood as this indescribable *quid*: an innate property, a pleasant originary aura or an acquired quality that pertains to the ideals of composition, rhythm, chromatic spectrum, and is applicable to both the physical person and to art.

The Renaissance concept of grace is a translation of the Latin term *gratia*, which indicates both 'gratitude' and 'benefit,' as we will soon see in Seneca, as well as 'physical beauty.' From the standpoint of benefit, what is meant is the exchange that occurs between subjects, as well as between subjects and the rewards offered; if someone bestows a grace, the person who receives the gift expresses his or her gratitude. This meaning is also preserved in the Christian concept. As for beauty, in Ovid (*Ars amandi* [*The Art of Love*] II, 570) we see an affinity beginning to emerge between grace and the notions of *pulchritudo*, *forma*, *decor*, and *venustas*. In a very interesting passage, the poet states: "many a grace was blended with beauty" ("multaque cum forma *gratia* mixta fuit").

From the Early Renaissance to the 1800s, the topic of grace finds great favor with the world of art. It would be useful to review the history of its reception and its fortune, which does not really obey the dictates of conventions, which are not incompatible but are unable to explain grace, in order to illustrate the range in taste from the Renaissance to Romanticism. For Leon

Battista Alberti in the 1400s, 'dignity and grace' are to be found primarily in the 'friendship' among the colors, a harmony that seems to constitute the "clearest and most elegant" beauty, which is proper to a painting (*De pictura* [*On Painting*], 1436, no. 48). In the mid 1400s, on the basis of a passage from Pliny, Lorenzo Ghiberti states that he prefers a higher degree of beauty, one that goes beyond the play of proportions and symmetries. For Pico della Mirandola, grace is a combination of qualitative and quantitative properties, constituting a first theory of aesthetics that unites the objective features of a thing and judgment of that thing. In his *Oratio de hominis dignitate* (*Oration in Praise of Human Dignity*, 1486), Pico envisions the human being as half earthly and half divine. In this intermediate space, we find the most profound meaning and the expressive richness of the idea of grace. In certain passages of his *Trattato della pittura* (*Treatise on Painting*), Leonardo da Vinci examines its various manifestations; it is distinct from beauty; it can be innate or it can be acquired through the selection of desirable components, drawing from many examples; it is proper to the painter who, "gives good airs to his figures" (see his text on the element of air), and applies the rule of "accompanying the colors in such a way that one gives grace to the other." We also find other illuminating comments where Leonardo observes that, "the beauty of faces" is caused by the transition from "soft lights" to "delightful shadows," in which "grace and shapeliness are born." In literature, Pietro Bembo (*Prose della volgar lingua* [*Discussions of the Vernacular Language*], Bk. II, p. ix), who is influenced by Cicero and wishes to define refinement of style or beautiful writing in which Petrarch excels, discusses gravity and pleasantness. In the first, he finds dignity and magnificence; in the second, grace along with gentleness, ambiguity, sweetness, and playfulness.

In the 1500s, Baldassare Castiglione (*Il Cortegiano* [*The Courtier*]) introduced the term 'sprezzatura' (nonchalance), which would enjoy general acceptance. The author explains that the grace emanating from 'sprezzatura' cleverly conceals the art and shows that what one does and says can be accomplished without effort and almost without the involvement of thought. 'Sprezzatura' is the product of a studied, and invariably dissimulated, attitude. Far removed from artifice, it becomes the 'universal norm' to which the 'perfect' courtier must conform; grace itself comes to occupy the center of behavior; it is a form that regulates the relationships between man and woman, father and son, as well as prince and courtier.

In *Dialogo di pittura* (*Dialogue on Painting*, 1548), Paolo Pino makes reference to this special sensibility and invites the painter to paint in accordance with a theory of taste as it pertains to light, which he calls 'buon lume' (good light), in which the objects depicted "reveal themselves better and in a more graceful way, and paintings have greater force and relief" (p. 118, my

trans.). Pino, however, also uses the term "venustà" (charm) as a synonym for grace and "vaghezzza" (gracefulness) as a synonym for beauty. In *Libro della beltà e grazia* (*Book on Beauty and Grace*, 1960, p. 85), Benedetto Varchi is influenced by Platonic treatises on love. Shortly after mid century, Ludovico Ariosto (*Dialogo della pittura intitolato l'Aretino* [*Dialogue on Painting, Called Aretino*], 1557), reinterprets the concept of 'sprezzatura' [nonchalance] in contrast to "troppa diligenza" (excessive diligence), thereby shifting the concept from the behavior of the noble man to painting and the technique of representation. He encourages the artist to achieve 'sprezzatura' while criticizing those painters who offer a vision of beauty that is too superficial and that inspires only affectation. In this way, he instead favors the notion of grace that characterizes Raphael's work and subsequently became 'canonical.' Giorgio Vasari (*Vite* [*The Lives*], Preface to the third part, 1568) also derives his idea of grace from Castiglione; he recommends that artists use "freedom in their rule," which could perfect their style without destroying or altering the order of the work; we could define this freedom as harmony, a quality lacking in 15th-century artists, in his opinion. Vincenzo Danti (*Trattato delle perfette proporzioni* [*Treatise on Perfect Proportions*], first book, 1567) shifts attention from painting to sculpture, especially Michelangelo's; he redefines the idea of grace as proportional composition that pertains to the figure, but as it relates to the plastic effect. Grace is defined primarily as the unseen part of corporeal beauty, which "allows itself to be known through intellectual powers," that is to say, it is one with the beauty of the soul, a theme that recurs frequently in Renaissance and Baroque treatises. This interpretation allows for the possibility of grace being present in disproportionate figures as well. In this rather interesting case, we find ourselves going outside the conventions to discover other dimensions of aesthetic creativity and emotion. He is followed by Giovanni Andrea Gilio (*Dialogo* [*Dialogue*], 1564), who underscores the importance of order that can confer beauty and grace in the form of harmony and propriety, Giovanni Battista Armenini (*De' veri precetti della pittura* [*On the True Precepts of Painting*], 1587, who points out the importance of unified colors, and Gian Paolo Lomazzo (*Trattato dell'arte della pittura, scoltura et architettura* [*Treatise on the Art of Painting, Sculpture and Architecture*], 1584], who studies the pictorial secret of the pyramidal serpentine figure (see Pt. 3, ch. 3).

In general, it seems that Renaissance aesthetics is influenced mostly by Classicism, as some contend, as an aesthetic of *pankalia* (the purposefulness of the world) where grace is seen as superior to all the other concepts: something exceptional, not strictly tied to the norms, something that also goes beyond represented nature because its nature is indeed that of the soul, as has been mentioned several times. As a point of clarification, in that time period

it was customary to consider harmony and proportion in Pythagorean and Platonic terms. In such a philosophical climate and according to the prevailing taste, the idea of beauty varied. This is shown by the fact that Michelangelo, Leonardo, Raphael, Mantegna, and Giorgione, are examples of what is commonly referred to as the 'perfect style,' although each had his own unique style.

In 17th-century Baroque and 18th-century Rococo, the concept remains essentially unaltered even though we see the term's semantic field expanding. In the second half of the 17th century, André Félibien (*Entretiens*, 1666–1688), cited above, distinguishes between grace understood as proportion and symmetry and grace understood as an expression of inner, affective impulses. In his book on the notion of perfection in painting (1662), Roland Fréart de Chambray sets down the criteria of perfection and identifies the grace in the works of Guido Reni. But in the 1700s, a century of great revivals, we find four important texts that we need to take into consideration. The first is that of William Hogarth (*The Analysis of Beauty*, 1753) who, in analyzing the concept of beauty, recognizes the grace of the 'serpentine line,' as Lomazzo also did before him. The second is that of Winckelmann (*Pensieri sull'imitazione* [*Reflections on Imitation*], 1755) whose ideas are Neoplatonic and Neoclassical: "grace is the pleasurable according to reason"; it is a gift from the heavens; it is developed through education and reasoning and it can become natural. From Winckelmann's theory comes the Neoclassicism of Antonio Raffaello Mengs (*Opere* [*Works*], 1787), for whom grace, "is almost impossible to define since it is a gift from God, or from nature, which, in itself, is nothing other than harmony that corresponds to the one found together with Being and in all human beings" (my trans.). The thinking of Francesco Milizia mirrors that of Mengs and Sulzer; there is a more delicate and sweeter beauty, which "comes from the facility and variety of movements and from the natural and easy transition from one movement to another" (my trans.). Taken together, the graces sometimes produce elegance, which is another category often associated with grace. Later on, Milizia (*Dizionario delle Belle Arti del Disegno* [*Dictionary of the Fine Arts and Design*], 1797) introduces grace into the concept of taste, that is to say, into the non-rational faculty of feeling. Almost a century later, with grace now on the verge of extinction, the neo-mystical and decadent context of Walter Pater (*The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry*) defines the relationship between grace and feeling by reintroducing the figure of Leonardo, who is described as a "genius who, among his traits, had the tendency to lose himself in refined mystery filled with grace."

Alongside the aesthetic canons, which we will examine more closely in the third part of the present volume, I would like to explore the ethical can-

ons. Christian Meier (1989) provides us with an overview of the values on which Greek society was based. He describes the way in which the prestige of the individual in popular councils and assemblies depended on the manner in which the individual presented himself and on the power of his persuasion, *peitho* (charming speech), which was associated with grace and recognized as an ideal of political virtue. In the 7th and 6th centuries B.C., *charis* seems to have had a new function in another sense as well, says Meier (Ibid. p. 41), especially as it related to religious feasts, which contributed to the sense of cohesion among the participants, that is to say, the citizens. In that world, the main point was to ensure a certain degree of solidarity. Feasts, sacrifices, banquets, choruses, and dances with very ancient origins were gradually instituted for the purpose of promoting the ostentation of luxury and expenditure for the benefit of the community, to the point where charitable donations for the poor were included. In short, we can imagine a certain relationship between grace, understood in this sense as a benefit, and democracy. On such occasions, it was also important to convey an atmosphere not characterized by imperfection, obscurity, and ugliness, but by beauty, airiness, and virtue. Grace was like a supplementary form, a quality desired to counterbalance the crude, harsh, violent reality of humans and things with goodness and equilibrium, by bringing together food, work, social encounters, rituals, sporting contests, etc. Meier (Ibid. p. 49) says that a variant of 'aristocratic grace' seems to have formed in the lifestyle and politics of the Greeks, which was a way of presenting oneself as a person defined by moderation and respect in both meetings and discussions. We could essentially consider the *polis* as being imbued with this spirit. It manifested itself in 'leisure,' which meant resistance to bitter necessity by acquiring additional life experiences in the exercise of freedom. This sense of community emphasized the differences between barbarians and Greeks, to the point where it was considered worthy of free men; it entailed magnanimity, generosity, behavior not subject to constraint, and refined manners. The resulting image was that of a man who was like the gods.

In the Athens of Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, we can perhaps see the sublime and aristocratic spirit so common in ancient Greece. The goddess Athena often claims to have her father's weapons, namely arrows, at her disposal, but she also says that she does not wish to use them; her repudiation of violence expresses another force or another quality through which Athena makes this virtuous sentiment shine with elegance and poise. Another aspect of the topicality of the *Oresteia*, a founding manifesto of democracy, is the connection between politics and grace, the conciliating trait that often assumes the form of *peitho* or persuasion, which frequently appears alongside grace.

I would like to offer one more observation on the notion of the gift, on rules, and customs. For the Greeks, grace can sometimes be found in sadness and despair. In the invocation of Zeus in the *Agamemnon* (vv. 160–83), Aeschylus recalls that this god leads mankind to wisdom by establishing its value through the pathway of suffering; he speaks explicitly of a 'violent gift' (*charis biaios*) from the gods to indicate the fact that grace can arrive after the experience of profound sorrow. There are other memories of this kind, which affirm the existence of a 'negative grace.' As well, in the myth and the cult of Dionysus, for example, Kerényi (1992, pp. 304–06) demonstrates that the Dionysian frenzy in the play, which is the removal of all inhibitions through laughter, this ecstasy of *Komos* (revelry), becomes a special effect of the Muses, which attains the highest artistic level in the works of Aristophanes—works full of the Dionysian spirit but even more so of the 'terrible Charites' (*phoeberai Charites*), especially in scenes where the chorus is composed of singers and dancers. In other cases, however, the situation is mitigated, as occurs in the story of the birth of the god, which is found in a fragment of the *Homeric Hymns* and in a song described by Plutarch (*Aetia Graeca* XXXVI, 299 A–B). These passages describe the arrival of Dionysus at the mouth of the river Alphaeus and there is mention of a temple near the sea. Dionysus is invoked here with the epithet 'hero,' a title given to the inhabitants of the kingdom of the dead: "Come, hero Dionysus, / into the temple of the sea, / with the Charites in the pure temple / raging with the hoof of the bull," while women sing, "O worthy bull! O worthy bull!" In this case, Kerényi says, Dionysus, in contrast with the earlier description, is to unite "with the Charites" because women could only expect to be raped by him in the absence of the calming effect of these goddesses. They desire the "hoof of the bull" that the god brings with him after his departure from the kingdom of the dead, but this is a different fury, one that is clearly domesticated.

Seneca provides us with a true monument to the ethics of grace:

> It is the property of a great and good mind to covet, not the fruit of good deeds, but good deeds themselves, and to seek for a good man even after having met with bad men. As it is, virtue consists in bestowing benefits for which we are not certain of meeting with any return, but whose fruit is at once enjoyed by noble minds. So little influence ought this to have in restraining us from doing good actions, that even though I were denied the hope of meeting with a grateful man, yet the fear of not having my benefits returned would not prevent my bestowing them, because he who does not give, forestalls the vice of him who is ungrateful. I will explain what I mean. He who does not repay a benefit, sins more, but he who does not bestow one, sins earlier. (Bk. 1, vv. 12–13)

Benefits are not tangible; they are spiritual and superior to their materiality.

Neither gold, nor silver, nor other rich gifts are in themselves a benefit; "the disposition of the soul" that practices it is; herein lies the importance of moral qualities. It does not lie in things, therefore, no matter how great they are. Seneca traces the history of this meaning, making precise references to mythology in the process. He describes the three Graces as we have come to know them and explains that they dance in a circle as they hold hands because the benefit passes from hand to hand and always returns to the donor. If it is broken at some point, this chain or 'circle of love' loses its efficacy, whereas it is perfect if the passages are maintained. He points out that the figures appear to be happy, as occurs to one who gives or receives a benefit; they are young because their memory of the benefits does not age; they are virgins because benefits are pure, spontaneous, and sacred for everyone. They wear loose-fitting, diaphanous robes because benefits should be seen. We ask ourselves, however: What does this myth teach us beyond the genealogy and the names we can apply to them following the example of Hesiod or Homer? As a response, Seneca goes beyond the representation of the painters and the tale of the poets as well; these are games that he considers pleasurable, but deceitful. He adds that poets do not love the truth, but what pleases them. To demonstrate that this is really the case Seneca points out that Thalia is called Charis in Hesiod, and Muse in Homer (Bk. 1, 3.2–10). To arrive at the truth we, instead, need to speak of benefits and to establish the rules of a subject that binds human society tightly together. The Stoic Chryssipus encourages us to teach others to give generously, to accept gifts graciously, to return the favor willingly, and to propose a contest that involves not only emulating those to whom we owe a debt of gratitude, but surpassing them, "the giver in forgetting, the receiver in remembering his debt" (Bk. I. 4). In another passage, Seneca speaks quite clearly: "if you wish to imitate the gods, bestow benefits upon the ungrateful as well as the grateful; for the sun rises upon the wicked as well as the good, the seas are open even to pirates" (Bk. III, 26). As he reiterates in other passages, it is not typical of a great spirit to give and to lose a benefit; it is, instead, typical for it to lose a benefit and to continue to give. For these reasons, grace contrasts with pride, which is considered to be the foolish ruin of great fortunes: "O pride, the higher thou risest the lower thou art, and provest that the good things by which thou art so puffed up profit thee not; thou spoilest all that thou givest" (Bk. II.13).

What, then, is a benefit? It is an act of benevolence that procures joy. What is important is not the deed but the attitude of the spirit that changes small things into great ones, that illuminates vile actions and downgrades those considered great and precious. It is on the basis of this feeling that our

soul disdains earthly objects and does not desire excessively; it experiences fully knowledge of the useful and necessary, and it rises above the fear of men and gods. Committed to virtue, our soul sees the entire world as a house in which we all reside; it lives as though it were always in a public space; the soul lies beneath a clear sky. Finally, Seneca declares: "All other matters are but the diversions of a leisure hour; for when the soul has once found this safe retreat, it may also make excursions into things that bring polish, not strength, to its powers. No one of these things is an honor; they are the badges of honor. In like manner that which falls beneath the eye is not a benefit—it is but the trace and mark of a benefit" (Bk. III. 7)

The text has been very much valued through the centuries and quoted by figures from St. Ambrose to Erasmus and from Marcus Aurelius to Diderot. Augustine would translate these ideas into a new vision of happiness. In the epigraph of *De ordine* [*On Order*], 2, 20, 52), we read that we do not pray to have riches and honors, which are ephemeral prizes, but to have those benefits that make us "good and happy."

Part II.

Mythological and Religious Images

I open this section of the present volume with a passage from Walter Friedrich Otto that will serve as a bridge between an initial and a subsequent reflection on our topic. In the preceding pages, I wanted to direct our attention toward the set of ideas that have provided a true aesthetics of grace across time, in parallel with an aesthetic of the beautiful, the tragic, and the sublime, which includes the formulation of values and sensibilities as well as the definition of conceptual and emotional categories. Having described and analyzed this array of theories and perceptions, I would like now to describe the images that symbolically represent grace. An allegorical, symbolic, and metaphorical vision emerges in an age of great changes, an age dominated by a complex cultural metamorphosis from the pagan to the Christian world,

In *Il poeta e gli antichi dei* (*The Poet and the Ancient Gods*), Walter Friedrich Otto discusses the heroic spirit and demonstrates the extent to which this spirit permeated the life of the Greeks. There were numerous heroic lineages and dynastic families boasting divine origins. Poetry, Homer's song, and art put on display the magnificence of a humanity that joined together man and god in a series of experiences capable of accommodating, in one way or another and in every place, the infinite and the eternal for the purpose of attaining spiritual heights where men themselves seemed to become divine figures. This is a kind of life that cannot have been born solely out of the genius of the poetic imagination. According to Otto, we must suppose that there once existed a humanity that lived with exalted feelings and "close to the gods" (p. 118). The Greek gods wished to be viewed from this sublimity. He who has "a great heart" senses this. In a letter to Schiller dated May 12, 1798, Goethe writes: "thanks to Homer we are still aloft above the terrestrial, as though on an air balloon, and we find ourselves truly in that middle kingdom where the gods floated." The heights described by the poet represent the space of the heroes, where man appears alongside the gods in harmony with the infinite; man and god look at each other, mirroring each other in a single eternal figure: it is an illusory space that would be renewed and celebrated in the Renaissance. In the 1400s and 1500s, in the climate of evocation of ancient times and, indeed, of the heroic, victorious spirit, the theme of triumph returns frequently in literary texts and in artworks. In painting, we can point to the works of Andrea Mantegna where dignity, nobility of spirit, and elegance are celebrated in the processions and the figures depicted. The grace that is subtly evident everywhere is also to be considered on its own, apart from virtue and glory. Otto (pp. 126–30) shows us the depth

of the Greek concept of *charis*. It is joy, loveliness, favor, gift, and charm that reveals itself or opens itself up to the heart; it ennobles the spirit and endows thoughts and words with the beauty that renders them immortal. He then cites the words of Pindar (*Nemean Ode* 4, v. 6): "Words have longer lives than deeds if, by the smiling Graces, the tongue draws them from the depths of the soul." Otto adds that *charis* is superior to all other qualities that one can simply acquire, such as a pleasant behavior or a degree of beauty. This is a goddess that reveals herself in nature, in the processes of flowering, blossoming, and maturing. It is a kind of charm that reverberates in the mind, in the eyes, and in the features of human beings. In Orchomenos Boethia, she has an ancient site of cult worship whose queens are called Charites (Pindar, *Olympian Ode* 14). In *The Theogony*, Hesiod considers them to be the daughters of Zeus and Eurynome. After mentioning the Horae (Hours), who oversee the work of mortals, and the Moirae, who allow the acquisition of good and evil, he writes: "And Eurynome, the daughter of Ocean, beautiful in form, bore him three fair-cheeked Charites (Graces), Aglaea, and Euphrosyne, and lovely Thaleia, from whose eyes, as they glanced, flowed love that unnerves the limbs: and beautiful is their glance beneath their brows" (vv. 907–11). He then goes on to speak of Demeter and the drama of Persephone, of Mnemosyne from whose beautiful hair the Muses are born, of Apollo and Artemis, Hera and Athena, Maya and Hermes, Semele and Dionysus. It is interesting to note the inclusion of the Charites in this select list of figures with their intriguing and arcane traits. Along with love that enchants, the gaze passes through the eyelashes to reveal clearly the secret aura of the power of seduction and stupor. The Graces are also present in Hera's entourage. From the beginning, however, *charis* is linked to a stirring of the soul, which is to be understood as both essence and living form; this also happens to another term, *aidos*, one of the noblest sentiments of the Greek spirit, which expresses reservation, shyness, and discreetness. The field of meaning of the two terms extends to include nature and the world as it spreads a moral impulse everywhere in accordance with the human capacity for feeling. Grace emanates especially from Aphrodite, a Greek divinity from ancient times and a goddess who, wrapped in a divine embrace, projects not only erotic pleasure but also, perhaps more importantly, the complete charm of beauty in an aura of splendor and perfection. Grace represents a kind of supreme distance from the world, which reveals to us the delicateness of the whole of nature in the joy of all things and it does so in an instant and with inexpressible sweetness. This is when instead of closing himself or herself off solipsistically the human being contemplates the life of the universe enthused to discover that what moves the cosmos is greater and truer than it appears to be. In the manifestations of the divine, man acquires knowledge

accompanied by a sense of *wonde*r and recognizes himself in the divine and the divine in him. At the first light of dawn, we realize that, infinity becomes form in this vision of the world; even in Greek tragedy there are moments that emphasize the antithesis of darkness. This harks back to Electra's exclamation, "Oh, dear light of day" (Sophocles, *Electra*, v. 1224), or in the equally emotional and popular Greek expression 'everything is sacred.' These are signs of a metaphysical approach to reality behind which we can also see the modern thought of Pier Paolo Pasolini, an interpreter of ancient texts, who saw a language stretched over the world of objects or, as the poet would have preferred to say, an archaic, mythic, and at the same time sacred, language from which a hidden truth, an unknowable *quid*, always emerges and which is *transcendental* for this reason.

We discover the light of Aphrodite in the sites of Mediterranean myth. In order to appreciate this fact, I would like to refer to Praxiteles' portrait *Aphrodite of Cnidus* (360 B.C., marble Roman copy by Ludovisi, Museo Pio Clementino, the Vatican) or the *Callipygian Venus* in the Farnese Collection (Archaeological Museum, Naples); the latter is a harmonious and genial synthesis of *eros* and charm. W.F. Otto says that Aphrodite, "has already led us to the Olympian gods, to those perfect figures that slowly emerged in the Greek spirit with their primitive forms of pre-Hellenic divine essences" (1991, p. 128, my trans.), a spirit pervaded by a reality that reveals itself in a superhuman form of being. These images allow us to interpret *charis* as a prodigious manifestation, but let us not forget another interpretation clearly related to this one, namely, Sappho's: grace cannot exist without the art of the Muses and without *eros*. It is something different from solemn, canonical beauty; at times, it can be like *abrosyne* (elegance) or *peitho* (the power of persuasion). Showering us with amiability, the Graces live together with the Muses on Olympus and are part of the erotic side of Aphrodite, inspire poetry that is subject to Apollo, and offer joy and merriment alongside Dionysus.

A different reading has emerged in recent times, which permits useful comparisons. Let us recall Herbert Spencer's thought in the context of evolutionism. In an article on grace dated 1852, the English philosopher wonders what the unique property of a work or act that we define as graceful is and he is thinking primarily of a movement executed with the least amount of effort. Applied to living forms, here grace refers to attitudes and positions based on the concept of the conservation of energy. Inanimate objects are also subject to this principle. Grace pertains to movement and its main feature is nimbleness; it also pertains to inanimate objects; the branch of an oak tree is not graceful, while that of a weeping willow is. Spencer goes on to propose the interesting hypothesis that grace is based on 'pleasantness,' which is to say,

the involvement of all the motor sensations; violent or awkward movements are considered unpleasant, while nimble ones are considered pleasant.

We can now shift our attention from the plane of the ideal to that of the pragmatic. From an anthropological point of view, about 30 years ago Gregory Bateson stated that humanity's fundamental problem is the search for grace. I would like to explain the meaning attributed to this term. Influenced by an idea of Walt Whitman's, Bateson notes that mankind has lost the simplicity and naturalness that animals possess. Art can be considered an aspect of man's search for grace: both when he attains an 'ecstatic' result and when he is frustrated because a work does turn out the way he imagined it. According to Bateson, we can say that the problem of grace is basically a problem of integration. An artwork is truly great when it integrates the various parts of the mind, especially its many levels; one is so-called 'consciousness' and the other is the 'subconscious.' The work expresses something that can be called grace or psychic integration when the reasons of the heart combine with those of the intellect. In this state of grace, the art of one culture can also have validity and meaning for someone brought up in a different culture. The question, then, is the following: In what form is the information relative to psychic integration contained and codified? Bateson's analysis is based on style, materials, composition, rhythm, technical ability, and it discounts the content itself. Special attention is paid to the ways in which the object is transformed, and not to the message. At the same time, his work studies the meaning of the code selected. Grace demands that we concentrate on a cluster of signs, objects, and events so as to underscore their redundancy or structure on the basis of a relationship that we can establish between the characteristics of the work and the characteristics of the culture that produced the work. Bateson offers us a key to understanding this term, which is anthropological and psychological in nature. He says that, as we observe, a complex stratification of the acts of our conscious and unconscious minds occurs. As does technology, information reveals its many unconscious components and the artist attempts to communicate with the conscious components of his execution, sometimes using a very attractive style. It is precisely this meaningful intersection of the conscious and the unconscious that makes it possible to evaluate the impact of grace on aesthetic intuition and on the artwork.

To return now to the age of great changes, the various cults in the Christian and pagan worlds produce a dense group of images. In this situation, we find figures that we can identify as important elements of a 'rhetoric' of the gaze—figures linked to representation and figures linked to personification, and others connected to the setting. Allegories, symbols, and metaphors are the fabric of a vision that is vivified by changing forms that are then taken up

by the collective imaginary. Mountains, waters, woods, and skies, as well as nymphs, angels, extraordinary beings, and other figures from the Buddhist and Hindu spiritual repertoire pertain to this multiple and varied panorama.

8.

Graces and Furies: Heroines of Worlds Turned Upside Down

Let us now enter into the universe of representation and myth. In the company of other goddesses, the Graces seem to be, I repeat, like the incarnation of grace itself and of beauty. They were venerated by the Minyians of Orchomenos, a place previously mentioned, where king Eteocles instituted the cult that spread to various parts of Greece. In Sparta people worshipped Cleta and Phaenna, two Graces who represented sound and vibrant splendor. There were two Graces in Athens as well: Auxo, who promoted growth, and Hegemone, who functioned as a guide. Pindar invokes them with these words:

> You who have your dwelling / in the place of the splendid horses, founded beside the waters of Kephisos: / O queens of song and queens of shining / Orchomenos: Graces: guardians of the primeval Minyai, hear! My prayer is to you. By your means all delight, / all that is sweet, is given to mankind. / If a man be wise, or beautiful, or splendid, it is you. / Without the grave Graces, not the gods even / marshal their dances, their festivals; mistresses of all / heavenly action, they who have set their thrones / beside Pythian Apollo of the bow of gold / keep eternal the great way of the father Olympian. (*Olympian Ode* 14, vv. 1–14)

This is a beautiful description and an excellent synthesis of their qualities using striking and very clear images.

In addition to being together at Apollo's side, they often appear in artistic depictions as the maidens of Aphrodite whose attributes they share, depending on the figure: the rose, myrtle, apple, and dice. They usually assume a specific pose: two on the right and left sides of the painting and look toward the viewer, while the third is in the center with her back to the viewer. This is an arrangement that has been repeated since antiquity. Evoking the cultural and mythological pagan world, the artists of the Renaissance frequently returned to this composition, as Jean Seznec explains. In Hesiod's *The Theogony* (v. 901), as noted above, the Graces are Aglaia (splendor and ornament), Euphronia (joy and happiness), and Thalia (abundance and prosperity). Through the ages, various allegorical interpretations have been proposed. Seneca (*On Benefits* 1. 3 previously cited in the context of the role played by ethics in this discussion) describes them as smiling, naked maidens or as figures wearing diaphanous veils. In this interpretation, they represent three aspects of generosity (as we have seen, this is where their originality lies), namely, the giving, receiving, and exchanging of gifts or favors: "*ut una sit*

quae det beneficium, altera quae accipiat, tertia quae reddat." The Florentine humanist philosophers read them as symbols of the three stages of love: *beauty* that moves *desire*, which is capable of leading to *satisfaction*. In other cases, they were considered to be personifications of Chastity (*Castitas*), Beauty (*Pulchritudo*), and Love (*Amor*).

Unlike the Muses, deities who accompany Apollo and preside over artistic inspiration in poetry, music, and the other arts, the Graces, unquestionably the "sisters" of the Muses, remain wrapped in mystery and are governed by the principles of cheerfulness, lightness, and sweetness. At the same time, they are different from the nymphs, whether Nereids, Nayads, Oreads, Meliae, Alceids, or Hamadryads. The latter, who are the companions of Diana in woods, grottos, and mountain springs, "floating in the air," as described in the *Orphic Songs* and more specifically in the invocation Perfume of the Nymphs, can inspire images of great, magical beauty; they can even be imagined, by men of the Renaissance, as having winged feet, as though they were undergoing a metamorphosis, for example, the maiden (presumed to be a nymph) in Ghirlandaio's painting *The Birth of the Baptist* in Santa Maria Novella. Neither the Muses nor the nymphs, however, really belong in the aura-like enchantment of the Graces.

With respect to the issue of the nymphs, I would like to mention an interpretation offered by Giorgio Agamben who examines the correspondences between André Jolles and Aby Warburg in Florence, bearing in mind an aspect of the esoteric tradition. Behind all of this, we find in Paracelsus' theory as formulated in *Liber de Nymphis, sylphis, pygmaeis et salamandris et de caeteris spiritibus* (*The Book of Nymphs, Sylphs, Pygmies and Salamanders and the Other Spirits*). The reference is to amorous passion, but the figures can also be imagined as examples of a deity in exile. More specifically, nymphs are studied in the light of the doctrine of elementary spirits (spiritual creatures), each of which is associated with one of the four elements: the nymphs with water, the sylphs with the air, the pygmies with the earth, and the salamanders with fire. According to legend, these spirits were not generated by Adam, but they possess human reason. In this interpretation, they belong to a second degree of creation, being neither animal nor human though they have their features; they are beings without a soul. In the explanation that Paracelsus provides, they have a 'double flesh': one is Adamitic or earthly, and the other is not Adamitic, but delicate and spiritual. They are composite creatures of body and spirit who are subject to death, but they are outside salvation or redemption and alien to God's grace. In this view, the nymphs, a shadowy species of human under the auspices of Venus and love, can acquire a soul only if they unite with humans and produce offspring (Agamben pp. 38–45).

Grace is not a strictly objective fact relating to metaphysical and theological questions; it also pertains to the comportment and style of the artist who interprets, invents, and disguises everything. This has been stated in the pages devoted to the thought of some Humanists and Enlightenment thinkers. In this regard, I could mention, among the many possible examples of reflection on the topic of grace in art, two works by Mantegna: *Parnassus* and *Minerva Chases the Vices from the Garden of the Virtues*. The first is clearly an exuberant manifesto on grace, where theme and style are fused together. Minerva's *aidos* (modesty or humility) prevails in the second, where the ecstatic dimension combines with the expressive power of virtue, without excluding the grace of bearing; this is acting similar to giving of oneself. The painter has captured this relationship between the spirit of daring and the charm of appearance. Athena enters quickly and boldly into the world scene routing evil effortlessly; she has the power of her weapons, and her beauty is like that of Venus. In this case, the theme and the style may seem to be distinct, but they are inseparable. *Aidos* is compatible with *charis*.

With respect to grace, many masterpieces come to mind: Piero della Francesca's *Story of the True Cross*, Botticelli's *Birth of Venus*, *Springtime*, or *Pallas and the Centaur*, Leonardo's *St Anne, the Madonna and the Child with the Lamb*, or *Portrait of a Woman with an Ermine*, Piero di Cosimo's *Death of Procris*, Garofalo's *Venus and Mars*, Raphael's *School of Athens*, *Mt Parnassus*, or *The Dream of the Knight*, Titian's *Sacred and Profane Love*, as well as several works by Correggio. At this point, however, it is important to analyze the dark side of this topic, which contrasts with the function of the Graces; it is an aspect that gives greater breadth to our discussion.

There exists, in fact, a world turned upside down, a dark, frightful world contrasting starkly with that of the Graces and the harmony of the Muses and nymphs. I am referring to the Furies, the Erinyes or Eumenides, allies of the Moirae, who belong to an area of myth occupied by the Gorgons and the Graeae. In Aeschylus' *The Eumenide*s, they are described as old with dark skin; they wear gray clothing and have serpents in the place of hair. In other passages, they are similar to the Harpies. Their breath and body odor are unbearable; their eyes, from which a poisonous liquid oozes, look like those of dogs; they bark and brandish whips tipped with metal buckles; they carry torches and live in Hades. We may recall that in mythology these spirits of anger and vengeance pursue Orestes. Some of these creatures were given birth by Gaia; others were born of the Night or Persephone who had been with chtonic Zeus or Hades; for others still, the mother of both the Erinyes and Charites was the Oceanid Eurynome. In support of this last theory, it is said that sacrifices were made near Megalopolis in Arcadia to both the Erinyes and the Charites, which, as we know, came to be called Eumenides or the

'benevolent ones.' Not always winged and living underground, Alecto the 'unplacable,' Tisiphone the 'avenger,' and Megera the 'jealous one,' supported the cause of the offended or murdered mother in particular. This is why we find them in the story of Orestes. In addition, the Moirae are depicted in literature, where they raise their voices in song in orer to bring Adonis back to life. The expression of grief, however, is essentially alien to these figures. There is also another reference that brings Pausanias and Pliny the Elder together in the same story. Both the Charites and the Erinyes were venerated in a temple at Rhamnus dedicated to Nemesis. It was originally claimed that the cultural icon Nemesis was the daughter of Aphrodite and that, in a fit of anger, the sculptor Agoracritus turned her into a statue of Nemesis.

These are figures in Greek mythology where the individual and the collective are mingled together; these are the traces of an arcane mystery that became integrated with the existence and the voice of an entire population. The skies, the earth, and the sea assume dazzling forms, creating the image and the living poetry of that ancient world, thereby exercising a sacred function that is both cult and history. In *Fisiologia del mito* (*The Physiology of Myth,* 1946), Mario Untersteiner illustrates the power of metamorphosis, a very well-known theme, and observing the unity of nature and its changeable manifestations, he interprets these processes in the context of *mana*, a term capable of expressing an impersonal and mechanical force that functions on its own, autonomously, even if it is "moved by a living being." The ancient meaning of this impersonal force resurfaces especially in the words *dynamis*, *menos*, and *charis*. Multiplicity and unity are present simultaneously; beneath the countless manifestations of experience, there is a single impersonal force that dominates everywhere. This is the divine as a reflection of the life of the entire universe, without borders separating the various regions of nature; it can take on anthropomorphic, tetramorphic, phytomorphic, and hybrid properties. We might say that there exists a *daimon* (an inferior deity) of transformations: Zeus as a bull, Demeter as a mare, Poseidon as a stallion, Daphne as a laurel tree, etc. This is communion with nature on the basis of innumerable changes. In addition, the divine manifests itself even when things and events are changed as the result of a prank, cunning, or deception. Reporting an observation made by Karl Deichgraber, Untersteiner declares that in myth there is a grace that renders cunning and its execution divine. Cunning, which is "graceful" in this sense, is an attribute of Hermes in particular (Ibid. pp. 17–71).

Moving from the plane of the symbolic and the mythic to the study of sensibility, we have a curious but interesting observation from Giacomo Leopardi, when he comments on the special meanings of the term 'grace'; for

example, "grace that is born of defect," which pricks and tingles like a sharp, spicy, harsh, acrid, or sour taste, and which "in itself is unpleasant and yet is pleasing to a certain extent and, so, many souls who have never been able to feel that other grace," due to custom, habit or complacency are moved and attracted by a taste that is naturally coarse or hard, which is a property of this 'defective' grace. The other grace is, instead, almost the sweet and delicate bouquet of jasmine or roses with no trace of sharpness or bite, as the poet says: "a gentle breeze that carries an unexpected fragrance that vanishes the moment it is perceived and leaves us with a vain desire to experience it once more, for a longer period of time, and to feel fully sated by it" (*Zibaldone*, 16 August 1823). Another thought worth mentioning here is that concerning 'wicked grace.' Leopardi affirms that the same wickedness can become grace and produce an effect on women, including those of good character and the conscientious; indeed, it does so to a greater extent than on the others, because wickedness is new and extraordinary to them. The wicked man draws such women to him with the same horror and quivering that produces in them this attractive and fascinating quality (9 October 1821). This demonstrates the range of meanings and implications for the term 'grace.'

The history of mythology tells us that the Charites were worshipped in Greece from the most ancient times. They had a shrine in Orchomenos, Boeotia, and there were other temples in Elis, Hellas, Arcadia, near Megalopolis, Sparta, Amicles, Laconia, Hermione, Argolis, and probably Kos. A site of archaic cult worship has been discovered near the present-day Propylaeae (gateway) of the Acropolis in Athens, presumed to be a mystery cult involving votive offerings to the Graces. In Olympia, the Graces had altars dedicated to them as did Dionysus. Their images could be seen almost everywhere up to the Phoenician coast and in Lybia. Festivals were celebrated in their honor because they were associated with the fertility of the land. As Aldo Lo Schiavo explains in his fine book, they were also linked with other community ceremonies, sporting games, and musical competitions. Possibly of Minoan-Mycenian origin, the cult, was primarily Apollonian rather than a mystery cult. The most ancient mythic tradition places them on Olympus, next to the Muses and Himeros, showering magnificent gifts on mankind and on things.

It is worth repeating that *charis* takes us toward enchantment, splendor, lightness, and festive joy and merriment, or toward the concept of the gift and the sense of gratitude. These qualities regard the individual in terms of both external features and internal traits, which is to say, feelings and emotions, the gentleness of the words spoken and elocution, the pleasure of communal festivals, exemplary or heroics deeds, but objects are also included. I re-emphasize that the semantic field is wide ranging. As Lo Schiavo underscores, we should indeed take note of the fact that the verb *chairein*

contains the idea of something that shines or glitters. We need to reflect on this meaning in order to understand the term's polyvalence. Beauty, charm, and splendor are all implied. Light is not to be considered in itself; it serves to emphasize or to identify an object, a quality, or a situation. The winner in a competition "shines" in relation to the type of beauty offered by the contest. In several passages of the *Iliad*, as well as in other narratives, we read of the light that emanates from the gaze, a light that radiates grace and dignity. *Charis* issues from the eyes. This spirit of serenity and conviviality stimulates memory of the golden age when humans lived like gods who do not experience old age, distress, or illness (Hesiod, *Erga* 115), and when the gods and the Charites gathered for banquets (Pindar, *Olympian Ode* 14), and when the gods participated in Greek festivals called *Thaliai* (Revels and Dances).

The Graces are associated with various gods and perform a variety of sacred and symbolic functions. They are most frequently described as being at the side of Aphrodite and Apollo, but their stories also intersect with those of Hephaestus and Hermes, to the point of becoming their opposites in extreme cases, that is to say, the Furies, as we have seen. They are present in both the ordinary and the extraordinary spheres from the heavens to the earth and from Hades to Olympus. The shining Charites exert a beneficent influence on mankind and, more than any other poet, Pindar sings their beauty. As Lo Schiavo informs us (1993, pp. 61–62), with the help of the Charites, Aphrodite and the Pierides, the Greek poet pays homage to Apollo Pythios, the divine ruler of Delphi, a place renowned for musical contests, considered to be an integral part of athletic competitions. The victories of young participants in the different sporting events are an essential feature of Pindar's poetry. The winner, the one who distinguishes himself by finishing first, embodies the gift of the Charites; he receives a crown of flowers under the aegis of the goddesses. Thanks to them, he acquires fame, honor, and glory. Envy is powerless against "the one on whom august Grace showers noble beauty" (my trans.)

The beauty of the body is obviously a part of this ideal of perfection. In Archaic sculpture, the gods were depicted in virile, nude forms called 'Apollonians' or *kouroi*, which were like the figures of athletes and heroes in every respect; later, the god is often represented as a young man in whom beauty and grace predominate and inspire admiration. We can understand, however, the connection between these two figures since they represent the ideal of perfection, which characterizes ancient Greek aesthetics. As Lo Schiavo (Ibid. pp. 59–60) informs us, in the ephebe god we have a clear example of the psycho-physical state of the adolescent, especially that moment of adolescence when the mother's protection ends and life with the ephebe god be-

gan in Athens and elsewhere. Thus, splendor, grace, and youthfulness connect Apollo to the Charites in a more general paideutic or didactic sense, which is also expressed by the musical harmony that links the god closely with the Muses. The Muses, the Horae and the Charites, each group in its own way, recall the superior form, the "incarnate form" of the god. Apollo is a luminous divinity *par excellence*. When he is born on Delos, from the labor pains of Leda, and bursts into the light, the whole island glows with joy; the earth smiles and a divine fragrance pervades the entire region. Harmony of sounds, proportion of bodies, and beauty of forms inscribe themselves in the incomparable light. In classical Greece, the concept of the entire world that aspires to order, clarity, and balance, envisions Apollo as the god who causes the darkness to disperse from all of nature. His relationship with Aphrodite underlines a different and distinctive function of the Charites. Just as there is a distinction to be made on the basis of capacity and moral qualities, there is also a distinction to be made on the basis of the physical beauty of the person or the charm that the person exudes. There is certainly no contradiction between these two possibilities; in the widespread secular mentality of the Greeks, noble *areté* and shining *charis* could be found together in the same object, even though we can distinguish the one from the other on an abstract level. The Greeks often saw ethical values in an aesthetic light.

Aphrodite embodies a cosmic power; she emanates a mysterious, attractive, and enchanted radiance. She is the goddess of beauty, but also the goddess of love, or better, of sensual pleasure, passion that irresistibly attracts human beings to one another. She symbolizes forces not controlled by reason but that are, instead, guided by enchantment. She inspires emotions, desires, illusions, and seductions that rob even the wisest of their rationality. From ancient times, she is described in literary passages as a luminous deity that 'loves the smile.' Her splendor radiates for the benefit of whole world, which it adorns with flowers on the surface of the ocean, in the heavens, and on the land. Her season is spring when nature is reborn or takes on a new life, and the magic of intimate encounters is everywhere. The love that blows gently from her is, in fact, something powerful yet delicate; it is the energy of the created world that "attracts us into the delights of union," using different qualities and stimuli. It is not by chance that in myth Aphrodite is usually depicted as linked closely with Eros (amorous passion), Himeros (ardent desire), Peitho (seduction), and naturally with the graceful Charites. When Pandora is born, the linkage between the Charites and Aphrodite becomes clearer. At times, the Graces are presented as maidens who wait on the great goddess, ready to bathe her, cover her with divine ointment, clothe her in beautiful robes, or sew the grey peplum and pick flowers for her. In other cases, the connection between the Cyprian goddess and the daughters of Eu-

rynome appears to be based on parity, as when the latter are invoked by the poet and when they participate together in choruses and dances in which the goddesses delight and the world rejoices. There is a close complementariness among them, which allows the two features that characterize these figures to be identified unequivocally. We cannot say that the respective roles are interchangeable or that amorous passion is reducible to a hybrid or mixture of beauty and grace; however, that of love certainly responds to the effects of beauty more than any other power; where there is the one, there is the other; and where the latter appears, we are invariably surprised by the former.

Having examined the close relationship between the Graces and Apollo and between the Graces and Aphrodite, we need now to consider the relationship between the Graces and Hephaestus and then Hermes, as has been well illustrated by Lo Schiavo. Another example of the association of the Graces with Aphrodite can be found in the fact that painters and sculptors, by now partly liberated from the obligations of the cult, began to depict the Cyprian goddess as a nude in mid-4th century B.C. Around the same time, the fair-haired daughters of Eurynome were depicted as unclothed. This type of representation, which became canonical for the entire Hellenistic age, presented three nude young women with sinuous and seductive bodies embracing the central figure with their backs to the viewer. As indicated above, the most ancient artists painted them with long robes, in accordance with religious tradition. We know, in fact, that mythic tradition attributed considerable importance to the powers of attraction and seduction of splendid robes and precious jewels, which formed part of the amorous weaponry of Aphrodite and the Charites. Their competence in this matter is exemplary. In the sphere that Aphrodite occupies, clothing, hairstyle, and gold ornaments, combined with the beauty of the body and gracefulness of comportment constitute, in a specific way, a reliable source of distinction and attraction, as demonstrated by the attention paid to these elements in the *Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite*. It tells of the goddess welcomed to Paphos by the Charites and of the amorous encounter of the Cyprian deity and the hero Anchises. There are also references to the *toilette* and the clothing elsewhere; however, the *Hymn to Aphrodite* contains a veritable inventory of the instruments and strategies that serve to beautify the person, to draw attention to him or her, and to make the desire for sexual union irresistible. We, therefore, find here an art of cosmetics, which is enhanced by perfumes and ointments, embellished by hairstyles, fine clothing, and jewels—examples of technique and beauty that increase the luminous aura of the goddess. In literature, we find specific references to the Charites as deities interested in sewing, that is, the art of making luxurious garments. It was they who made Aphrodite's gray peplum and the beautiful garments worn by Aphrodite herself when she arrives at the

temple at Paphos. It is also they who sewed the sacred tunic of Dionysus and the wedding gown of Harmony, given to her by Athena.

Hephaestus is the architect of the gods and the absolute ruler in the realm of metallurgy. *Charis*, that light and luminous aura, bathes his ingenious works, executed in gold and silver or in bronze, rendering them wonders to behold. Mortals acquired the arts and learned to produce 'works full of grace' from Hephaestus. When Thetis goes to ask him for new weapons for Achilles, Hephaestus reassures her, saying that he would forge such beautiful weapons that everyone who saw them would admire them and be awed. On that very occasion, the *Iliad* (Bk. 17, vv. 522–25) describes the wife of Hephaestus, who meets Thetis at the entrance of her home, as one of the Graces; in fact, she is Charis in person. It is she, the beautiful one with the splendid veil, who married the busy god of fire. This is a couple that, inspired by Homer, Phidias had sculpted in the company of the other gods on the pedestal of Zeus' throne at Olympia. In other sources, the wife of Hephaestus is Aphrodite herself (*Odyssey* Bk. 8, v. 270). Apart from these associations, however, I would like to mention the fact that there is a connection between the works of genius and those of nature, between technique and beauty, and between intelligence and grace.

Also important is the relationship between the Graces and Hermes, the winged messenger of the gods, son of Zeus and Maya, the dispenser of goods, great friend of mankind, and a figure around whom all the banquet rituals revolve, which was central to the culture and daily life of the Greeks. In these encounters, grace was part of the atmosphere; it was like a kind of blessing for the participants. We also know, however, that Hermes, whose name might mean "he of the mount of stones," was known as the protector of the roads and gateways from the earliest times. In his honor, piles of stones placed on tombs, along roads, and at intersections were considered sacred; perhaps, this is the origin of the word *herma*, which mark the boundaries of fora, roads, markets, and entrances to the cities and residences. Because he is present at every crossing to indicate the safe route, and to facilitate encounters, the god has something in common with the Graces who, as we know, are present at crucial times in life, for example, during the passage from adolescence to adulthood, from the unmarried to the married state. Once again, Lo Schiavo, as a point of comparison, states that some of the cult monuments dedicated to the Charites were also located where people met, for example, at the entrances of temples or in public squares. I must also mention that the daughters of Eurynome appear frequently as figures that lead Persephone out of Hades and toward Zeus and her mother Demeter. This is a case where they clearly reveal their principal vocation, which is to provide luminosity to the world above. Hermes carries out an analogous

function when, on orders from Zeus, he leads the same Persephone from the dense shadow of Erebus to the light of day, among the gods, where her mother waits for her. Lo Schiavo then compares the two mythic scenes, which are perfectly parallel since they share the theme of the return of Demeter's daughter to the light of the world above ground, and he explains how, in this important function, the role of Hermes and that of the Charites can be interchangeable.

Here, the motifs of the earth and the mother, of their sacredness and power, are interwoven. The myth speaks of the procreative power of the body through a series of powerful representations.

9.

Mater Dolorosa, Mater Lacrimosa

If we think of the body of the earth as the body of the mother, we can imagine various personifications, including the Christian concept of the Virgin Mary. This is always a portrait of sorrow and tears, sacrifice and *terribilità* (frightening power). Regardless of how she is depicted in various narratives, this figure is often given itself over to suffering, sacrifice, and even martyrdom—a life of passion at the end of which we find the light of the gift of reparation, a saintliness that heals, or a grace that lifts us out of atrocity.

Let us consider the earth in Greek mythology. In Hesiod (*Theogony*, vv. 126 ff.), Gaia, the earth, is said to give birth to a being like herself, one capable of covering her completely, and to Uranus, the sky, the secure abode of the gods. This primordial couple would give birth to families of gods, cyclopses, and other mythic beings. In the *Homeric Hymn to the Earth*, the speaker sings to the universal mother, a venerable ancestress. Aeschylus praises her because she gives birth to and nourishes beings and receives their seed. In a very ancient hymn, sung by the Pleiades of Dodona, she is referred to as 'our' mother. In *Traité d'histoire des religions* (*Treatise on the History of Religions*), Mircea Eliade describes a great number of beliefs, myths, and rituals pertaining to the topic of the earth that form the basis of the cosmos itself in a series of religious representations that suggest the cyclical rhythm of different civilizations. In the hunter-gatherer and then the agricultural era, to use ethnological terms, the earth came to be valorized, from a strictly telluric standpoint. In the beginning, Eliade claims, all so-called 'divinities of the earth' were really *divinities of place*, in the sense of our cosmic environment. This established a relationship between a divine mother and nature, as in a hierophantic exercise.

In *Miti e misteri* (*Myths and Mysteries*, 1979, pp. 327–29), Kerényi states that there are various texts, including the famous one by Lucretius, according to which Venus and Nature, Aphrodite and Physis, were to be considered equivalent concepts. We should include among these documents several magical prayers from late antiquity: an 'evocative enchantment,' a 'coercive prayer,' and a 'lecanomancy' of Aphrodite. Although these kinds of writing (magical) were not very Epicurean or classical, we must still remind ourselves that Lucretius himself may have fallen prey to magical or aphrodisiacal influence. The hymns sung during the preparation of a philter were not inventions of the last centuries of antiquity, despite the fact that they have come down to us in their more recent versions. According to Kerényi, they are derived from a variety of Oriental religions, but they also

allude to relationships among divine Greek figures, relationships that could belong to a more ancient Greek mythology, one that is not so much classical as popular. In one "coercive prayer," Aphrodite is also invoked as 'Nature' or universal mother, and she performs the function that Parmenides attributed to the Lady of Mixtures: "Cytherean born from the foam, mother of the gods and men / ethereal, chthonic, universal mother, indomitable Physis / who keeps together all things and causes the great fire to circulate [...] / you also move the sacred desire in the hearts of men and women toward men." Through the offering of incense this 'coercive enchantment' is related to the 'star of Aphrodite,' the planet Venus. In 'lecanomancy,' the same goddess, called *Physis* and *Aphrodite*, seems to be identical to the moon: "I also invoke Physis of all the things born of Zeus, the biform, indivisible, swift Aphrodite, who is as beautiful as the sea-foam, that you may display your beauteous light and your lovely face." The identification is not merely occasional, says Kerényi; it recurs in the form of philosophical doctrine, and in the highest forms of literature; it is also clearly expressed in the *Hymn to the Moon* as another evocative enchantment: "Genitrix of all things and mother of love, Aphrodite / bearer of the torch, luminous and radiant Selene." From this derives the encomium to the goddess, which introduces the great didactic Epicurean poem on nature. Kerényi (ibid.) also points out that, despite the fact that *Physis* subsequently changed from a primordial word to a purely philosophical concept, she nevertheless remained a well-defined image of the mother, an image purified of both the features of Mother Earth passively giving birth and the 'Niobe' feature of the *mater dolorosa*. Taking up this subject, Horace offers us a poetic dream of this representation: "Now Cytherean Venus leads out her dancers, under the pendant moon, / and the lovely Graces have joined with the Nymphs, / treading the earth on tripping feet, while Vulcan, all on fire, visits / the tremendous Cyclopean forges" (*Odes* Bk. 1, v. 4).

In this sense, as Kerényi informs us (Ibid., p. 310), according to the doctrine of Zeno the Stoic, great Nature is not only ingenious; she is herself an artist who ensures the preservation and the beauty of the universe, as Cicero writes in *De natura deorum* (*The Nature of the Gods*) (Bk. 2, 51, v. 128). In the Invocation of Mother Earth (*Hymni naturales* [*Hymns of Nature*], Bks. 3-4 sect. d.C.) a prayer rich in *pathos* is recited in which Nature is called holy, a refuge for the peoples of the world, divine interpreter of the creatures of the sea and sky, and eternal wet-nurse of living entities. The soul returns to her in peace once it has left the body. In a similar comment on the Mediterranean origins of the myth, we can find a true 'transcendence of nature,' as Kerényi underscores once more in *Dionysos* (1992, pp. 39–42). He says that, on the setting of a gold ring housed in the Archaeological Museum of Heraklion,

there is a scene full of harmony and dynamism in which movement emanates from above, from the space where divine apparitions occur. An epiphany takes place among the flowers as two serpents surprisingly enliven the background; they are placed so high in the scene that they could belong to the world of the divine. A great eye, located somewhat lower in relation to one of the serpents, is like an observer who casts a glance from that position, which can give the entire representation a special depth. It is possible to interpret two of the four large female figures as goddesses in the act of appearing. The fact that they come from an upper region is indicated by a fifth small figure floating behind the goddess located above her. The latter figure raises one hand. The figure that precedes her and is also descending in a spiral motion, raises both hands. This is the gesture of epiphany. The raised hands of the other two large female figures mirror the gesture. It would not suffice, however, to see this as a gesture of prayer. For Kerényi, the gesture is appropriate not only for epiphany *per se* but also for the *act* of epiphany itself. In addition, the gestures made in the course of visionary experiences of this kind are genuine and not repetitive as they are, instead, in cult worship. This is a world that does not acknowledge the distance that separates the human being from the transcendent, a world in which the delicateness of life dominates a series of 'naturalistic scenes' where beauty is expressed by human bodies inspired, *elevated* we might say, by the enchantment of a superior presence that has no purpose. From this, we can identify and reflect on many airy and floating figures in a religious imaginary, whose roots are to be found in different visions and cultures, from the Etruscan and Roman to the Christian and Buddhist.

The image of Nature as genetrix undergoes a transformation and assumes aspects that change with the passing of time, in accordance with various faiths and myths. From the Christian perspective, Mary comes to occupy a central position. Several earth and mother cults flow into this figure, and new meanings emerge, namely, sacrifice and incarnation. In this perspective, alongside the masculine motif, which passes from the Father to the Son, an entire woman of sorrow motif is established. It is possible to interpret the following comment on grace by Luigi Payerson in this light:

> It is extremely tragic that, only in sorrow, does God succeed in helping man and that man can attain salvation. It is, however, in this same shared, divine and human suffering that pain appears as the only force that can conquer evil. This principle is one of the cornerstones of tragic thought: that between man and God there is no collaboration in grace unless there has been suffering first [...] and it is for this reason that suffering is to be considered as the spring for changing from the negative to the positive, the rhythm of freedom, the fulcrum of history, the pulsation of the real, the link between

> time and eternity; in short, it is like a bridge connecting Genesis and the Apocalypse, divine origin and apocatastasis. (1989, p. 33, my trans.)

Christianity has made suffering and sacrifice a doctrine of redemption in the face of the evil in the world. As Simone Weil is quoted as saying in a paragraph above, this is a redemption born from the effects of "gravity." Only in this way, in fact, is it possible to have as a response a heavenward surge and finally to soar toward liberty; and the surge is all the more beautiful the longer it lasts and the more painful is the descent.

Because of the symbolic power of martyrdom, that of St Cecilia stands out; it is "historically" documented in the Catacomb of St Domitilla and is given artistic representation by Stefano Maderno in the famous funerary sculpture from the first part of the 1600s (Basilica of St Cecilia in Trastevere, Rome); the position in which the body was found following the martyrdom, i.e., with the head wrapped in a cloth, was reproduced many centuries after the event by Maderno in a graceful, subdued Baroque style. On this issue, however, we cannot avoid a retrospective comparison with the painting of Francesco Francia, specifically the depiction of an angel who crowns the saint and Valerian with roses and lilies (Oratory of St Cecilia, Bologna) and with Raphael's *St Cecilia with Saints* (Pinacoteca Nazionale, Bologna). This last painting shifts attention onto the figure of St Cecilia as *patron of musicians* —an image that alludes to her marriage and the moment when she is on her way to join her husband Valerian. On this journey, she is surrounded-ed by the festive sounds of musical instruments, but Cecilia is not interested in earthly delight, preferring the celestial harmony that she feels in her heart. In the most famous depictions, the portative organ or, depending on the iconography, the harpsichord, harp, lute, or other stringed instrument, is sometimes played by angels who accompany her. In Raphael's painting, Cecilia pushes the organ away from herself as she holds it upside down, while other instruments, associated with the cult of Bacchus (flutes, drums, and cymbals) seem to be broken at the feet of the virgin who listens to a heavenly song. In this version, Cecilia rejects earthly instruments in order to hear the music coming from above. This is a precious and particular motif that would inspire artworks of great value.

In 1687, John Dryden wrote "A Song for St Cecilia's Day," in which we find both Jewish history and the myth of Orpheus, Pythagorean science and the principle of universal harmony, fused together in a fully Christian vision. Classical taste takes pagan visions into a completely new dimension; in the face of nature that consists of 'cold atoms,' grace descends upon the scene of the martyrdom, leading back to the heavenly music. The poet says that notes pour out, notes that inspire sacred love as they expand into the air, repairing the evil of the world. It is no longer a contest among musicians in the pres-

ence of Orpheus but a gleaming revelation; Cecilia joins the sound of the organ to her song and the angel, upon hearing her, is astonished and mistakes the sky for the earth. Affected by the power of this melody, the spheres begin to move as they sing the praise of the Creator.

Still on the topic of martyrdom, let us not forget Alessandro Scarlatti. In his *The Martyrdom of St Ursula* oratorio, he expresses with extraordinary delicateness the quality of the encounter between the grace of song and the grace of sound in the context of religious canons. A product of the Baroque, Scarlatti succeeds in communicating the torment of martyrdom with his "Deh! Volate, bei dardi amorosi" ("Come! Fly, beautiful arrows of love") sublimating the genius of music onto that of the soul.

In the musical context, we should recall, however, that grace technically refers to embellishment of execution and interpretation; it is essentially a note executed with a particularly skilful touch, derived from the transposition of the term 'sprezzatura' (expressiveness). In musical theory, the term may also indicate a kind of obsession with composition. When we think of a master of gracefulness in music, we usually hear the name of Corelli whose tomb is located in the Pantheon in Rome, beside Raphael's, not by accident.

Martyrdom has been linked to theological grace in a long and ancient tradition. We find early evidence of this in Isaiah's "Songs of the suffering servant," which anticipate the death of Christ by five centuries. Martyrs are witnesses to the faith, and self-sacrifice offers them the gift of grace by which they are welcomed into the plan of salvation and hope in the resurrection. The palm recurs often in Christian iconography as an attribute of martyrdom for one's faith, thereby inverting its original pagan meaning. The early Church, in fact, used the symbol of military victories and athletic contests, which also had the notion of 'profane' grace to express the Christian defeat of death.

The figure of Mary, *mater dolorosa*, contains the motif of sorrow and tears as the external and visible expression of suffering. In his *Requiem* and his *Lacrymosa*, Mozart creates a clear and majestic illustration of the way musical composition can be permeated by theological doctrine and can define a style involving powerful emotions.

In time, the two figures of the *mater dolorosa* and the *mater lacrimosa* became interwoven and fused together. To the figures were added solemn attributes, which are uttered during the recitation of the mysteries of the rosary and the litanies. Usually, the *mater dolorosa* icon refers to the Virgin at the foot of the cross and the Pietà or Lamentation with the body of the dead Christ on her knees, but it can sometimes refer to the Virgin alone. The Lady of the Seven Sorrows is depicted with seven swords that pierce her bosom and frame her head; this is a literal interpretation of Simeon's prophecy at the

Presentation, which corresponds to the first sorrow: "Behold, this child is set for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is spoken against 35 (and a sword will pierce through your own soul also), that thoughts out of many hearts may be revealed" (Luke 2: 34–35). The other six sorrows recall the flight into Egypt, Jesus lost by his mother in Jerusalem (or the disputation with the doctors), the carrying of the cross (or ascent to Calvary), the crucifixion, the deposition from the cross, and the ascension. Northern European artists, especially Flemish painters of the 16th century, treated the subject in different ways. Occasionally, the seven swords are replaced by other examples of sorrowful episodes arranged around the figure of the Madonna. The motif of the swords is also present in various 17th-century Italian and Spanish artworks. As well, in the 16th century the isolated figure of the sorrowful Virgin, without swords, begins to emerge; the figure symbolizes the Church left to confront alone the desolation of the world after the death of the disciples—a subject similar to that of the Madonna of Mercy. The latter is sometimes portrayed as contemplating the instruments of the Passion. The theme was of interest to Spanish painters of the Counter-Reformation and was called *la Soledad* or the Virgin of Solitude.

The Madonna of the Rose Bush also comes to mind. In the late Middle Ages and in the early Renaissance, the Virgin and Child were often depicted beneath a rose bush or pergola, in front of a hedge or trellis covered in roses, which marks an enclosed space. The Madonna genuflects, in the manner of a pious woman, before the Child who lies on the ground; she may also be seated on the ground (Madonna of Humility); occasionally, she is enthroned. From early Christianity, the rose plays an important role in sacred symbolism; the red rose alludes to the blood of the martyrs and the white rose to purity; the Virgin is also called 'Rose without thorns.' In the rich iconography of sweet Madonnas, we find yet another image, namely, that of the Virgin as 'enclosed garden,' derived from the *Song of Songs*: an enclosed fragrant garden, *hortus conclusus*, which is adopted as a symbol of absolute purity. In Albertus Magnus' *Praise of the Blessed Virgin* (1, 12), the enclosed garden stands for beauty that is intact and resplendent, and the Virgin reigns as queen. In some paintings, to the right and left of the Madonna and Child, angels strew rose petals in the direction of Jesus, saints, and donors; this occurs, for example, in the *Madonna of the Rose Bush* attributed in recent times to Michelino da Besozzo (Museo di Castelvecchio, Verona).

Figures associated with the sacredness of the earth are connected with specific places. From the Christian point of view, the subject of martyrdom defines an entire sacred geography. In this regard, a visit to the catacombs in Rome can be very interesting because they reveal an intersection of rituals and myths dating back to the first centuries. The commemoration of martyr-

doms cut across different belief systems, and Christian sepulchers sometimes appear next to pagan tombs. Today, in the Catacomb of St Sebastian, beneath the Basilica of St Eustace, which is not far from the monument to Cecilia Metella, there is an area of funeral banquets dedicated to the memory of Peter and Paul, which suggests the existence of a network of passages used by Christians, outside the walls of Rome, among villas, gardens, votive steles, cultivated fields, and burial sites. We have, for instance, the old Appian Way, which is a place for recollection and contemplation, a path along which we can walk and admire the sights, where Christians, pagans, Jews, and citizens of other cults shared the encounter of life and death. We could think of this network of pathways as the ways of grace as we extend the meaning of the term to show how even the ordinary aesthetic life can be permeated by the spirit of contemplation and reflection on the world, mankind, and history in an atmosphere of lightness and enchantment. Nature can be illuminated by meditation on the end and the beginning of all things.

According to Friedrich Schlegel (*Lyceum Fragments* no. 29), grace in the simplicity of life lived is a waiting that consists in a "sensibility that one contemplates and forms." Rosario Assunto has interpreted the beauty of this waiting in an original way as the appearance of a winged figure, an angel of the secret with no particular names, a witness to all that is insubstantial and ephemeral in life, an angel who is like our fragile interlocutor suspended between the living and the dead, as we ourselves are. This is the angel about whom Rainer Maria Rilke speaks in *Ninth Elegy* of the *Duino Elegies*. In the face of our agitation, the angel represents a time and place of the sayable, so the world might present and communicate to him all that is simple and amazing. But this same amazement is the angel's gaze, which pierces us, and it is also ours as we observe objects and actions: a vision consisting of happiness, innocence, and sorrow that acquire form. We celebrate with the angel, "these things that live in order to die," things that are saved, transformed in our invisible heart, by human beings traveling along a maze of passages, like wayfarers who have reached their destination.

10.

Places of Apparition

Mankind chooses sacred places in accordance with the different cults that they practise and an area of the earth that is marked by the god is an extraordinary space, the place of all places. Once we are within it, we do not stop at the physically limited space of the site, but we symbolically go beyond its circumscribed area until it becomes external to itself and become a "non place." This is the sacred space around a spring or a tree; such is the temple and the ideal city, all of which are God Himself in a conceptualization that distinguishes the monotheistic from the polytheistic tradition. We find different definitions of sacred space from the religious imaginary that has established these meanings as expressions and revelations of the divine. Many ancient pagan sites were related to pilgrimages and marked routes through a territory, winding their way through myth and history; these routes were taken up in successive epochs and interpreted in various narratives and beliefs. In this sense, in a universal quest for the transcendent, humanity sees the shaman and the priest as one and the same figure. There is, in fact, a cultural line that connects and unites prehistory with the course of civilization. The geometry and archeometry of sacred spaces were instituted where different religions intersected in a process of cultural mirroring. Mankind finds itself, therefore, inside a maze of itineraries, from the oracle of Delphi to the Holy Sepulcher; we may listen in silence as we stand next to a fissure in the rock face and wait for a response or look at the Sepulcher and think of the final act in the life of Christ in order to immerse ourselves in the vision of the resurrection. Grace is always involved. As mentioned above, these places stand for all places inasmuch as they constitute an 'eschatological u-topia (no place)'; whether imaginary or real, they are gifts from the invisible realm.

Elémire Zolla, in *Che cos'è la tradizione* (*What Tradition Is*), reminds us that in the "Hymn to the Christian Image of the Messianic Urbs" the words are:

> Blessed city, heavenly Salem, / vision dear of peace and love, / who of living stones art built / in the height of heaven above, / and, with angel hosts encircled, / as a bride dost earthward move; / from celestial realms descending, / bridal glory round thee shed, / meet for him whose love / spoused thee, / to thy Lord shalt thou be led; / all thy streets and all thy bulwarks /of pure gold are fashioned. Bright thy gates of pearl are shining; / they are open evermore; / and by virtue of his merits / thither faithful souls do soar, / who for Christ's dear Name in this world /pain and tribulation bore. / Many

> a blow and biting sculpture / polished well those stones elect, / in their places now compacted /by the heavenly Architect.

It is the inviolable grace of the building that unites body and soul, and it is also the ecstasy of the transition from one state of being to another, the threshold of Paradise reached through suffering, or it is the miracle of a heavenly plan transposed to the map of the city, as in the case of Angkor Wat. We find ourselves in the world and we discover one memory after another, from man-made passages to natural ones, from Delphi to Cyprus, and from Crete to the Sinai: rituals, altars, steles, or even limpid signs in the form of revelations, apparitions, and miracles. A place is designated as holy inasmuch as its existence appears to be removed from all that is profane, impure, or contaminated because it is animated or inhabited by supernatural forces that inspire fear mixed with veneration. Such a place, therefore, is considered to be pure due to its value as a contrast to the quotidian and it pertains to individuals and objects alike. This reflection concerns the issue of building on the earth in a continuous mythological and biblical process of transcending. In the context of this same inclination to build is the Holy Temple in Jerusalem, the site and image of universal Harmony, such as that between body and soul, which is analogous to that between the physical human body and the heavenly body that materializes in the world. In Vitruvius' *De architectura* (*On Architecture*), the oldest surviving text on the subject, we do not find the origins of archetypal building. To find these, we need to turn to biblical narrators who describe Noah's ark, the Tabernacle, the Temple of Solomon, or the Tower of Babel. To understand and develop these ideas, we should read Joseph Rykwert (p. 140), who observes that the first construction mentioned in Scripture, where it describes the fall of mankind, is more ancient than these archetypes: "And Cain knew his wife; and she conceived, and bore Enoch: and he built a city, and called the name of the city, after the name of his son, Enoch" (Genesis 4:17). As for the rest, Scripture says little about the subject of the present study. On the other hand, myth and popular legend—and especially rituals—have handed down to us some of the many beliefs concerning the invention of architecture and the transformation of friable and perishable materials into stable and durable ones. In all cultures, in fact, there are many rituals pertaining to construction; Rykwert, however, does not deal so much with the construction of private dwellings, temples, palaces, or entire cities; instead, he chooses to discuss a 'different' house, a house that is out of the ordinary. It may be that this house existed at one time, before being reduced to rubble by a heroic or divine intervention, and that "in the first six days" it was inhabited by a god or a hero. There is, in fact, a widespread ritual of building sheds that in some ways resemble or remind us of those erected by ancestors or heroes during an important epoch in the life of a tribe or a

people. At any rate, we are always dealing with a house that is 'different' from normal dwellings that are located in time and space. They embody a shadow, a memory of the perfect construction that existed before the creation of time and space, when humans felt completely at ease in their home and when the house was thought to be 'right,' like nature itself. It is, then, a matter of uncovering the grace associated with living in the place and in the building suited to our spirit in a utopian aspiration toward what came before: the desire to be, once more, the inhabitants of a world free from discord, as we once were.

These considerations lead us into the idea of the Place of places, the House of houses, the Temple of temples, niches for the invocation of higher powers, and the sites of divine epiphany. These niches exist in the Hindu, Persian, Christian, and Muslim traditions and represent the location where private, secret prayer is recited: a corner or altar inserted within a temple, which serves as the threshold between microcosm and macrocosm. It is sometimes a reproduction of the vault of heaven, in which case its doors stand for the passage from interior to exterior space, through which the world above and the world below are connected. In this way, the perimeter of the Place of places is marked, where one is enclosed within the other, as though the heavenly gift were preserved in a special receptacle inside another receptacle, which is also sacred and which preserves the gift within a wider culture.

In the Christian tradition, we have Jesus' house in Bethlehem and its walls, which are said to be miraculously connected to Loreto: a story, a legend, a stone relic. What does the believer see and imagine at Loreto? Inside a magnificent shell that displays examples of renowned Renaissance art in the form of works by artists from Sansovino to Bramante in a triumph of classical taste, we find three walls that constitute part of a small room, reputed to be from the first century and from Galilee. According to Catholic tradition, these bare and ancient stones are part of Mary's house, the part that enclosed the grotto, in Bethlehem. It is claimed that these remains are connected with the mystery of the Incarnation and the promise of salvation. There, Christian believers imagine and venerate a body of grace evoked in the contemplation of the holy family who lived within those humble walls, which are modest as the walls of the shrine that contain them are majestic; they are, however, richer than the precious receptacle because of the spirituality they offer to the believer; here "The Word was made flesh; and dwelt amongst us." According to the belief system, we revisit the past through extended flights of the imagination in places of cult worship, where the grace of the stones corresponds to the grace of the art and the architectural styles. It is also a pilgrimage for the faithful who seek consoling simulacra.

If we enter the sphere of inspirational visions or fantasy in order to uncover the events and places in Mary's life, we cannot ignore the visionary experiences of Anna Katharina Emmerich (*The Life of the Blessed Virgin Mary*] 1852). The mystic describes in surprising detail the house in which Mary lived after the death of Christ and which was believed to be located in a place not far from Ephesus, in modern-day Turkey. She believes and, therefore, fervently sees or imagines a house made of rectangular stones with a rounded wall at the back, high windows, flat roof, divided into two compartments by a hearth in the centre. The fire, she writes, was lit on the ground, opposite the entrance, in a niche in the wall that rose in steps on each side up to the ceiling. Emmerich writes: "in the center of this wall, a deep channel, like the half of a chimney, carried the smoke up to escape by an opening in the roof, I saw a sloping copper funnel projecting above the roof over this opening." She adds:

> The front part of the house was divided from the room behind the fireplace by light movable wicker screens on each side of the hearth. In the front part space, the walls of which were rather rough and also blackened by smoke, I saw little cells on both sides, shut in by wicker screens fastened together. If this part of the house was needed as one large room, these screens, which did not nearly reach to the ceiling, were taken apart and set aside. These cells were used as bedrooms for Mary's maidservant and for other women who came to visit her. (p. 348)

In the vision, the small house stood near a wooded area among trees with smooth trunks and foliage in the shape of a pyramid—a very silent and isolated place. The houses of the other families, in fact, were all located a certain distance from each other and somewhat isolated as well, as you would expect in a rural setting.

In another vision, the mystic sees the apostles and disciples praying around the Virgin's bed. Mary's face is aglow and smiling, as it was when she was a young woman. Her eyes look up to the heavens and are radiant with joy. What Emmerich experiences in the scenario fills her with wonder and deep emotion: the ceiling of the room disappears and, at the same time, she sees the heavenly Jerusalem descend upon the Virgin amid luminous clouds and angels arranged in two choruses, as a ray of light strikes her. Her body floats above the bed, completely aloft, and her soul leaves her body as a small, pure figure of light; her arms are raised in a motion to lift herself higher as she is drawn up by a beam of light. Then, her body, arms crossed on her bosom, falls back onto the bed. In this extraordinary *corpus* of visionary tales, we also find a description of the Garden of Gethsemane (Brentano 1990, p. 38). It tells the story of Jesus and the apostles who cross the river Cedron

in order to enter into the garden, located half a league from the site of the Last Supper. It was there, among several deserted houses without doors, that Jesus, in his final days, spent the night with his disciples to impart instructions to them. The garden is large, surrounded by a hedge, and full of flowers and fruit trees: a quiet corner conducive to prayer. A short distance away, the Garden of Olives, which was separated from that of Gethsemane by a small path, was instead ringed by a simple earthen wall; there are grottos, terraces, and olive groves. Benches and seats can also be found there and it is a place conducive to gathering one's thoughts in prayer and meditation.

What does this story suggest? It suggests that it is possible to be offered the vision or the arduous grace of rapture. As we have seen in Fachinelli's interpretation (see Pt. 1, ch. 6), the ecstatic mind can receive or generate surprising images and it can enrich our collective imaginary by communicating these images.

In addition to the prayer garden, where we locate theological grace, there is a meditation garden, with pleasant vegetation: a profane grace that takes us, through nostalgia and imitation, to the pagan world of grottos and nymphaea where we find a delightful assortment of trees as well as sculptural and architectural effects that combine the charm of certain enclosures with the plants, flowers, waterworks, thereby constituting ideal or imagined places rendered real by human ingenuity and our quest for feeling and beauty. Whether classical or baroque, picturesque or geometric, the garden is always a space of grace and it has always had this symbolic function. In its more restricted spaces, nature has always preserved the memory of myths presented in bold simulations. In such beauty, we come to understand nature's splendor, essence, and manifestations. We can identify in this a Platonic gaze, so to speak, which has been interpreted in a variety of ways over time. We have two basic and successive versions: the first is medieval and the second Renaissance. Albertus Magnus (*De horto concluso* [*On the Enclosed Garden*]) theorized an ideal enclosed garden in which absolute beauty is reflected in earthly beauty. He described flowers and plants with allegorical meanings: the lily is virginity, violets are humility, roses are charity, and grain is maternity; they coexist in a space filled with perfumes. In addition to the enclosed garden, landscapes, by extension, were also considered imitations of an extraterrestrial landscape. Speaking of the garden at Asolo (in the Veneto region of Italy), Pietro Bembo, instead, thinks of nature in aesthetic terms as a 'flower bed,' the sacred temple of an architect God. The beauty created by the art of the garden is an ideal space where order, symmetry, elegance, and the classical canons reign, and where the intelligence that governs the space can be felt. Here, we also have a comparison with the natural land-

scape, which reflects the neo-mythological atmosphere of the Renaissance: a pleasant abode for cultivated and refined individuals.

We can now examine the mountains, where earth and sky meet. In one of his anthropological studies (*Traité d'histoire des religions*, pp. 93–94), Mircea Eliade reminds us that consecrated areas can be compared to mountains and can themselves become 'energy centers.' Mt Tabor and Mt Gerizim in Palestine were "centers" as well; Palestine, the Holy Land *par excellence* and considered to be the 'highest point' on earth, was untouched by the Flood. For some Christians, Golgotha is located at the center of the earth because it is the peak of the cosmic mountain and, perhaps, it can also be considered the place where Adam was created and where he was buried. In addition, according to Islamic tradition, the 'highest' place on earth is the Ka'ba (the holiest place in Islam) because, symbolically, "the North star indicates that the Ka'ba is located exactly above the center of the sky." Such accounts can be easily found in other religions as well where, for example, peaks like the Himalayas continue to be experienced as a form of devotion.

At times, the mountains lend themselves to becoming 'parks of sacred representations' like Mt Varallo, which was created by artists of the 1500s and 1600s, who blended architecture, sculpture, frescoes, and natural landscapes to produce a setting populated by visitors who feel invited to renew the stations of a Christian memory through their excursion. The lights and shadows of day and night in the chapels create an atmosphere of wonder that is at one once aesthetic and religious.

There are wondrous metamorphoses in myths: men and women are transformed into rocks, flowers, and trees. To ancient peoples and their animistic mentality, the world appeared as a living organism. In remote times, the silhouette of Mt Sipylus (in modern-day Turkey) was probably perceived as a sorrowful Niobe (the daughter of Tantalus). In the modern period, Flemish painters execute certain landscapes as an artifice or a whimsical representation in accordance with a rhetoric of taste: a face depicted as a mountain, a stream, field, etc. In the symbolic representation of the world, physical nature is turned upside down. For the Greeks and then the Romans, all of nature seemed animated by unseen forces, as Ovid tells us in *The Metamorphoses*. The mythical setting included the whole of Greece, indeed the whole Mediterranean. It was not an imaginary area. People were convinced that they were living in a world and a time that they shared with heroes, nymphs, and gods. These were sacred places, invented but real, where nymphs changed into trees in order to escape the clutches of a god. Trees and flowers were associated with the gods. These gods, born from the air, the earth, the sea, and the starry sky, have always been present, as though asleep, but ready to come to life in the crevices of grand ruins. The fact that they are located in a

given territory for the purpose of devotion indicates the relationships that existed between the cities and the cult centers, permitting pilgrimage routes to emerge; these form a veritable sacred geography in which it is presumably possible to find alignments between the axes of the temples and those of the stars. James Hillman reminds us that forces appear in specific places, beneath a tree, near a spring, on a mountain, on a plain, in alignment with the stars, and that in a ritualized personification, mankind marks these cult sites with altars, ditches, or stones arranged in a certain order for the purpose of propitiation, sacrifice, and prayer. In the course of history, however, there are many powerful cultural changes and the meaning of grace changes accordingly. Let us consider a Rome filled with statues, which, from the 4th century, on orders from Constantine, and the two centuries following, gradually erases the images in great thermal baths, richly decorated nymphaea and temples. With the arrival of Constantine, a different function is created for the image: sculpture is no longer the most important expressive mode; rather, it is painting and mosaic with their immaterial figures. The cities change form.

Examining early Middle Ages in the West, Jean Richer (*Sacred Geography of the Ancient Greeks*) proposed the theory that the geographic alignment of Greek temples forms a terrestrial constellation that mirrors celestial constellations. He identifies a sacred geography as he describes a Greek world founded on the analogies and correlations among the various temples dedicated to Zeus, Athena, Apollo, and Artemis. The cults, sacrifices, and divinations correspond to precise forms, but they do so in a 'planetary modulation' perpendicular to the axis that links Mt Ida, on the island of Crete, with the temple of Delphi, in Attica. They trace three great 'zodiacal pathways' that converge on Delphi, Delos, and Sardis in Asia Minor. Thus, we discover a planimetry of occult spirituality. If we think of Delphi, for instance, how can we not be impressed by the features of this place and by the associations with Greek deities that it evokes? In Apollo's temple itself, the fire of this celestial god is associated with Gaia, the earth, and with Dionysus. Athena's temple is near Apollo's. The very configuration of Delphi suggests a hierogram. As Eliade also informs us, the name Delphi derives from 'delphys,' meaning 'womb' and, therefore, the most celebrated sanctuary in ancient Greece owes its name to this very famous mythic image. The navel of the earth (*omphalos*) was located at the very heart of the temple of Apollo. Nearby, was the priestess Pythia, who, before delivering her oracles, drank water from the Castalian Spring. Here, the union of sky and earth is suggested by the nature of the Fedriades cliffs and by sacred Mt Parnassus, the stairway to the heavens. The group of temples appears to superimpose the configuration of the firmament onto the surface of the earth.

From Pausanias' journey through Greece, we can form an idea of the relationship between places and sacredness. As Frazer (*Pausanias' Description of Greece*, 1900) observes, putting himself in the shoes of the ancient traveler, the images from the past reappear:

> If he looks up at the mountains, it is not to mark the snowy peaks glistering in thesunlight against the blue, or the sombre pine- forests that fringe their crests and are mirrored in the dark lake below; it is to tell you that Zeus or Apollo or the Sun-god is worshipped on their tops, that the Thyiad women rave on them above the clouds, or that Pan has been heard piping in their lonely coombs. The gloomy caverns, where the sunbeams hardly penetrate, with their fantastic stalactites and dripping roofs, are to him the haunts of Pan and the nymphs. The awful precipices of the Aroanian mountains, in the sunless crevices of which the snow-drifts never melt, would have been passed by him in silence were it not that the water that trickles down their dark glistening face is the water of Styx [...].The high knoll which juts out from the rugged side of Mount Maenalus into the dead flat of the Mantinean plain was called the Look, he tells us, because here the dying Epaminondas, with his hand pressed hard on the wound from which his life was ebbing fast, took his long last look at the fight. The view of the sea from the Acropolis at Athens is noticed by him, not for its gleam of molten sapphire, but because from this height the aged Aegeus scanned the blue expanse for the white sails of his returning son, then cast himself headlong from the rock when he descried the bark with sable sails steering for the port of Athens. (Vol. 1, xxx-xxxi)

Frazer then recalls the foaming river Ladonas that flows down the mountains of Northern Arcadia and through a splendid gorge, the river Asopos that winds its way lazily among fields of cane, the plain of Nestane that collects the rainwater from the mountains whose peaks are shrouded in fog, the pathway through the vineyards with the mountains on either side, the spring that issues from an ancient plane tree, the summer walks along the shaded paths of a wood near the sea, the sand and the pines on the low-lying coast of Hellas, the oak groves of Phellon on the rocky terrain where the deer run free and the boars have their lairs, and the forest of Boeotia with its giant oak trees on whose limbs the crows make their nests. This is, indeed, the way nature's wonders, together with transformations of beings and divine apparitions in their various guises, offers gifts as well as art, which we think of as coming from the heavens.

Christian culture has traced the apparitions of the Madonna and the archangel Gabriel, associating them with corresponding heavenly phenomena. In this case too, countless graces are sought out along the routes as pilgrims walk on land that they feel is a divine manifestation. Ugo di San Vittore writes: "the whole sensible world is a sort of book written by the finger of

God" (*Didascalion* 7, *De tribus deibus* 4c, pp. 1135–40). This involves writing, representing, depicting, imagining, living, and praying. Men set off along marked pilgrimage routes that entail specific liturgies along the way; their very going becomes a ritual and prayer in action. Architecture and art organize the itinerary, giving order and adornment; in stylistic disguise, these are visible manifestations of the power to which we aspire. They provide a bridge between the sorrow mankind experiences and the flight of faith.

For his part, Augustine (*Sermon* 242, 2) invites us to examine the things that God has made so we might know him. He invites us to contemplate the beauty of the earth and the sky, the rarefied air that is everywhere, the order of the stars, the sun, the moon, the day and the night, the animals and birds. Souls are concealed, but bodies are visible; that which is supported is visible, while that which supports is invisible. If you ask them, he says, they will tell you that they are beautiful and invite you to observe them. "Their beauty is their acknowledgement" (*Sermon* 241 Augustine asks rhetorically: Who has created these changeable beauties, if not he who is immutably beautiful?

11.

Flight and the Wave

During the Renaissance, as we can evince from his writings on water and flight, Leonardo introduced a vision of nature as a gaze that, from an experimental standpoint, does not reject but rather recomposes a true theory of grace as it concerns the activities of seeing, feeling, imagining, and knowing. This is a symbolic gaze that is not limited to expressing the ineffability of the smile, but seeks to create and promote the image of mankind and the world in the grip of a reciprocal rapture, in a perennial transcending that is at once ancient and modern. Sensory perception and experimentation, in effect, did inspire brilliant portraiture in Leonardo's work as much as it did the science of capturing the point where the spiritual and the corporeal become indistinguishable, in the space between the laws of gravity and lightness. As the surface of water breaks up when moved by a gentle breeze, so too air affected by heat and the atmosphere becomes hazy. From this an entire aesthetics emerges. The technique of painting blurred contours, which we typically find in the paintings of Da Vinci, leaves us "suspended between the visible and the invisible," in the words of Giorgio Vasari. In addition, as we still know today, this is made possible by a theory of vision that is the product of both the datum and lightness. The tangible object changes and becomes transcendental when we are in a state of meditation and representation; the analysis of phenomena conducted by Leonardo is aimed at a form of cosmic religiosity concerned with the reality of particulars, but also with the search for the truth behind appearances. So that it can assert its splendor, the art of the visible must confront the invisible and be able to convey it to our gaze with energy and inner coherence: the living entity becomes spiritual by enlivening the spiritual. In this way and with a mysterious quality that goes beyond the limits of the materials used, Leonardo's artworks establish a system of representation governed by beauty and grace. That grace is to be found precisely in the airy spaces between figures and objects. These spaces are connected to the secret meanings of nothingness and the void, as confirmed by some of his notes: "In the vastness of the things among which we live, the existence of nothingness holds first place [...]. In this nothingness the part is equal to the whole, and the whole to the part, the divisible to the indivisible" (Notebooks, my trans.) It lies between the past and the future and extends an aura of 'impossible' things.

We have discussed magic and the evocative power of the smile. In Greek mythology, grace is inherent in the spirit of immortality that originates in Eros; offered to mankind, it sparks a special kind of exaltation with which

the Muses are often associated. It is the gods who send down love, but this kind of delirium or rapture, which can also be torment, proves to be a good. It is useful for the wise to include this idea in their studies of the nature of the soul. In Plato's *Phaedrus*, we learn that, "the soul through all her being is immortal, for that which is ever in motion is immortal"; it is that which is self-moving without being generated (24). In the midst of all living entities, however, it can be depicted as the power of both the winged horses and the charioteer. We read the following:

> The soul in her totality has the care of inanimate being everywhere, and traverses the whole heaven in divers forms appearing—when perfect and fully winged she soars upward, and orders the whole world; whereas the imperfect soul, losing her wings and drooping in her flight at last settles on the solid ground-there, finding a home, she receives an earthly frame which appears to be self-moved, but is really moved by her power; and this composition of soul and body is called a living and mortal creature. For immortal no such union can be reasonably believed to be; although fancy, not having seen nor surely known the nature of God, may imagine an immortal creature having both a body and also a soul which are united throughout all time. (*Phaedrus* 25, b–d)

Plato reflects on the reason why the wings fall. The wing soars and carries one aloft to where the gods dwell and it participates in the divine more than do other objects pertaining to the body. The divine is beauty, wisdom, goodness, and other similar virtues. The wing of the soul nourishes itself precisely from these things, whereas it becomes corrupted by vileness, evil, and other foulness. The text then presents a glorious image of Zeus, the powerful ruler of the heavens, as he holds the reins of a winged pair of horses; he is the first among the gods, governs all things, and provides for all. He is followed by eleven bands of gods and demons; the happy troupe performs a variety of movements and produces many marvelous sights as each god carries out his work. Amid this throng, the souls that are said to be immortal, once they reach the summit of the heavenly vault, go forth and stand outside the vault and contemplate what is beyond the heavens as the gravitational orbit carries them around. (27). This "heaven above the heavens" (27), which no poet has ever sung or can ever sing adequately, offers truth that we may contemplate. In fact, it is here that we find, "that colorless, formless, intangible essence visible only to the mind, the pilot of the soul, that essence which is the fount of true knowledge." The mind of every other soul that yearns for what is proper to it is nourished by pure knowledge, as is the divine mind; for this reason, when it finally gazes upon being, the mind enjoys it; as it contemplates truth, it nourishes itself and is glad until the revolution of the worlds

takes the soul back to the same place from which it set out. Such is the life of the gods. But, of all the other souls, the one that succeeds best in following the god and resembling him will gaze into the supra-celestial region and will be drawn into the orbit together with the other gods. The places of truth are compatible with the best part of the soul, and this nourishes the nature of the wing, and for this reason the soul can soar. Plato writes:

> the soul which attains any vision of truth in company with a god is preserved from harm until the next period, and if attaining always is always unharmed. But when she is unable to follow, and fails to behold the truth, and through some ill-hap sinks beneath the double load of forgetfulness and vice, and her wings fall from her and she drops to the ground, then the law ordains that this soul shall at her first birth pass, not into any other animal, but only into man; and the soul which has seen most of truth shall come to the birth as a philosopher, or artist, or some musical and loving nature. (28)

Then there is a conversation on various incarnations in which the importance of the Idea is stressed, as the speakers move from multiple sensations to coherent and reasoned unity. This understanding entails the recollection of the truth that the soul once beheld as it soared in pursuit of a god, turning its eyes to the things below, which we now call existents, and raising its head toward what really exists. Plato goes on to say that, precisely for this reason, "the mind of the philosopher alone has wings; and this is just, for he is always, according to the measure of his abilities, clinging in recollection to those things in which God abides, and in beholding which He is what He is." This is why he speaks of the philosopher as the man possessed by the divine, whom many take for a madman. Remembering divine beauty as it views earthly beauty, every human soul feels imprisoned in a body-tomb and lives aspiring to contemplate the forms in a pure light. The soul quivers with delight, becomes annoyed, and suffers, but it also rejoices if it encounters love and cannot wait to encounter it again; overcome by a wave of amorous desire, it communicates, catches its breath, leaves its worries behind in order to soar in sweet pleasure. Thus, the soul is enraptured between flight and the wave, that is, the flight of recollection and the wave of erotic passion. According to Plato, when we love, enflamed by passion, we construct a kind of divine image of the beloved that we then venerate. In this sense, we say that one who is in love is possessed. As part of the 'happy band' of Zeus or some other god, each being yearns to love a soul like itself and dedicates itself to study in order to discover the nature of his or her own god and be united with that god through memory. The person participates in the divine, to the extent humanly possible, by attributing qualities to the beloved and thus loves that person even more, pouring over the soul of the beloved an

image similar to his or her own god. Many are those who, as followers of Hera, Apollo, or the other gods seek love in a kindred soul "walking in the ways of their gods." And when they find that soul, they themselves imitate their god, to the extent possible, in actions and in ideal form, in an effort to render that person like themselves and like the god they worship.

In this sense, for the Greeks grace pertains to love whose components, namely passion and modesty, are thought to be the bridle of the charioteer, in the mythical image mentioned above involving flight and the wave. An object of worship like that shown to a god by the person who truly experiences such devotion, the beloved is amicably disposed toward the one who has seen him or her in a blinding vision. Paraphrasing Plato (36, c), the wave of passion is similar to the wind or an echo that rides on the ruffled surface of water.

To summarize, we can say that love is a divine delirium that can be subdivided into four types and associated with four gods: prophetic inspiration with Apollo, mystical love with Dionysus, poetic love with the Muses, and the highest source of inspiration with Aphrodite and Eros. The Graces are always present in these four correlations, as has been pointed out (Pt. 2, ch. 1). In the last type, we can understand the image of Venus as it relates to Eros in terms of flight and the wave. In his famous painting *The Birth of Venus,* Botticelli represents this hypothesis symbolically in a typically humanistic work, suggested to the painter by Angelo Poliziano who, in the *Stanze per la giostra del Magnifico Giuliano de' Medici* (*Stanzas for the Tournament of the Magnificent Giuliano de' Medici*), describes the scene in poetic form. Zephyrus blows a magical breeze over Venus, moving the veil that Hora holds out to her. The nudity of passion, the purity of the truth that the soul seeks in its flight, is celebrated in the wavelets pushed by the wind. Through the phenomenon of transformation, nature and the spirit of knowledge animate a philosophy of love. Modesty and virtue entwine with beauty, which undergoes a transfigurement in an aura of grace; the wave of passion that accompanies the breath of Zephyrus is calmed by the memory that Eros causes to emanate from Venus. In this image of air and water, we can identify Zephyrus who is a double figure, implying the presence of Eros. Edgar Wind has provided an important interpretation of Botticelli's work in a series of references to Ficino and Pico, but, on rereading these pages, we are always left with the impression that he does not go beyond a sort of fascinating preoccupation with hermeneutics.

Returning to the winged figures in the mythologies of various peoples, we find a Christian version of them in John I1:51): "Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see the heavens opened and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man." This is because, as has been said of *eros* and

agape, charity elevates the soul and makes it soar upward, while at the same time charity causes the angels to come down to earth. Thus, they bring us God's gift in the same way that they bring our prayers to him.

In the useful anthropological *Traité* cited above, Eliade (pp. 94–99) studies ascending motion and the symbolism of water. In the history of the human imaginary, there is a celestial symbolism, wherein heights have a sanctifying quality. The highest regions are, in fact, permeated with sacred forces; the entity that rises closest to the sky participates in transcendence with varying degrees of intensity. 'Altitude' and 'heights' are associated with the superhuman. Eliade tells us that each 'ascent' is a breaking through a level, a passing into the world beyond, a surpassing profane space and the human condition. In the anthropology of religions, the sacredness of heights is confirmed by the sacredness of the superior realms. Mountains, temples, and cities have the prestige of being 'centers' and are equated to the highest peak of the world, where the sky meets the land. It follows that consecration through rituals of ascent to the upper world (scaling mountains or stairways) remains generally valid for the human mind because those who practise these rituals are situated in a 'high' place. The richness and variety of the symbolism of ascent are often obscure and difficult to interpret; taken together, however, these rituals can be explained in terms of the magic of the 'passage,' the 'climb,' or the 'ascent,' which is like entering into a temple or an altar. As has been stated already, we transcend the human condition. Furthermore, the ritual consecration of the climb is analogous to death. Eliade goes on to explain that, in religions that locate the real world in the sky or in a superior realm, the soul of the dead person is seen as traveling along the paths of a mountain, or climbing a tree or rope.

All visions and mystical ecstasies contain this experience. According to Porphyry, Plotinus experienced heavenly rapture on four occasions during the entire time that the two were together. Paul of Tarsus, too, was lifted up to the third heaven. The doctrine of the ascension of souls to the seventh heaven—both during initiation and after death—enjoyed enormous popularity in late antiquity. The oriental origin of this belief is undeniable, but Orphism and Pythagorism have contributed much to its spread in the Greco-Roman world. Whether shamanic ritual or initiation rite, mystical ecstasy or oneiric vision, eschatological myth or heroic legend—the ascent of mountains or stairways and the experience of floating in the air—the doctrine always involves going beyond the human condition and entering into the upper cosmic levels. Mere 'levitation' corresponds to divinization. Eliade provides a few examples: Rudra ascetics "walk along the road of the wind because the gods have entered into them; the Yogis and the Indian alchemists take off and fly in the air covering great distances in a few instants" (my trans.) To be

able to fly, to have wings, is symbolic of transcendence; the capacity to float in the air also stands for access to the most profound truths. Evidently, in the phenomenology of the ascent, a radical distinction persists between religious experience and the technique of magic; a saint is 'abducted' to the heavens; it is said that Yogis, ascetics, and magicians can 'fly' but through their own efforts. In both cases, the ascent distinguishes them from the great mass of the profane and non-initiates; they can penetrate zones filled with the sacred and become like the gods. Eliade contends that their contact with the heavenly spaces deifies them to the point where they dissolve into the air. From a conversation among Zen monks described by Suzuki, we can extrapolate the following thought, which sheds light on what has been described here: "What is the true meaning of religion?" "A soft breeze blows in the blue sky."

Ananda Coomaraswamy (1987, pp. 355–56) studies the power of water, from Plato to Meister Eckhart. For Plato, divine life is an "Essence that flows incessantly" (*Laws* 966e) while for Eckart, the soul is a "river that flows from the eternal Deity." These two observations relate to a story about origins, with which I would like to explain that, when we are in the depths, in the river, and in the spring of the deity, there is no one there to ask where we are going or what we are doing. As well, when we return to the depths, to the river, and to the spring of the deity, no one asks us where we have come from or where we have been. Coomraswamy also cites Shams-i-Tabrīz as she continues with her description of the condition of origin and return. No one knows who the person entering is. An unending river of life implies the idea of an inexhaustible fount or *fons*, the fount or Nature's spring that flows without end, for Pythagoreans. In this regard, Plotinus says: "Imagine a spring that has no origin but itself. It gives of itself to all the rivers and yet it is never exhausted by what they take from it, but it remains wholly what it was [...] the fount of life, the fount of intellect, the principle of being, the cause of goodness and the root of the Soul" (*Enneads* III. 8,10 and VI. 9). Philon says that this is God because it is the source not only of life but of all knowledge as well. Jan van Ruysbroeck refers to it as, "the fount from which the streams issue [...]. The essence of Grace dwells there; it has its proper seat there, like an overflowing spring, and it flows actively into all the powers of the soul (*The Adornment of Spiritual Marriage*, c.1350, ch. 35). Analogously, Coomaraswamy states that Shams-i-Tabrīz also thinks of the soul as a fount and of created beings as streams. In Sufism, Rumi (*Dīvān*, ode 12) declares: "Do not think that the water will run out; this water is, in fact, without end" (my trans.).

The idea of the soul's return to its original home is undoubtedly a universal one: divine life "flows out and flows back" at the same time. To quote William Blake: "the Eternal Man has regained his former blessedness." Now,

however, we need to place alongside this idea of the flow, the image of an immense expanse of motionless water, the sea, the source of all life and the symbol of the end of all things. This would seem to imply the loss of self-consciousness and temporal disorientation. The ultimate goal, however, is not the destruction of mankind, but rather that of freeing humanity of all *limitations*. From the Buddhist point of view, life is infinitely brief: we are what we are only for the time it takes for one thought or sensation to change into another. In time, life "is like a dewdrop or a bubble in the water [...] or like a mountain torrent that flows swiftly from afar and sweeps away everything in its path, and there is no instant, pause, or minute in which it stops [...]. Or it is like the mark made by a stick in the water." More of a process than an entity, the 'individual' is always becoming one thing after another and never stops to be any of his transitory aspects; it is like Heraclitus' river in which you can never step twice. It must be said that this perpetual flow of *samsāra* is juxtaposed to the silent sea itself, in which the waters of the rivers originate and to which they eventually return. When speaking of this sea, which symbolizes nirvana, the Buddhist is thinking primarily of its still depth: "as no wave emerges from the depths of the great ocean, but all is stillness, so too the still and motionless monk must not cause any movement within himself" (my trans.) Following those suggested by Coomaraswamy, this analogy is completed in the following manner: for Meister Eckhart, the ultimate goal is 'drowning,' which the Buddhist calls *ogadba* (immersion).

In summary, we could say that water symbolizes the whole of potentiality; as Eliade reminds us, it is *fons et origo* (source and origin), the template of all possibilities in life: "Water, you are the source of all things and all life," reads an Indian text that encapsulates the long vedic tradition. Like *amrita* (that which is immortal), the waters are the nourishment of the world, the essence of vegetation, the elixir of immortality; they ensure long life and represent a creative force. "May the waters bring us wellbeing," the vedic priest would pray; "the waters, in truth, are restorative; the waters expel and cure all illnesses."

Principle of the undifferentiated and the potential, the origin of all cosmic phenomena, receptacle for all spores, primordial matter from which all forms are born and to which they return, water is at the beginning and at the end of every historical and cosmic cycle due to regression and cataclysm. They will always exist, but never by themselves because they contain within their undivided unity the potential for all forms. In every cosmogony, myth, ritual, or iconography, they perform the same function: they precede all forms and sustain all created things. Immersion in water represents regression into the pre-formal, complete regeneration, and a new birth; it is the equivalent of dissolution or reintegration into the undifferentiated world of

pre-existence. Coming out of the waters repeats the cosmic gesture of the emergence of forms. Dissolution is followed by a 'new birth,' whereas immersion fertilizes and increases the potential for life and creation. In the anthropological imaginary, water heals through magic rituals; it ensures rebirth after death in funeral rites. Incorporating all potentialities, it becomes a symbol for life; in fact, we use the term 'acquavitae.' The underpinning of universal becoming, water is compared to, or directly incorporated in, the moon. The rhythms of the moon and of the waters are governed by the same secret law; they regulate the periodic appearance and disappearance of all entities and give a cyclical structure to becoming. The water cult existed in Greece from the remotest past and was intimately connected with mythological and legendary figures.

12.

Zephyrus

The wind is holy and every myth starts with a wind that arrives together with the word. It is associated with a variety of extraordinary occurrences; it is a metaphor for unexpected changes and strange or miraculous events. In a dance across the infinite void of Eurynome, newly born out of the invisible realm and chaos, the sea, sky, and light separate as the wind Ophion begins to blow. He is a Titan to whom the goddess gives the features of a serpent. She assumes the form of a dove and unites with him, thereby beginning to create by laying the egg from which the cosmos is born. Eurynome was venerated as woman-serpent and mother of all pleasures in a temple in Arcadia. She was bound by a golden chain and crowned by the Charites, her daughters. After being expelled by Cronos and Rhea from the snowy peaks of Mt Olympus where she once ruled, Eurynome sought shelter in the sea, where she was received by Hephaistos who had been cast down from the heavens and into the sea. A variant of this myth of origins, in which the primeval couple are Time and Necessity, is also analogous to the Nemesis/Eurynome and Night pairing. Loved by the Wind, Night lays a silver egg from which would emerge Eros/Phanes, the luminous desire that sets the universe in motion. Love, therefore, has reappeared from the moment of creation and, like a living wind, is always present among mankind, events, and things.

The most popular wind is sweet, gentle, favorable Zephyrus, who is intimately associated with the fertility of spring; he is often portrayed in paintings and is described in literature. Homer says that he blows continuously in the garden of Alcinous, causes seeds to germinate and the fruit of luxuriant trees to ripen: pear, apple, pomegranate, and fig trees. Poliziano (*Stanze* vv. 1–25) describes the wind god this way: "Zeffiro di be' fioretti adorno / avea de' monti tolta ogni priuna: / avea fatto al suo nido già ritorno / la stanca rondinella peregrina" ("Zephyrus, adorned with lovely flowers, had already / lifted the hoarfrost from the mountains; / the weary pilgrim swallow had already returned / to its nest") (Quint p. 15). Zephyrus is, therefore, a breeze that causes the winter to thaw, removes the frost and snow from the trees, and ushers in spring with pleasant sounds and beautiful light. His spouse is Chloris. The Romans call her Flora. Lucretius (*De rerum natura* [*The Nature of Things*] 5, vv. 736–40) describes her as she follows Zephyrus' footprints in the springtime as she strews colourful flowers along the entire way. For Ovid (*Fasti* 5, vv. 193–214), on a spring day, as she wandered through the fields, the wind god saw her, fell in love, and kidnapped her, but he then married her in proper nuptials. Out of love, he gave her a kingdom: the kingdom

of flowers—not only those gathered in gardens but those in cultivated fields and the whole of nature as well. Botticelli models one of the figures in his painting of *Springtime* from this Ovidian tale; that figure is Chloris who flees from Zephyrus as she is being transformed. When the god finally catches and embraces her, flowers begin to flow from her mouth. This is the moment depicted by Botticelli who places the two goddesses side by side: Chloris, who is being clutched by the god, extends her arms in front her amid a profusion of rosebuds as Flora strews flowers.

Poussin gives us an image of Flora dancing in her garden surrounded by those mythological figures that turned into flowers when they died. In *The Empire of Flora* (1631), Ajax, who was transformed into a starflower or a carnation, is depicted in the act of throwing himself upon his own sword because he was not awarded the armor of the fallen Achilles. Narcissus stoops to observe his own image reflected in the water contained in an amphora. Clitia, who in myth is changed into a sunflower, contemplates Phoebus, the object of her unhappy love as she turns her head to follow his daily course across the sky. Hyacinth places her hand on his wounded head. Adonis (an anemone), depicted with his lance and hunting dogs, tugs at his mantle and reveals his wounded thigh. The beautiful youth Krocus and the nymph Smilax lie in a corner; as punishment for their impatience, they were both changed into the flowers that bear their names. The breath of metamorphosis blows over these figures, suggesting the ceaseless motion of life and the imagination.

Zephyrus and Flora also inspire 18th-century affectation where grace is deformed into a banal gracefulness typical of kitsch. The couple is depicted in a flowery clearing. Flora is stretched out on a pallet as the groom, a young god with the wings of a butterfly, strews flowers from a cornucopia with the help of several cupids.

There are also other extraordinary tales involving Flora; for example, the tale of the birth of Mars. Angered by the birth of Minerva who emerged spontaneously from the head of Jupiter, Juno wanted to conceive a child without the involvement of a male. She turned to Flora who handed her a flower whose mere touch could make her pregnant. And so, without having relations with the king of the gods, Juno gave birth to the god whose name is that of the first month of Spring. The delicate quality of the flower and a simple touch brought about procreation via a completely feminine breeze, without the need for the energy or the power of the sexual act.

To return to the topic of the wind, I have discussed its properties and the mythology that surrounds it. I have spoken of Zephyrus and now I need to mention at least one case in which the simple breeze becomes a source of tragedy. This is offered to us in the myth of Cephalus and Procris, a tale

filled with emotion. Cephalus and Procris both suffered from the serious illness of love because they were jealous of each other. After Cephalus, Procris experienced this torment. She would often see her husband leave to go hunting and her mind produced suspicions of betrayal; she wondered if he was being tempted by the mountain nymphs. She querried a servant who usually accompanied her; in some versions of the story, this servant is a Satyr. The answer alarmed Procris since she learned that, after the hunt, Cephalus would stop to invoke a mysterious 'breeze' to come and renew his ardor. So, she decided to spy on her husband, hoping to catch him in the act of performing his 'guilty affairs.' One day, she followed him on his hunt, but Cephalus, hearing something move in the wood, threw his javelin in that direction, a javelin that never failed to hit its mark. Procris was mortally wounded and before she died in agony she understood the error of her suspicions. Cephalus had always been faithful to her and the breeze that he invoked was the wind. As fate would have it, that unfailing lance, a gift that Diana had given to her and that she had offered to Cephalus, was the cause of her ruin.

The myth has inspired several iconographic interpretations in which the death of Procris in particular is depicted. The young woman usually lies under a tree with the lance piercing her breast. Cephalus, who has just found her, raises his arms to the sky in agitation or wipes tears from his eyes; he is seated or kneeling next to her, overcome by despair. His dogs are at his side. In Piero di Cosimo's unusual version, titled *The Death of Procris*, we find the Satyr depicted kneeling next to her body and looking at her, moved by the sight. He touches her forehead with his fingers as he places his other hand on her shoulder. Cephalus' dog sits quietly on the right side of the painting while his master is mysteriously absent from the composition. Procris' body is beautiful with its pallid color of death; her limbs are wrapped in drapery; her hair is dishevelled, her wrist turned upward, and her mouth half-open as it draws its last breath; blood spurts from the center of her throat. Behind them, nature extends solemnly toward the horizon against which are depicted a broad inlet, the sea, birds in flight, and a port with boats moored off the coast. This is a work full of charm, where the tragic meets the sublime, which is the highest point of grace. The passion has ended, the desire to know extinguished; the wind subsides, the wave has become a sea of tears.

In the opening paragraphs of this chapter, I spoke about the representation of the wind and the living breath. I would like now to consider the Biblical account in order to make a brief observation. It is said that, in the beginning, God created the sky and the earth, and that his spirit floated on the surface of the waters, like a wind (*Rua'h*). Before the beginning, however, there was chaos, a formless mass commingled with darkness. In creation myths, the procreative spirit appears in different ways. It is interesting to note

the breath that descends upon the water, causing it to ripple and to create a wave; the breath of life forms an image and a sound that are translated into a variety of perceptible appearances. This phenomenon recurs in many symbolic systems, describing a cycle of birth and death.

In conclusion, to draw some comparisons, I would like point out the breath or energy present in Chinese and Japanese culture. Zhang Zai, one the first philosophers from the Song period active in the era of great development in landscape painting, found more general expressions to describe this possibility, inspired as he was by the *Book of Changes*. In the universe everything originates in this same breath/energy that brings about the forms of existence ordered according to the infinite diversity of beings, in conformity with their relationship to and coherence within the plan of nature: two inseparable modes of the same living spirit, namely, the *qi* (vital force).

François Jullien has the following comment on the creator wind:

> The breath-energy that deploys like the Great original void / rises and falls, evolves without rest: / this is the vitality of the void and of fullness, of movement and rest, / the movement of yin and yang, the hard and the malleable. / To float and to rise: this is the limpidness of the yang, / to lower oneself and descend: this is to immerse oneself in the yin. / Through stimulation and communication, unification and dispersal, / the wind and the rain, the frost and the snow form, / at the same time as the flow of the multitude of existents / and the union and function of the mountains and the rivers. / To the bottom of the wine and the ashes of the hearth, / there is nothing in all this that does not represent a lesson to be learned. (2009, p. 180)

In human experience and the human imagination, flying, like walking and swimming, is floating in open spaces. The difference lies in the lightness and mobility. In the context of the miraculous, saints levitate, remain suspended in a room, or fly to the top of a mountain before the astonished eyes of onlookers, that is to say, shepherds and citizens. In our concrete lives, instead, devices help us to realize our dreams.

13.

Silences of the Cloister and the Garden

Solitary spaces are more conducive to meditation on everyday life and on extraordinary things. In places that are far from our familiar surroundings, we can rediscover the profound meaning of the Christian discourse on the beatitudes and the goodness of grace we receive via the pathways of suffering and humiliation. We are illuminated in this sense by the Sermon on the Mount as it is handed down to us in the Gospels of Matthew (5:3–12) and Luke (6:20–23): those who are the most unfortunate and the least happy in the eyes of the world are at the same time blessed by God; they will one day live in the kingdom of heaven. Those who hunger for justice and are exiled, hated, insulted, or rejected, the poor, the afflicted, the meek, the compassionate, the pure of heart, and the persecuted, in a surprising and unexpected reversal, will be blessed. Luke says: "Blessed are you who weep now"; divine grace will pour over you. This is how the 'benefit' comes from the Word and becomes flesh. This is how the Christian miracle comes about. This is its gold, its precious metal: exalting humility and charity over the uselessness of pleasures.

The ideal of the ascetic retreat has its origins in this concept of the beatitudes and we can practise it even in open fields, as Erasmus of Rotterdam, heir of this medieval idea, invites us to do. In the *Convivium religiosum* (*The Godly Feast*), he describes a retreat from July-August 1522 and the spirituality that reigned there among friends, in a house that was felt to be a place of meditation and a cloister for thinking.

The text is in the form of a dialogue. It seems strange to me, says Eusebius, that there are people who like to live in smoke-filled cities, especially now that the countryside is in full bloom and radiant. Not everyone, in fact, is fascinated by the sight of flowers, fields in springtime, streams, and rivers. If they are, however, there is something else they like. He explains that Nature is not silent, but loquacious, and it teaches many things to those who contemplate it, if the person is attentive and kind-hearted. Here, Erasmus takes up the thought of Bernard of Clairvaux, particularly when he observes that we can find more in forests than in books because trees and rocks teach us things that no teacher can ever communicate to us. What else proclaims the agreeable aspects of nature in springtime, Eusebius ask: Is not wisdom comparable to the goodness of God the creator? The group of friends then accompany the owner of the house into the garden. The features of the garden invite them to pray. The beauty of the garden charms many of the guests, Eusebius says, but almost all of them are accustomed to not proceeding

"without greeting Jesus. I placed him in the stead of the vile Priapus as guardian not only of my garden but of all that I possess, including my body and my soul." There is a small fountain that spouts salubrious water; for the visitors, it represents the only font that, with its 'heavenly water,' restores those who are tired and weighed down by woes. Racked by the evils of this world, the soul symbolically desires the water, like the deer who, as the psalmist says, burns with thirst after eating the flesh of the serpent. Here, those who are thirsty drink freely and some sprinkle water on themselves. Others drink from the fountain not because they are thirsty, but in order to perform a religious gesture. The guests leave this place reluctantly and are taken into another, more cultivated, rectangular garden enclosed by a wall. And now Timothy exclaims in astonishment: "Good heavens! These look like the gardens of Epicurus!" Eusebius responds: "This entire place is dedicated to pleasure, but honest pleasure, which nourishes the eyes, re-educates the sense of smell, and restores the soul. Here, only perfumed herbs grow and not all herbs, only the noblest." Each species grows in its own area. The guests then realize that they have never seen anything more delightful than a second small fountain in the middle of the garden, which 'smiles' at all the herbs and promises relief from the sun. The tiny channel that so gracefully presents all its water to the eyes of onlookers and divides the garden into equal parts, where the herbs of the various sections seem to contemplate themselves, is not made of marble. It is imitation marble produced with cement powder; the white color is produced by limestone incrustations. Simplicity is far better than luxury. The beauty of the garden is enhanced by three covered walkways. In these, the proprietor studies or strolls either alone or chatting with friends, or he eats if he wishes. Even the equidistant columns, which attract the eye with the impressive variety of their colors, are not marble. Timothy then observes: "What a graceful artifice." He could swear that it is marble. Eusebius responds, saying that appearances often deceive us. I "compensate for the riches I do not have with artifice." This declaration also relates to another aspect of the garden, which is partly painted.

Timothy asks: "Are you not satisfied with such a well-groomed garden, without painting other gardens?" Eusebius answers that a single garden could not contain all the species of herbs; in addition, we experience a double pleasure when we witness a contest between a painted flower and a real flower because we admire the art of nature in one and the genius of the painter in the other. In both, "there is the kindness of God who lavishes all these things on us and in everything he is admirable and at the same time worthy of our love." Finally, we must realize that the garden is not always verdant; the flowers are not always growing. With its luxuriance, this other garden seduces us even in the middle of winter. It is true that it nourishes only the eyes,

but it does so 'forever.' Time adds grace to the painting, which we find attractive. Even the flooring is painted to look like a field. The tiles, in fact, are made of light colors and are decorated with floral patterns. On the entire wall you see wood painted to look like rich natural scenery. First of all, each painted tree represents a species faithfully. The birds are also of different species, especially the rarest of these. The gaze comes to rest on another section of the wall where there are lakes, streams, and seas. Within these are depicted all the fish types. We then enter a third garden, which is divided into two parts. In one, there are cooking herbs and, in the other, medicinal herbs. On the left, there is an open field with green grass only; it is surrounded by a continuous hedge interwoven with thorns. Eusebius says that this is where he sometimes walks alone or with his friends. On the right, there is an orchard with many exotic trees, which he is trying to acclimatize. The dialogue between Timothy and Eusebius ends in a celebration of the figure of Christ. What is important is the divine presence in all this nature that changes.

In retrospect, it is because of the arguments presented above that I now turn to the Middle Ages continuing with my line of thought on mysticism and the grace of the garden. There are two examples. The first, from Alain de Lilles' *Anticlaudianus* (1182–1283), is imagined as an extraordinary place. Its beauty and value are superior to those of all other places of its kind, which provides what is lacking elsewhere. Here, the generous hand of Nature, "pours its gifts and puts itself on display with great grace" and:

> Clothing itself in delicate efflorescence, studded with its floral stars, with the flaming purple of roses, the earth is busy presenting itself as a second sky. Never dying, the grace of the flower blooms with the flower's bud; unlike the rose, daughter of the morning, which is already old, withering at twilight; but nature is always joyous in its appearance; it remains youthful and fills eternal spring with grace. (Assunto 1988, p. 48, my trans.))

The second example comes from Guillaume de Lorris' *Roman de la Rose* (*The Romance of the Ros*e, 1282–1283), which is modelled on the *Anticlaudianus* in its attempt to interpret, in his own way, this image of a place so delightful that it seems unreal, a dreamy place similar to the earthly Paradise.

Before Guillaume de Lorris, Nasrid tribe sultan Ibn al-Ahmar (1238–1273) rethinks and rebuilds the Alhambra in Granada. Although it is a fortress and not a convent, it can still appear as a graceful project; in fact, architecture and nature create an oneiric and musical atmosphere with the system of harmonious relationships among the parts and the play of different heights, the alignments and crossings, as well as the curves and whirling volumetric forms. In this articulation of forms that give lightness to the architecture and render the vegetation sculptural, what is striking is not so much the

surprise but the feeling, emotion, or tenderness that we experience in the presence of a world that is at once sensual and spiritual. As we admire its forms, we immerse ourselves in the tradition of Islamic aesthetics, as we do in Harun al-Rashid's Garden of Delight (*The Thousand and One Nights*).

Spurred on by this idea of grace, I am inclined to think that it should be interpreted within the framework of lightness, anticipation, and a state of suspension, with its core being the ambiguous, ungraspable, and indefinite relationships, as many French scholars suggest in the 1930s, for instance, Raymond Bayer, Félix Ravisson, Henri Bergson, and others before them. This interpretation, of both the principle and the movement, can also be applied to music and to the arts, and it can be associated with the spirit of composition; it appears throughout the centuries and is relevant in terms of both its semantic field and its thematic structure. For Bergson (1941, p. 233), everything that seems graceful originates in a state of relaxation and a desire to please. Grace manifests itself in the charm exuded by beauty or goodness. "For one who contemplates the universe with the eyes of an artist, it is grace that is discerned through beauty and goodness that is discerned beneath grace" (in Hadot, p. 51). Each thing manifests itself in movement through the forms, but it also proclaims the generosity of the Principle that expands. The two meanings of the word 'grace' become one, Bergson says, referring to Ravisson. We know, however, that this idea has traveled across all the centuries where art, theology, and philosophy intersect.

14.

Contemplation of Nature

In *De natura deorum* (*The Nature of the Gods*), Cicero discusses divine nature in the doctrines of Epicureanism and Stoicism. In Bk. II, he deals with the wonder of celestial and terrestrial phenomena, describes the earth (p. 239), positioned at the center of the universe, as solid, spherical, and "conglobular by natural tendency," clothed with flowers, herbs, trees, fruit—all living entities that are incredibly numerous and of an inexhaustible variety. He goes on to describe fonts and ice formations, the clear water of streams, riverbanks clothed in a green mantle, deep caverns, the cragginess of rocks, the heights of rugged mountains, and the immense expanse of the plains; he also includes the unseen deposits of gold and silver as well as marble quarries. He reminds the reader of the many species of animals, both domestic and wild, the flight and song of birds, the pastures of sheep and cattle, and the life of the forests. He has the following to say about the human species:

> What shall I say of men, who, being appointed, as we may say, to cultivate the earth, do not suffer its fertility to be choked with weeds, nor the ferocity of beasts to make it desolate; who, by the houses and cities which they build, adorn the fields, the isles, and the shores? If we could view these objects with the naked eye, as we can by the contemplation of the mind, nobody, at such a sight, would doubt there was a divine intelligence. (p. 292)

Cicero then describes the beauty of the sea, the coasts, and the beaches, the spectacle of the universe, the air and the sky, the moon and the stars. We see in all these things the great care of divine providence. Long before him, Sappho had depicted Aphrodite's epiphany with the magic of the natural environment, creating a synaesthetic effect at the same time; in an enchanted memorial chapel of trees and perfumes, humans can discover the aura in the sensory experience of the natural and the numenous. Elsewhere, in Sophocles *Oedipus at Colonus* (first stasimon, vv. 668–719) we have an extended epiphany of nature: the spontaneous environment, the home of the gods, coexists with mankind's productive environment. It is a celebration of Attica, and the divine is present everywhere.

Mankind can contemplate nature and dissolve in it, but is nature capable of contemplation? In this difficult, we might even say impossible, consideration, one of Plotinus' ideas is worth considering. For him, nature too contemplates. How does it do so? Since it operates while remaining immobile, nature is also contemplation in the form of reason because the soul that is in nature is nature itself, like a being that contemplates its own existence. It is

not capable of the kind of contemplation that derives from discursive thought; yet, nature is seen because it exists and, as such, because it acts. To be what is, however, means to posit oneself as contemplation and, at the same time, as the object of contemplation. The term 'production' itself is contemplation in this sense; in fact, nature is:

> Thus the act of production is seen to be in Nature an act of contemplation, for creation is the outcome of a contemplation which never becomes anything else, which never does anything else, but creates by simply being contemplation [...]. Whatsoever comes into being is my vision, seen in my silence, the vision that belongs to my character who, sprung from vision, am vision-loving and create vision by the vision-seeing faculty within me. The mathematicians from their vision draw their figures: but I draw nothing: I gaze and the figures of the material world take being as if they fell from my contemplation. (*Enneads* III. 8, 3, and 4)

This means that, in its unlimited proliferation, so-called nature possesses a soul that is the offspring of a superior, more powerful soul, which has within it a quieter contemplation and sees, with this intelligence and self-consciousness, the realm of subsequent objects to the extent that it is possible for it to do this. If we concede that nature is endowed with intelligence and consciousness, I would say that the intelligence and consciousness to which I am referring are not similar, but they can be compared with those of other beings, just as we can compare consciousness in wakefulness with consciousness in sleep. Contemplating its object, nature "remains in repose; that object springs from it because nature remains steadfast in its own essence and it is the object of silent, but somewhat blurred, contemplation" (*Enneads* III. 4). Being able to contemplate the truth and not an image of it, we are mindful of the fact that, according to this vision, our products and actions proceed through 'effect' so that we can gradually contemplate an object superior to the one produced, and not through a 'weakening,' that is to say, when there is nothing that follows the act performed. In this sense, nature, like man, can be considered to be an ecstatic process of reunification with the One.

The path to contemplation is sought out by human beings whose objectives are happiness, quiet, serenity, and a state of beatitude desired for its own sake, as Aristotle writes in the *Nichomachean Ethi*cs. The contemplative life is considered to be superior to the active life because, once they attain it, humans do not live it insofar as the are human, but because of the excellence of their being humans since there is always an element of the divine in mankind;

> We must not follow those who advise us, being men, to think of human things, and, being mortal, of mortal things, but must, so far as we can, make ourselves immortal, and strain every nerve to live in accordance with the best thing in us; for even if it be small in bulk, much more does it in power and worth surpass everything. That what is best and most pleasant for a given creature is that which is proper to it. Therefore for man, too, the best and the most pleasant life is the life of the intellect, since the intellect is in the fullest sense the man. So this life will also be the happiest**.** (Bk. 10)

Throughout the centuries, we often find this path to quiet; it is almost always associated with ecstatic visions and with the act of ascending. A walk along different routes and an encounter with distant cultures constitute a scenario in which to lose oneself from a psychological perspective, where the One merges with God. This is a pathway that concerns not only religion and philosophy but the arts and poetry as well. Among the many voices closer to our own time, I have selected that of Robert Browning, who writes: "Truth is within us." Truth originates in external things:

> There is an inmost center in us all, / Where truth abides in fullness; and around, / Wall upon wall, the gross flesh hems it in, / That perfect, clear perception—which is Truth. / A baffling and perverting carnal mesh / Binds it all, and makes all error, and to know / Rather consists in opening a way / Whence the imprisoned splendor may escape, / Than in effecting entry for a light / Supposed to be without. (*Paracelsus* 728–37)

From a metaphysical and not merely a poetic point of view, this concept involves darkness and light, loss and gain, emptiness and the full realization of all things, the impenetrable abyss of the divine, and the union of the soul and the spirit in the person. The contemplative mind goes beyond the multiplicity and the division of consciousness and is located outside of itself. The ego and the world disappear. Everything becomes one as perception and feeling fuse together. Hermann Hesse has also spoken of the pathway to the inner self, imagining it as "the ardor of meditation and the core of wisdom." Those who set off along this path feel that their every action and thought brings their soul into contact with God and with the world. Knowing how to see temples of tranquility everywhere, for Hesse, means praying in the way that the trees and the flowers, the forests and the plains, the mountains and the animals pray. Those who pray are on the same path as nature; they do not ask for anything, but rather describe or sing its graces and love more intensely with a spirit of innocence and salvation. At the end of the journey, mankind can finally realize, to its amazement, how simple and spontaneous is the beatitude that it has sought along difficult pathways marked by suffering.

From Hesse's perspective, this journey is also a return home, to the only happiness we can know, namely love, and to the only virtue we can possess, namely, faith in a universal feeling. Thus, we live consoled by the emotion of enlightened inner feeling. We can find this idea in Hesse's *Letters* in an encounter of religions: "Indians call it Atman, the Chinese call it Tao, and Christians call it Grace" (p. 148, my trans.).

The assimilation of the external world, whereby the world itself enters into the person who contemplates it beyond language, images, or mental acts, which is typical of contemplation, was already present in Plato's writing (*Phaedrus* 274–78) and, in the divine fire that illuminates the mind, as described above, we can see parallels in yoga as well, where we project our own image and have the capacity to make ourselves invisible, pass through solid objects, walk on water, and fly. In the Yoga Sutras, the process of enlightenment unfolds in a series of eight powers: control the body's minimum and maximum proportions, become as light as wool or heavy and fall to the ground (like the shamans who fly through imaginary skies), become like the wind, obtain any object desired, and push oneself to achieve supremacy or the desire to subjugate. In this case, contemplation is not only the way to tranquility, or at least it is only through a special process; for some schools and monks, it can mean sacrificing the self as a gift to Buddha for the good of others. Massimo Raveri speaks of the extreme temptations of Japanese ascetics who practised self-immolation by fire (pp. 70–71), threw themselves from high places, or gave themselves up to be eaten by tigers. Another type of grace is the kind we wish to obtain. This is not Christian martyrdom because there is no reference to salvation in Christ. Originally, in the Buddhist vision there is no God, no eternal principle, and no soul, only endless becoming and the cosmic void. Every being is a composite of elements destined to join together and to separate. We cannot escape the painful wheel of rebirth except through the methodical exercise of self-detachment and lucid self-denial. And when we are free from all the things to which we are attached, we must still loosen the final bond of our ego: the body. As we read in the *Vimalakīrti Nirdisa Sutra*: "It is like a mass of foam, which is intangible […] like a bubble and does not last for a long time […] like a floating cloud which disperses at any moment […] It is transient like the wind […] It is unreal and depends on the four elements for its existence" (Luk p. 18). Grace, therefore, can be thought of as the gift of oneself for a transition in the time of the individual's life directed toward the attainment of freedom and illumination (see Pt. 1, ch. 5).

The vision of Nature can also manifest itself as a vision of Paradise. There are other objects beyond the visible ones. The mountains, valleys, and rivers conceal worlds of divinity. Raveri (pp. 128–43) once again offers us a

valuable study of the human imagination and religious asceticism in the Far East after describing the initiatory journey, drawing his inspiration from the doctrines and practices of Japanese esoteric Buddhism. Aware that the essence of ultimate truth to which the mind itself tends is the void, the monk does not stop at the final stillness of knowledge: from the esoteric perspective, the mind must take a leap because it is still a prisoner of a logic based solely on negation. It is necessary to proceed along the path of transcendence and enter into metaphysical vertigo. The monk leaves the kingdom of *bodhisattva* to enter that of *Dainichi nyorai*, a secret, final state of perfection for the enlightened one. Here, spatiality becomes airy, invisible, and abstract, without boundaries, on the verge of dissolving. A clear detachment from the creation of illusory forms through three esoteric secrets is produced: everything is pure light of the body, the word, and the mind of universal Buddhahood. As he contemplates mystical ecstasy, the ascetic recognizes that the universal Buddha so ardently pursued is he himself. Mt Yudono holds a secret that, in its original symbolism, unites the perfection of the abstract (the *mandala* diagram) with the heat of life, the representation of purity and the pattern of love. It is a great rock shaped like a vagina, from which a hot spring flows in countless rivulets. In front of the rock there are stone phalluses. The body grotto is the matrix in the center of the Taizo Mandala, the *mandala* of the Womb that represents the perspective of beings destined to attain the state of Buddha-hood. As Raveri (p. 116) points out, its meaning is explained by the double metaphor of the lotus and the womb: as the mother has the embryo within her and nourishes it, the energy of compassion nourishes and protects the Enlightenment that is innate in sentient beings. With eyes closed, the ascetic enters the grotto, immerses himself in the warm water, cleanses himself, and quenches his thirst. We witness regeneration and a return to origins, prior to creation; the monk closes himself off to the world and imagines himself as an embryo of the universe. All that was once divided by time is recomposed into a unity. He concentrates on the luminous sensation of Paradise; then, surrounded by the faithful, he enters the darkness of the underground to shut himself off there.

Here, then, is an example of the way nature can be the body in an ecstatic practice: a grace of vision and a light shed on an anterior and inner image. One other example is the following. When he founded his monastery on the top of Mt Koya, Kūkai imagined the plateau to be the flower of their Taizo Mandala. The eight peaks were its petals. His successor Shinnen (804–891) proposed the idea of the mountain as the Paradise of Amitābha, but decades of abandonment followed before the monastery, under Jōyo (957–1047), could be once more lived in as in a Paradise, the Pure Land of Amitābha. From that time onward, the most famous mountains in Japan (Fuji, Yoshino,

Kumano, and Yudono) were seen as paradisal places. There is a similarity that unites the two experiences, the *mandala* and the contemplation of Paradise, and it concerns the technique of meditation in a vision that projects and sacralizes earthly reality as it is, and transcends it internally in the conviction that *samsāra*, that is to say, the world of illusion, contains all the light of nirvana within it. In both cases, natural elements (colors, flowers, diamonds, and the body of the Buddha) are used by the initiates for their symbolic and metaphysical value. The material forms are, at the same time, sensory expressions of Buddha-hood and mental abstractions that attain profound levels of knowledge. Those ascetics who meditate on the Paradise of Amida are the same figures who practise the meditative techniques of the *mandala*. They choose to superimpose the two visions, says Raveri. One suggests the other: ideals of the mind and nature. "Luminous lands that are also harmoniously ordered in the affective union of beings where we find the calmness of a primordial dawn, and they are associated with an incorruptible realm outside of time and space" (my trans.). Metaphysical architecture is the projection of a divine body. Amitābha, the light of compassion, is seated in his royal pavillion at the center of the Pure Land, surrounded by happy souls. Similarly, at the last point of the *mandala* there is *Dainichi* (the first reality and the final one of Buddha-hood), in the splendor of his golden body, with his crown and royal ornaments, the triumph of the power of knowledge.

There are various ascetic traditions. In one of these (the Tendai school of Buddhism), as Raveri informs us (pp. 136–40), the monk walks continuously for ninety days around a statue of Amitābha, located in a chamber of the temple decorated with images of Paradise. He invokes his name without stopping as he stares intently at his image and the holy marks on his body. At the same time, he introjects or replicates the projections, the reflections that constitute the forms of the Pure Land, which he imagines to be a composite of all Paradises. In another of these traditions, the practitioner, who is seated in ecstatic meditation, interiorizes the last rays of the setting sun and contemplates the water of a fountain, admires its purity and clarity, feels its vitality, and his mind imagines the Pure Land from which the water flows; he contemplates the land that sparkles like a diamond as his soul soars up to Paradise, enchanted by pearly flowers and gem-studded trees. The invisible heavenly environment thereby enters into the sensorial world. During the Heian period, many Japanese nobles wanted to reproduce these visions of Paradise and had constructed for themselves gardens, pavillions and meditation rooms that imitated the Pure Land. They shaped nature into a vision. The ecstatic impulse created an ideal of supreme beauty and perfection. Contemplation received an earthly Paradise as a gift.

In contemporary literature, the ecstatic gaze has an infinite number of evocative aspects. So many things are recalled in a series of complex analogies and interconnections forming an unending flow of images in time and space, images that involve a simple sanctity that affirms the mind's capacity for knowing how to see. Contemplation of nature stems from the aesthetic life and it encounters the literary imagination. I have chosen one of the most beautiful passages from Marcel Proust's *À la recerche du temps perdu* (*Remenbrance of Things Past*) to illustrate:

> The hedge resembled a series of chapels, whose walls were no longer visible under the mountains of flowers that were heaped upon their altars; while underneath, the sun cast a square of light upon the ground, as though it had shone in upon them through a window; the scent that swept out over me from them was as rich, and as circumscribed in its range, as though I had been standing before the Lady-altar, and the flowers, themselves adorned also, held out each its little bunch of glittering stamens with an air of inattention, fine, radiating 'nerves' in the flamboyant style of architecture, like those which, in church, framed the stair to the rood-loft or closed the perpendicular tracery of the windows, but here spread out into pools of fleshy white, like strawberry-beds in spring. (p. 106)

Part III.

Forms of Representation

I have examined the meaning of grace as a gift freely given, as an exercise in pure benevolence, and as an aesthetic and cultural expression, making reference to a great ideative, ethical, symbolic, and anthropological machine. I have also analyzed its theological implications, highlighting the wonder experienced by mankind elevated to a supernatural destiny. I have interpreted its figures, evolution, and structures, taking into consideration places, bodies, and materials, without overlooking the qualities that characterize it in terms of movement and lightness, unsayability and ineffability. I now turn to interpreting the forms of its aesthetic and artistic representation in greater detail.

Grace sometimes spills over into the area of gracefulness, its adjacent realm, considered as part of the broadening of issues that are important in the 1600s and 1700s. This second inroad, less airy and metaphysical, leads us into the domain of ornamentation even though it retains its original focus, which is on the sense of detachment from the world itself, nonchalance or indifference in the presence of things, and a gaze directed toward the past. The love that reigns never takes possession of, settles on, or invests in something. In this perspective, we are not concerned with reality, which is to say, with objects, but with the evocation of feelings. Even arabesque and embroidery can be included in this process because they are equally indifferent to things and beings, as are the so-called major arts.

The fundamental role of grace in the forms of representation is the subject of the reflections of Friedrich Theodor Vischer for whom the space of the symbol is interposed between the obscurity of mythic and religious consciousness in which image and meaning are one, on the one hand, and lucid rationality that maintains the distinction, on the other hand. Vischer maintains that, between these two forms of representation, there is a third possibility, a free and transparent penumbra, something unconscious, and yet aware. It is a surprising intermediate state (*vorbehaltende*) in which we are suspended in a sense. From the standpoint of Humanism and the Renaissance, the entire discussion on grace in the arts exists, as it were, in this rarefied middle zone because of the evocation of and nostalgia for the ancient world. From this comes the frequently discussed ineffability, which has been attributed to grace as its special quality, as the mark of truth. The dilemma remains, however, particularly as regards the religious domain: a beautiful image may not necessarily be a true image. The non-believer does not feel the power of the effigy or the word, while the believer does. A mythic image can, in fact, be read in terms of its role as fiction, as well as its role as ritual.

When it pertains to art, an object abandons its cult state to become a symbol in aesthetic perception or it can change in degree while remaining within the symbolic state. In this sense, we can say that aesthetic language, like artistic language, is figurative. Words, like images, refer to an illusory world that can be found in a subsequent ideal representation, in art or in myth and religion. The present study of grace is positioned in this intermediate zone for the sake of avoiding essentialisms, which, as such, would necessarily be univocal.

It is precisely because of this in-between space that we can follow and visualize Ovid's narration (*The Metamorphoses* vv. 250–68), where the poet describes Minerva, the bearer of civilization and virtues, as she visits the Muses in their abode on Mt Helicon. The goddess listens to their song and stories, and she sees the sacred Hippocrene fountain, which the flying horse Pegasus caused to flow by striking a rock with its hoof. The setting is a wood on the slopes of the mount where the Muses play instruments and read books. Minerva arrives and sits among them. In the background, Pegasus takes wing from the top of a cliff from which water gushes. According to tradition, the Muses are linked to Minerva, the protector of the arts. It is in terms of symbolism that we can identify grace outside of the religious context. In this sense, we can visualize and 'relive' the pagan myths in the Renaissance.

As regards the Christian vision, instead, we can begin with the term *Gnadenstuhl*, or 'throne of grace,' guided by the comments of Sergio Givone (pp. 212–14). Here too, however, the interpretation is a symbolic one. In the tradition of the Reformation, through the representation of the mystery of the Trinity, the Church wanted to suggest what we might consider to be the greatest of horrors: God who dies in anguish before God himself who watches impassively in silence, while the Holy Spirit gives meaning to the atrocious absurdity in terms of a divine miracle. It is a well-known iconography, starting with Dürer, that has illustrious predecents in Beato Angelico (see the cells of the San Marco convent) and Masaccio (in Santa Maria Novella). The depiction of the Trinity, which is a plan for salvation, involves the image of an omnipotent and tragically powerless God. This represents a condition of profound ruin and perdition. There is something of a spontaneous reaction to the dismay in the face of the dreadful suffering of Jesus and the world, in the form of the emotional tint epitomized in an image of grace. Givone writes:

> God allows the existence of that which eclipses and obscures the divine *ut scriptum impleretur* (as it is written it is fulfilled). He allows it to be, therefore, in the framework of a plan for salvation which is in effect from the beginning; the need for abandonment, however, is not part of a predetermined plan because, on the contrary, what unites the Father, the Son, and the Holy

> Spirit, is a profound exposure to suffering (the suffering of the world and that of God) wherein the suffering is preserved as it redeems the need, and saves it by harboring it within himself because redemption is the same as the memory of the unredeemable. It could not be otherwise; in fact, even the calming forgetfulness of the damaged life, which damages him doubly, does not redeem; nor does the transfiguration and with it the erasure of the negativity that is in the non redeemable. This act of allowing to be implies that being finally is: ungrounded, freed from its own foundation and, therefore, removed from itself and from being that always is or is not what it was or is only itself, but exposed to the ultimate risk, clinging to the cruelest of enigmas, indeed, delivered into nothingness. (Ibid., my trans.)

The paradox of the image of the 'throne of grace' resonates with the metaphysics of the bottomless abyss of the Divine. Exposing itself to the point of self-destruction, the Divine encounters nothingness, which is assumed as it own essence. As mysticism teaches us, however, nothingness is the essence of the Divine because the Divine is super-essential by virtue of the fact that it is supreme relative to being. It is in the vertiginous vastness of non-being that the Divine operates on being, allowing being to be, says Givone. Only from this premise can we imagine the horror and the miracle of a paradoxical and ambiguous redemption, where compassion and cruelty, mercy and anger, omnipotence and powerlessness appear to be one and the same thing. This is not a superior economy of salvation, in which the Father is the custodian (and priest) and the Son is the instrument (a sacrificial victim), that 'explains' the fact that grace derives from its opposite; however, in any case,

> that torment and that silence beyond which we cannot go and which are anything but the beginning of an explanation and, nevertheless help to explain, if only by preserving the paradox on the level that is proper to it and resisting any reduction of it. The withdrawal of God beyond the essential, outside of its own essence, beyond being is the philosophical image of this. (Ibid., my trans.)

In this vision of a 'bottomless pit of the Divine' to which I referred in my comments on Payerson, we find echoes of Meister Eckhart. In fact, God does not exist *qua* God, but *qua* God who frees himself even from his being God: the essence of the Divine does not reside in the 'spirit,' the 'person,' or the 'image' that embodies it; better still, it does not possess it at all, since it is profoundly free relative to being that appears out of nothingness. Eckhart writes: "God acts above being, in vastness where he can move; he acts in non-being. Even before there was being, God acted: he acted upon being when being did not yet exist." With these thoughts, which reiterate those

previously expressed by Eckhart, I now move on to a symbolic reading of the forms of artistic representation.

15.

Beyond Beauty

Let us return to the idea of grace in Plotinus, for whom the soul and the forms of the Good give mankind, in addition to objects, a supreme and brilliant beauty beyond symmetry, and this is what conquers us:

> Beyond Intellectual-Principle it passes but beyond the Good it cannot, for nothing stands above That. Let it remain in Intellectual-Principle and it sees the lovely and august, but it is not there possessed of all it sought; the face it sees is beautiful no doubt but not of power to hold its gaze because lacking in the radiant grace which is the bloom upon beauty. Even here we have to recognize that beauty is that which irradiates symmetry rather than symmetry itself and it is that which truly calls out our love. (*Enneads* VI. 7, 22)

It is the soul that makes the difference, for example, between an ugly but lively man and a beautiful statue that is proportionate in its imitative form. This is because the soul possesses the form of the Good and receives its tonality from the Good: "with such colors it awakens and becomes lighter, and makes lighter the body it possesses, to which it gives all the good and the vitality of which it is capable, by giving of itself." The grace of beauty, therefore, is a universal principle in thought and in art that is beyond elegance and harmony.

Grace usually indicates qualities and traits that render an object or a person pleasant to the eyes. It also involves the sense of hearing; we can certainly say that a piece of music is graceful, whereas it seems rather difficult to extend the term's meanings to the other senses: taste, touch, and smell. We find graceful elements in dance, the figurative and plastic arts, architecture, theater, music, and literature as well as in cinema and everyday life. Interwoven are variable sets of data that are light, gay, delicate, fine, pleasant, harmonious, delightful, or exquisite and they offer illustrations of accuracy in style and execution, very measured effects of contrast, and a special ability that does not, however, exhibit tension or effort.

Grace unifies gently, as in a rarefied atmosphere; it involves forms and attitudes (for example, dance, sculpture, fashion, because they entail gentle, courteous manners), but, in practice, it always avoids the vices of affectation and mannered style. In some cases, as we have seen in clear references to mythology, it can pertain to virtue, talent, and the disposition of the soul. It pursues an ideal model of classical inspiration in art.

As we have seen, a fairly strong link emerges historically among grace, decorum, charm, and proportion. Grace promotes spontaneous, we could al-

most say innate (since they are acquired so thoroughly), qualities that relate in part or in whole to the human body, an object, a work (of art), or a form, considered in terms of the rhythm of the composition, the color, etc. It represents a very widespread concept and a very important one in classicist discussions, from the Renaissance to the 1800s. It occupies a salient place in literature, theory, criticism, and later in aesthetics. Generally speaking, we find in treatises on art a tendency or desire to distinguish (depending on the authors and the period) between beauty and grace, on the grounds that the latter has the property of cultivating spiritual and mysterious features in particular. In music, a 'gallant style' affirms itself based on the idea of grace in conformity with affected models of Rococo taste; its features are lightness and decorativeness. The major exponents of this tendency include Georg Phillip Telemann, Baldassare Galuppi, and Giovanni Marco Rutini, as well as Haydn and the young Mozart. In music, this topic involves profound reflection on the secrets of rhythm and composition, on rest and movement, as Stéphane Mallarmé, Hans von Balthasar, Giovanni Guanti, and Vladimir Jankelvitch have argued, with ample commentary from Bach to Debussy and Ravel. As regards musical language, grace signals the embellishment of execution and interpretation above all. In short, it is a bravura passage that exhibits a special touch, which is derived from the term 'sprezzatura' while, in music criticism this term appears, even extensively, because it is deemed to be the equivalent of a kind of rapture.

In 17th-century aesthetics, we have a more in-depth study of the relationship between grace and beauty in Winckelmann's *History of Ancient Art* (1756–1759). The author affirms that "grace is the pleasurable according to reason," meaning that it is a concept that applies to all actions, one that develops through careful reasoning and diligent scrutiny, and that, on the basis of the foregoing, can also become nature (in the sense that, with the assistance of a trained mind, we find it latent in nature). He says that grace is averse to constraint, affectation (this has already been pointed out), strained expressions, witticisms, and violent passions, and it loves "the simplicity and restfulness of the soul"; it is the most convincing proof of the superiority of ancient works over modern ones. In the history of art, we find this in Correggio and then in some works by Bernini.

From grace comes that experience whose objective is the concept of 'abstract beauty' inasmuch as—Winckelmann says—pleasure always appears to go hand in hand with the serenity of inner joy. In artworks, this quality applies to the human figure, but it also pertains to 'the contingent,' that is, ornaments and draperies in which all affectation and exaggeration are eliminated from the outset because grace is based on the relationship between the one who acts and the act itself, with the clear purpose of "display-

ing the dignity of man in his spiritual attitude." Even though justified in its Neoplatonic and Neoclassical application, the binding and persistent idea of the simplicity, decorum, and serenity of the soul, restricts Winckelmann's observations to the field of the figurative and plastic arts where, it must be said, his observations were headed in any case. If, however, we expand our horizon, we discover that arabesque, to which we can certainly also apply the concept of grace and thereby avoid limiting it solely to imitation, grace is not the exclusive domain of simplicity; we also discover that spiritual restfulness can easily be "swept away" even by a series of light dance movements. Simplicity and restfulness are probably prisoners of the 'pleasurable without reason.'

As does Winckelmann, Mengs considers grace to be 'a gift from heaven,' a harmony of Being. Following in the thinking of Mengs and then Sulzer, Milizia states that he cannot define grace through these mysterious and sacred features and he notes its ease, malleability, and variety in relation to movements and especially its universality in the context of taste as a non-rational faculty of feeling: "Grace is one of the branches of taste, through which the artist attains pleasure in the sweetest, most agreeable way possible. Grace is not acquired; it knows no principles or convictions. Every nation can have its own kind of beauty, but grace is one and the same for all countries [...] and it is more universal than beauty" (1826–1828, 3, p. 77, my trans.). These authors are cited in other sections of this book, but they are mentioned here for the purpose of providing a summary of the various positions pertaining to forms in a broader comparative context.

In Great Britain, Edmund Burke, who is more interested in the sublime than he is in grace, in his *Philosophical Inquiry into the Origins of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1756), examines the idea of grace as the beauty of movements and attitudes in which there is never a trace of difficulty or effort, and which instead conveys a sense of ease, delicateness, and harmony (chs. 3, 22). There seems to be a kind of return to that feature of special 'sprezzatura' mentioned above in reference to Castiglione. Burke's examples are the Medici Venus and the Antinoös. We could identify several others and, regarding grace in style, it would not be out place to mention Luca della Robbia, Desiderio di Settignano, and Carpaccio.

A few years later, Spalletti (*Saggio sopra la bellezza* [*Essay on Beauty*], 1765), added the element of expressivity as "conformity with inner movements caused by the affects of the soul" to Burke's description of movement. The idea of grace in the ease and casualness of movement as well as in the love that springs from objects and actions in which it is embedded would return several times in the aesthetic debate and is an ancient question. Diderot's views on the beautiful and the graceful, instead, appear to be definitely

useful for understanding the Rococo forms of the period. For him, the beautiful is synonymous with the great, the noble, the harmonious, the elevated, and the true in expression, the regular in construction, the new in creativity, and fullness in feeling; the graceful, instead, is fine, delicate, pleasant, brilliant, and original. This line of thinking leads him to declare that it is the intellect that makes things *graceful*, but it is the soul that makes them great. We can understand Diderot's statement only by thinking of the fact that, according to common sense, the graceful seems to be less meaningful, less full of meanings, and more frivolous than *grace*.

The most famous theoretician of grace is Schiller who rethinks Kant's reflection on art and morality. In the phrase 'beautiful souls,' where we see an ideal of human perfection in operation, he appears intentionally to bring together those moral traits that indicate spiritual harmony and serenity, and thus distinguish those souls for whom virtue is pleasurable and love. In this way, he succeeds in fusing together moral sensibility and exquisite, delicate taste. In his essay *Grace and Dignity* (1793), Schiller declares that this soul bears the sign of a harmony between sensibility and rationality, duty and inclination, character and form, interiority and exteriority. Grace, which also makes the good soul beautiful, expresses this harmony of moral freedom and natural necessity in the world.

At the same time as he subdivides the sublime in order to arrive at the nature of tragedy, Schiller describes the nature of the beautiful in dealing with the notion of grace. There is a fixed or architectural beauty or structure produced by nature through the law of necessity and a *mobile* beauty, created by a spirit in response to conditions of freedom, where the human being is self-determining. Schiller declares that in such a person "resides the freedom that regulates beauty. Nature has given the beauty of the form and the soul determines the beauty of play of phenomena." Assuming the liberty of the person and the expression of the soul but excluding instinctive movements and those of the will (accepting sympathetic movements), the beauty of movement determines grace. This accounts for the character of the persona. The soul inhabits these bodies.

Grace prevents the moral value of character from causing the aesthetic value of the sensible figure to decline (sensibility and rationality are harmonized) and allows beauty to manifest itself effortlessly, *spontaneously*. What prevails is not intentionality determined by the discovery of the will of the subject, but 'naturalness.' In an admirable synthesis, Payerson comments as follows:

> The value of character that expresses itself in mimetic features is moral, but the value of the body in motion as it speaks is aesthetic. The moral value of character is harmonized with the aesthetic value of the figure. And the mor-

> al value of character is part of the supra-sensible world, while the aesthetic value of the figure is part of the sensible world. Morality and aesthetical-ness are reconciled in grace. (1983, p. 106, my trans.)

The spirituality of the sensible figure, which we consider to be expressive, becomes spirit that acts like nature and, at the same time, it is nature that acts like spirit. The state of grace is attained when the spirit can manifest itself without expression or constraint and when sensibility emanates freely.

This idea must be related back to Schiller's didactic project in which the education to sensibility entails the construction of character: the moral ideal implies the aesthetic and vice-versa. Furthermore, the *beautiful soul* and *grace* must be united in the *sublime* soul and in *dignity*. These, too, are fundamental points of his thought, without which it is not possible to understand the whole architecture of Schiller's project, and its complexity. Dignity, in fact, is nothing other than the sublime in the human figure, while grace represents the serenity that true beauty brings. The highest level of dignity, the most appropriate representation of the free spirit in the face of sensibility, is offered by 'calmness in suffering.'

I wish to point out that dignity is invoked and expressed especially in passion (*pathos*) and grace especially in behavior (*ethos*). Grace is seen to originate in the inclination toward dignity. Dignity resists the degeneration of love into desire, whereas grace resists the degeneration of esteem into fear. Through these considerations, we can, therefore, grasp the complementarity of the feeling of the beautiful and the feeling of the sublime. The difference between them lies in the point of view; at their root, the concepts are identical. And this is an aesthetic and educational theory of humanity whereby the feeling of the beautiful, which aspires to the freedom and spontaneity of the sensible world, is joined to and supported by the feeling of the sublime, whose objective is the liberation of the spirit from the sensible world. Thus, the beautiful soul (a notion dear to the poets and philosophers of the Romantic era) is, in a way, guaranteed by the sublime due to the fact that the soul becomes truly beautiful only when, faced with the upsurge of negative passion, suffering, and adversity, it does not abandon the moral principle with which it previously complied. Once again it is Payerson who explains that, for Schiller, the beautiful soul is not to be found on this side of the sublime for it has surpassed it. It is not the undetected innocence of the sublime, but virtue accompanied by grace. "The sublime is a pathway to the beautiful soul: the pathetic, the tragic, and the sublime have great pedagogical value for man and it is through this education that man fortifies himself in his morality" (Ibid. p. 119); it does so by avoiding affectation and by gathering the energy produced and regulated by grace instead.

In his reflections on the terms that in the German language denote grace, especially the words *Anmut* (grace) and *Reiz* (attraction) Schiller finds the first to be close to the concept of dignity, a 'filling' of the heart, and the second close to sensibility, an 'excitation' of the heart. Payerson comments as follows: "In this way, dignity that is close to grace is nobility, and dignity that is close to fear is loftiness. The highest form of grace is charm, which enraptures, and the highest form of dignity is majesty, which disconcerts" (Ibid. p. 118, my trans.).

In his *Aesthetics* (Pt. 1, ch. 2, 3c), Hegel situates grace in the stage where classical art acquires an increasingly finite existence and precipitates the emergence of a direct relationship with the subject in the work when "it attains immediate accidental individualization, in terms of content, and what is *pleasant* and attractive, in terms of form." Pleasantness and agreeableness cause the seriousness of devotion to disappear while the universal and the content recede into the background. In this exteriority and determinacy, the seriousness of the gods becomes grace. With the development of the individual and the tangible we pass from the majestic to the delicate and to grace.

With respect to what has been said thus far and what remains to be said, I would like to describe the conceptual map of our topic. Grace seems to be a particular, even autonomous, emanation of beauty, which is usually fixed, but it becomes mobile. It is linked to spatiotemporal displays (dance), but not only this; a statue, a musical or literary work, a painting, or a film can be graceful. In drawing and in the figurative and plastic arts it appears to be related to the felicitous development of curves, rather than angles or straight or broken lines. If, however, we think of some arabesques, this absolute privileging of the curved line is not really justified. Grace is generally accompanied by a sense of calm, moderation, harmony, peace, confidence, equilibrium (internal and external), and lightness. If in the sublime we feel acute restlessness and fright, dominated and overcome by something that surprises us with its largeness and power, in grace we perceive a happy, reassuring, seductive atmosphere deep within us.

In this vein, namely, that of the smile and pleasantness, we should not overlook Bergson's views on movement (*Essai sur le données immédiates de la conscience*, ch. 1). He interprets grace in a unique and meaningful way, declaring that its superior essence is determined by an unstable sympathy (virtual or nascent) that is on the verge of appearing. Precisely because it is participation and movement, in the sense of nimbleness and ease with respect to objects, grace then appears to Étienne Souriau as an imminent and always incomplete richness, a state of equilibrium that is at once perfect and unstable. It is also said that embroidery, miniature painting, and fashion are the realms of the graceful but, as we have seen, this is only partly or relatively

true. It is probable that the use of the noun and the adjective has different values. Grace, in fact, pertains to the more complex and highest forms of art. In describing the traits of genius in *Titian* (p. 110), Victor Basch demonstrates that grace damps down excess force to which the temperament is inclined, establishing the fact that authentic beauty is a synthesis of grace and sublimity in which he sees an inimitable harmony between the mysterious smile of Giorgione and the superhuman tension of Michelangelo. This third synthesis is reiterated by Raymond Bayer in *Traité d'esthétique* (*Treatise on Aesthetics*, 1956, pp. 226–27), where he affirms this principle seeing grace as the antithesis of effort and as the development of form and technique; he also sees the sublime as the field of the poetic. The beautiful is the balance of the structures of the sublime and of grace in their values and in their human content.

In *Esthétique de la Grâce* (*The Aesthetics of Grace*), he devotes himself to determining the objective structures of grace. The result is an extensive and very-well organized cluster of observations on and descriptions of art as well as on the biological and psychic life. Grace, then, presents itself not only in dynamic structures but in static ones as well (sculpture, architecture, and ornamentation). With respect to music, as he tends to do, Bayer imagines a decline in the liturgical seasons, a weakening of oppositions, and a harmonious flowering of 'wastefulness.' If such elements are accompanied by effects of imprecise, suspended, and disorienting sweetness, the result is reminiscent of the style of Ravel, he says. We see the birth of an *aesthetics of the equivocal*: grace is attained when aspects of richness and freedom from the pattern spill over from the equilibrium through the intervention of unexpected novelties.

Grace stimulates and involves other similar categories, which do not have the same weight or the same historical importance, but which we find rather frequently in an intermediate zone between the arts and cultural habits. The fact that they do not appear to be consolidated in the way that grace is and that they, nonetheless, seem to have many ties with it, does not lead to the establishment of a direct or indirect dependence; at any rate, grace does not form the basis of a hierarchy of the aesthetic categories. I am discussing some of these in greater detail because, from the standpoint of the theoretical debates and the historical significance, as well as from the standpoint of the various artistic applications, they exhibit greater conceptual complexity and present more stimuli to sensibility and the imagination. Furthermore, I see them as important to the development of my argument, as well as for different circumstances, since they are all interconnected in a continuous process of metamorphosis in art, studies, and taste. I will then examine the delicate,

the elegant, the graceful, and what in French is referred to as the *joli*, within the wider sphere of grace.

16.

Elegance and Delicateness

Elegance is an attribute that recurs in aesthetics, especially during the Renaissance, but no one has ever thought of this aesthetic category as a spiritual discipline, which is to say, as a form that can be profound and affect the constitutive qualities of a work or a style. It is generally considered to be a rather superficial trait; however, it is elevated by the Neoclassical spirit. In this regard, it is worthwhile to cite Francesco Milizia's comment: "Elegance (therefore) is not to be found in the arid or the effeminate, in useless ornaments, in affected lack of restraint in contours, in the choice of strange styles, and in mannered designs" (1826–1828, 2, p. 349, my trans.). It is an ancient term used by such Latin writers as Varro, Cicero, and Pliny the Younger. It is documented as an artistic idea at the end of the 1600s by Roger De Piles and Filippo Baldinucci, then by Antonio Mengs, Milizia, and Antoine Quatremère de Quincy. Mengs claims that elegance is that which pertains to grace, while Milizia argues that elegance is all the graces combined.

The discussions on this topic are well known. William Blake and Joshua Reynolds disagree on defining it as form and color. It is very difficult, however, to isolate a work or part of one by emphasizing this aspect primarily. This can be attempted only in the second half of the 1800s or during the 20th century, when this aspect tends to be associated with an atmosphere of restrained magic. D'Annunzio is conspicuously, and at times obstinately, elegant, as are Henry James or Marcel Proust, not to mention the dandyism of Oscar Wilde. Elegance shuns the ordinary and the vulgar and this is its power of seduction as well as its fragility. On the subject of literary style, Leopardi has this to say: "It is difficult to say that a word or a phrase is elegant if it is not in some way removed from its vulgar usage" (*Zibaldone*, 6 July 1820).

In painting, it is possible for colors to dominate in a display of the chromatic spectrum. We have, for example, the chromatism of Pontorno, Veronese, the School of Fontainebleau, Turner, or Kandinsky to name but a few cases. And, since it seems to rise here to the level of a truly important category, let us not forget Whistler's *Variations in Blue and Green* (1868, Free Gallery of Art, Washington) or *Nocturne in Blue and Gold: Old Battersea Bridge* (c.1865, Tate Modern, London) by the same artist, or various paintings by Sargent. But, this is a question of composing or creating that combines closely or genetically with form. The arabesques mentioned earlier are elegant as well.

In cinema, elegance comes particularly from 'photogenic quality' with its ability to attract and seduce, or from the calculated rhythm of the montage process. Luchino Visconti, Max Ophüls, Alain Resnais of *Last Year at Marienbad* are elegant directors because of the stylized attention to technical details (photography, lighting, and scenography) and the management of the actors, from the study of their poses and movements, to the choice of framing and the editing.

Among the sculptors, we have Aristide Maillol and, in part, Medardo Rosso but not Auguste Rodin whose work is rooted in the sensual, which is also an important category that intersects with the main aesthetic categories. Among the countless examples in art history, let us not forget the magnificence of Mannerism and Liberty (Art Nouveau), while in cinema we have the example of Henrik Galeen's *Alraune* (1929).

To return to our topic, elegance designates a heightened sense of precision and stylization. We can also see this in the animal kingdom (panthers, jaguars, antelopes, etc) or, at the opposite end of the spectrum, in the products of mathematical thought. Mathematics and physics deal with elegant solutions or 'beautiful' demonstrations that reveal the connection between efficiency and simplicity, which is the application of a formal principle of coherence. In certain conditions, elegance can be joined to the qualities of sobriety and simplicity (in most cases), but also (in fewer cases) to the bizarre (Baudelaire, for instance), especially when combined with dandyism and Decadentism or with the idiosyncratic, particularly when it tends toward the Baroque.

That stylistic rigor, which usually exalts, leads us to consider the emergence of intellectual elements that are not difficult to connect with the aesthetic experience of science. I have already referred to mathematics in this regard. In short, there is a field of aesthetic experience between art and science in which the intensity of emotions is achieved in the most economical way possible. We can, therefore, move from mathematical symbols to the symbols in recent musical scores or visual poems (calligrams, etc.), to certain sketches and drawings (Leonardo's, for example).

Elegance can be found throughout the history of the arts. It can be perceived in Bach's musical compositions, in the works of Agostino di Duccio, Antonio del Pollaiuolo, Sandro Botticelli, in the architecture of Leon Battista Alberti, Filippo Brunelleschi, Donato Bramante, and Jacopo Sansovino. The risk associated with elegance is represented by aridity, display, and an obsession with technical detail. The search for formal perfection is based on the 'golden mean,' which is where elegance resides. It is a term that Edmund Burke defined as *regularity* and as the bearer of grace (Pt. 3, sect. 23).

Pleasantness always arouses curiosity because of its many nuances and associations with grace, the sacred, the metaphysical, and the mystical. It is something sweet and enchanted that surprises us. We hear and feel the rhythms of quarter notes and sixth notes on the harp, the magic of dawns, the atmosphere of extraordinary visitations, and small or great revelations in dreams. Pleasantness conveys intimate messages; it communicates tender emotions, inspirations, and evocations. The risk associated with delicateness is excessive sweetness and it involves candor without conflict. The poems of Francis of Assisi and certain verses from courtly love poetry can be considered sweet.

Sweetness retains an aura of sacredness and mysticism; it leaves a weak imprint. We can find the sacred in the course of tradition and mythology and identify anthropological aspects to which can be added other tetramorphic, fantastic, symbolic, and aniconic ones. This is because art, which is sacred in origin wherever it is found (in the sense that every object was once considered to be a manifestation of the divine), in its attempt to represent the invisible and to convey a metaphysical conception of the world, permits the encounter of the human and the divine to manifest itself. The result of this encounter is not always the depiction of a god; it can be a description of the cosmos or a network of geometric forms.

In painting, there are interesting allusions in Leonardo's *St Anne, the Madonna and Child with the Lamb* (1506–1513, Louvre, Paris), Beato Angelico's *Annunciation* (1430–1432, Prado, Madrid), or Carpaccio's *The Dream of St Ursula* (1495, Galleria dell'Accademia, Venice) where, alongside the sweet, we find the arcane, which is another important and equally elusive quality that recurs in various places and contributes to the mysterious and fascinating aura of the painting. The concept of *suavitas* is theorized in the 1700s in Spain (Palomino) and in Italy (Milizia and Lanzi), by authors faithful to the classical tradition and it applies to artworks characterized by a harmonious unity of the parts, a well-balanced and measured blending of colors, and extreme attention to the areas where sweetness merges with softness. As far as Lanzi is concerned, Guido Reni excels in this regard.

It is clear that sweetness and elegance are linked to grace. It is well known, however, that the categories, whether more or less determinate, are interwoven and blend with each other in a variety of ways. It is up to us to find, separate, or bring together, in the appropriate complexity offered by art and nature, the ideative, expressive, and compositional elements for the purpose of understanding the aesthetic unfolding of forms.

17.

Loveliness and Resplendence

The term ‘loveliness’ is elusive and difficult to describe from a conceptual standpoint. It relates to a fine and enchanted beauty; it involves delicate, sweet, and subtly cheerful ideas and suggests images, movements, and postures that are always graceful, polite, and never specious. We find loveliness in invocations and agrarian and pastoral representations, but it can also be found outside this style and genre. It is the bearer of wellbeing and casual or simple joy; it communicates a fresh and harmonious composure and attracts the senses with its frankness, virtuosity, and candor.

At times, grace seems to be adorned with a halo of nostalgia. It is important, however, to clarify that *nostalgia*, which plays such a significant role in aesthetic production, cannot be considered a category; instead, it is an aesthetic *feeling*. It is true that we can speak of a feeling of the beautiful, the sublime, the tragic, and the graceful, superimposing on it, or fusing it with, the structure of the corresponding category. With its meaning of loss and abandonment, as well as longing for an impossible return, nostalgia is more consonant with affective elements than with those of the creative imagination. As a category, it is more elusive and concealed than other categories because it clings to the possibility of the involvement and emotion of the viewer or reader. Furthermore, it affects us like a spontaneous stirring of the soul, on the one hand, and like the product of a cultural condition, on the other. Marcel Proust’s *À la recherche du temps perdu* (*Remembrance of Things Past*) in literature and Andrei Tarkovsky’s ‘pathos’ in cinema occupy the space between reality and memory: the poles of an implicit poetics, not of a theorization of categories. Its transposition to the realm of art pertains to the sphere of the poetic.

In the literature on art from the 15th to the 17th century, the terms ‘grace’ and ‘loveliness’ are almost identical. Leon Battista Alberti acknowledges that “clearer and more elegant beauty” is born of friendship where ‘dignity and grace’ prevail. In the *Treatise* (no. 316), Leonardo speaks of the loveliness and grace of the members of the body, which must be ‘arranged’ in relation to the overall effect of the figure: “if you want a figure that displays loveliness, you must make the members slender and relaxed, without showing too many muscles, and the few that it is necessary to execute, make them soft, that is, only slightly marked, using shadows and not colors, and the members, especially the arms, pliant.” Giorgio Vasari says that the Ionic order displays beautiful grace and loveliness, and that the latter gives concreteness to the ‘graceful licence’ of the Mannerist style, which draws value

from it by executing slender and graceful figures. Gian Paolo Lomazzo interprets the term in the context of Michelangelo's principle of the pyramidal or serpentine figure, which supposedly contains all the secrets of the painting inasmuch as "the greatest grace and loveliness that a figure can have is its ability to appear to move, which painters call the *furia* (frenzy) of the figure." This concept of the *furia* is very important since it is a basic component of grace, beauty, and decorum in movement. This virtual identicalness is taken up as well by Francesco Scannelli in the mid1600s.

Alongside the more common meaning of loveliness, but equally aesthetic, we find another term, which indicates everything that seduces quickly and superficially and that stimulates the senses; it extends to the sense of smell and perhaps even to those taste and touch. This is the French term *joli*. For some, this quality is an inferior form of beauty; it does not possess regularity, completeness, austerity, or nobility. Some say that one of its aspects is smallness of size or miniature status, but we immediately think that a vast landscape can also be 'pretty,' and not just a flower. In painting, for the immediate idea of the fragility that the object communicates and for the appreciation that it provokes in art, we can refer to depictions with colors that are not very intense, but that are still fresh and gay, which implicitly require our compliance and complicity. *Joli* is friendly and decorative. We can find it in painting, sculpture, and handicrafts, as well as in fashion and if we want to highlight a period, we can readily point to the 1700s once again (the poems of Pietro Metastasio, the paintings of Jean-Honoré Fragonard) or to Art Deco. But, there is also a strong definition that we can take as the point of reference. Victor Hugo, the master of drama (and comedy) analyzes this category magnificently. In *Shakespeare* (Pt. 2, Bk. 1, ch. 2), he says, in the modern spirit, that we can have a truly great *joli* result and that Homer himself, through Astianatte (the daughter of Andromeda), was able to illustrate it powerfully. In his description of the figure of Ophelia, indicating a feature of this aesthetic category, Hugo notes the encounter with and the expression of intentions and destinies, thoughts and events, together with the appearance of mysterious and exquisite elements that enchant more powerfully the more they tend toward pain (to the pleasure of pain), located between reality and invisibility.

I have said that the category of the *joli* (a term that is difficult to translate, but one that can be defined in Italian as something between pretty and graceful) initially suggests fragility and precariousness; but, it is also true that this is a very unusual way to process perceptions and emotions. We find in it an almost infantile attitude. When we enter into this dimension, we participate in the sensibility of children who, unlike adults, do not feel the beautiful, the great, the tragic, and the sublime. We must, therefore, enter into the

gratuitousness of these 'small miracles,' embrace the smile that hovers over these attributes, and follow this vital, simple, and spontaneous flowering.

Some of the more fragile, precarious, spontaneous, and original aspects are perfected in their secret encounter with the pathetic. The greatest artists have dealt with this quality, from the simplest and most casual style to the most involved, and they have amalgamated it with other qualities and elements. We can find it in Homer and Hugo and, in music, in Mendelssohn (the scherzo in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, 1827–1843), but especially in Mozart (for example, the *Quintet for Clarinet and Strings* K581), which sometimes achieves highly expressive results in this regard. Other fine examples are, in certain respects, Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *The Village Soothsayer* and Franz Schubert's *Sonata for Violin and Piano*, opus no. 1). In painting, we can consider Domenichino (*The Hunt of Diana*, 1620, Borghese Gallery, Rome) or other figures by Jean François Lyotard. We can also find several references in cinema, despite the heterogeneity of the works. The spirit that animates the films of François Truffaut is imbued with this taste. To sum up, we note, as does Étienne Souriau, a feeling of precarious calm and unseen tragedy about to erupt unexpectedly; what I have defined as *joli* is, in reality, a finely tuned allusion to the violence of the universe and to a momentary miracle.

The mystic can experience sudden peaks of emotion, flashes of ecstasy, or bursts of grace. I have spoken of these in relation to the ecstasy that the experience of the divine provides in the ascetic life. When it displays a high degree of spirituality, an artistic work can also acquire a mystical quality. We very rarely manage to isolate this quality in its autonomous aesthetic specificity because it is always fused with other traits. When we do succeed in isolating it, it represents absolute aspiration and rapture on the psychological level, and a frenzy of purity. Since neither images nor words succeed in expressing the unspeakable, can we perhaps see it (the unspeakable) as based in sound or music? We can, indeed, sense its presence when we reflect on a remark by Beethoven: "Music is a higher revelation than all wisdom and philosophy." Music conveys suggestions of ascent. Sound becomes the eminent principle of contact with the metaphysical world. Apart from the prophetic aspect of the third Beethoven style, which involves mysticism and esotericism, we find such works as Schönberg's *Jacob's Ladder* (1912).

According to some theological, mythological, and historical sources, this is evident. Marius Schneider (1951–1964, pp. 63 and 69) cites the *Chandogya Upanishad*, which states that the song of the sun, chanted by the right voice, attains the world beyond and can even resist the will of the gods, and the *Samavidhana Upanishad*, in which a specific note from the tonal scale is attributed to each god, thereby suggesting that music is the true food of the

gods. Still within this context of the ascent, Schubert also reminds us that music has a relationship with metaphysics, in the correspondence between musical notes and cosmological elements.

It is true that grace is normally located along a progression to perfection and it is not alien to the instant that brusquely interrupts the impression, but we must also keep in mind the 'propitious moment' that brings about a transformation. Let us recall Pindar's famous lines: "Each thing has its limits; knowing it is the best and most timely way" (*Olympian Ode* 13, vv. 47–48). St Paul translates the power of the sacred, which to that point was represented in poetry and the plastic and figurative arts, into a perturbation that is no longer associated with the wonder (*thauma*) of *charis*, but with the light of the word of Christ that, in an overwhelming moment, reveals itself in mankind as a bolt of lightning.

18.

The Oneiric and the Marvelous

Homer declares, "dreams too come from Zeus' (*Iliad*, Bk. I, v. 63). I am not interested in the interpretative aspect here. From antiquity to today, there have been countless Books of Dreams and as many dictionaries to decipher them. We find dreams, symbols, enigmas, and the archetypal meanings that dreams entail dispersed in all the arts (the most difficult one to verify is music since it is less reliant on descriptive and narrative elements). As a genuine cosmos, the oneiric no longer appears to be a simple subject, but a fundamental compositional quality. Fused with the imagination, it creates an entirely aesthetic way of conceptualizing, seeing, and feeling through typically elusive, incoherent, and mysterious images—something that is at once human and immaterial, conceptual and representational.

Born from a 'sleeping nature,' the oneiric is an extraordinary adventure that is not subject to any predictable law and approaches the divine and the invisible. The other arts, especially in pre-Romanticism, are permeated by this active awareness of enchantment. From that period forward, the dream is no longer a rhetorical device or an explanatory paradigm (regardless of how learned, elegant, or valuable it may be); it changes and, together with the allegories and fantastic figures produced by the human mind, it becomes a sophisticated architecture capable of endowing artistic expression with an unusual, amazing, and sometimes miraculous quality, in the depiction of situations and the human spirit.

When we consider it to be an aesthetic quality of a work, it undoubtedly means that we open up to a great expressive freedom within the matrix of rational thought. We, thus, surpass the classical concept whereby the dream is a descriptive fiction used within the sub-genres of poetry (epic, lyric, elegiac, dramatic) as can be found in the *Encyclopédie* (1765), in the entry for *Songe* (dream).

Coleridge understood the sublime as a power of vision and imagination, but distinct from the feelings of repulsion and dread, and closer to dreams. In a letter to William Lisle Bowles from 16 March, 1797, he states that he was 'almost tired' of the terrible sublime in the Gothic novel and then, in a letter from October 9, he went on to describe himself as a *dreamer*. In still another letter, from 14 October, he wrote: "Like the Indian Vishnu, I would like to float on an infinite ocean cradled in the Lotus flower and awaken once in a million years for a few minutes just to know that I was going to sleep for a million years more."

Dreams affect our entire life, changing it with its disturbing beauty. Albert Béguin (*L'Âme romantique et le rêve* [*The Romantic Soul and the Dream*] 1939–1960) recalls Jean Paul's (Jean Paul Friedrich Richter) remark: "A dream is nothing but unintentional poetry," which is to say, that such a comparison between a dream and artistic creation is one of the recurring themes of Romanticism (p. 35). He contends that Jean Paul produced a psychology and an aesthetic of dreams and he discovered the mysterious origins of genius by analyzing psychic phenomena. *The Natural Magic of the Imagination (*1795), *On Dreams* (1798), and *Looking at the World of Dreams* (1813) are not only incisive statements of poetics; they are also elements of a true aesthetic of dreams. The poet and the dreamer feel themselves transported by an inner voice that rises from the depths of the soul and encompasses everything, both the interior and the exterior. According to Béguin, the poet and the dreamer greet "the echo of a divine discourse" (p. 260) with their voice. By transforming the universe, dreams imply the acquisition of new and superior powers on the part of humanity.

In order to declare that every individual is 'fully an artist,' Nietzsche adopts an idea contained in *Die Mastersingers* by Hans Sachs (1494–1576): "Believe me that man's truest conceit / In a dream bcomes complete: / All poetry we ever read / Is but true dreams interpreted" (in Nietzsche, p. 20).

In their complicated automatisms, dreams can also be terrifying and entail psychoanalysis, as happened with Surrealism, which expressed the horror of the unconscious in a 'sublime' fashion. In this case, the grace of the dream reverses the trance of the nightmare. The trance dissolves and produces a monstrous grace. Alongside the latter, we can find a defective grace. Leopardi describes it in the *Zibaldone* (16 August 1823). The poet says:

> It stings and stimulates like an acrid and spicy flavor, or a sour, acidic, or bitter one, which is in itself unpleasant and to a certain extent desirable, and so many spirits who have never been able to feel that other grace or who are already blasé about the beautiful, due to long usage and complacency, are moved and enticed by that, so to speak, defective grace, like palates that are naturally coarse or hard, or tired of agreeable food as a result of habit, are delighted and stimulated by those flavors. (my trans.)

Dreams often engender wonder, which is praised for its inventive and illusionistic quality, like the very special technique of foreshortening, by Giovanni Pietro Bellori (*Lives of the Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*, 1672), who admired Annibale Carracci and Guido Reni. The marvelous was originally thought to be the expression of the incredible superhuman, in other words, the divine. Aristotle thought of it especially as it pertained to the epic and drama. It is a fantastic, magical, and legendary element that represents

something superior (to nature), unusual, extraordinary, or memorable. It is linked to the sensation of intense surprise, amazement in the face of the new, the arcane, the inexplicable, the captivating, and the irresistible.

In Virgil, divinities and miraculous elements were, for the most part, an aesthetic and decorative effect, whereas Horace seems to place wonder together with the verb *delectare* (to charm). The Middle Ages, instead, provides their own version, which is designed to describe exceptional events, enchantments, and miracles (for example, the chivalrous poem). In the Renaissance and the Baroque, the marvelous would become the object of study under the category of the wonderful, the peculiar, and the incredible. In this attractive, intangible, and indefinite element, the Baroque sees something new, the product of a theatricalization of wonder involving the use of tricks and devices. All the arts are affected by this exuberant, daring, and splendid spirit. The music of the 1600s aborbs this category in an attempt to describe the extra-musical and, besides, the marvelous is present in melodrama. Romanticism revisits the medieval notion of the order of the 'supernatural,' which includes magicians, demons, knights, saints, and heroes in order to separate its myths from religion and history, and to preserve them in an autonomous aesthetics. The marvelous is not defined by an attitude toward the events narrated, but by the very nature of those events, where the supernatural has no justification and is not explained. According to some, the marvelous journey is the most complete exploration of universal reality.

Aristotle (*Metaphysics*, IA, 2 982 b, 10–20) said that humans derived the impetus to philosophize from the marvelous (and from myth since it too is marvelous). Swept up by wonder before phenomena for which they could not account and thinking that they were ignorant, they sought to avoid this weakness by elevating the purpose of knowledge. We can now say, however, that Surrealism has overturned the facts in a sense. We are no longer led by the marvelous toward the will to know but, through discovery and the dynamization of the unconscious, we choose to abandon philosophy in order to allow ourselves to be swept up by the chaos of the imagination. This process parallels the one determined by modern technology's power of suggestion, which captures the spirit by inverting the trajectory that takes us from fantasy to science. We find ourselves immersed in the wonder of technology.

19.

The Classical, the Baroque, and the Romantic

The classical ideal is perhaps the only historical and stylistic category that, through various classicisms (in other words, attempts to imitate or restore the classical which is seen as a model), can lead us to think of a 'universal' characteristic, one that is always present or at any rate recurs periodically in the history of culture and art. This "universality" (uniformity of style, for the most past), however, would have to be supra-historical and supra-cultural (notwithstanding the differences between the Orient and the West) and extraneous to the variety of forms of the human journey. This, after all, is impossible. It too is determined historically, in unexpected awakenings and in enchanted dreams.

As mentioned earlier, for Hegel (*Aesthetics*) the form of classical art consists of the immediate unity of the idea and its image, the natural and the spiritual, the sensible and the rational, as well as in its being a complete autonomous, human form. Viewed as joyful, disciplined, and serene greatness within the sphere of grace, the classical ideal is historically determined in the Hegelian dialectic, situated between the symbolic and the romantic form.

The main idea of the classical consists of a desire to 'restore'; there is a tendency to revive the aura of epochs, periods, and moments considered to be the culmination of unrepeatable spiritual processes from which we can only draw inspiration for a new, possible human achievement. The past, or rather the works of a given past (especially the Athenian culture of the 5th century B.C., considered classical because of the degree of perfection attained), becomes the fulcrum for a whole host of reiterations across the centuries. We find models and norms that we can follow in various ages. The general use of the retrospective gaze to evoke a majestic and noble past can also be found in the very same antiquity (indications of this attitude are present starting with the 3rd century B.C. and, then, in 150 B.C.). These approaches appear at various intervals in the Hellenistic era and at different times in European and Mediterranean civilization in which there appears to be either a decline or a surpassing of the culture of the period. In the recurrence of different classicisms ("custodians" of the education, studies, and art of antiquity), therefore, we can see a need for a sense of security in the often disorienting stages of the path of civilization. We think of preserving tradition; we select and collect the legacy of the past. The 'conservationist' aspect was already apparent in the age of Augustus, Gallienus, and Constantine. For these reasons, the classical and the modern (contemporary taste) have often been juxtaposed.

The classical world is commonly interpreted as something superior, part of a past from which the present has distanced itself or something stylistically determined in its elements of perfection, harmony, equilibrium, and formal serenity. These are elements (borrowed from Pythagorean and Biblical symbols of the beauty of God the artificer) that we could describe more fully as follows: order, proportion, symmetry, objectivity, didactic function, dignity in comportment and gesture, nobility of content. In this style, respect for beauty and goodness can be seen throughout; the impression created is one of balance between art and nature, together with invention, imitation, and calculation. Classical is a synonym for eternal and valid. Rosario Assunto noted how the Neoclassical aesthetic met the requirement for the harmonization of grace and the sublime. Unlike the naturalistic and sensual styles of Rococo, grace is seen as emerging from reason to illuminate and liberate nature, and not as proceeding from nature in a Leibnizian process of ascent. Through this interpretation, which examines the complex and serene integration of the beautiful, grace, and the sublime, we derive the idea that 'antiquity as the future' is the spiritual constant of grace.

In the 1700s, what we refer to as Neoclassicism was called the 'true style' by various scholars, critics, and artists, who linked it to a new Renaissance. Antonio Mengs, Étienne-Louis Boullée and Claude-Nicholas Ledoux, Jean-Louis David, John Flaxman, Antonio Canova, and Jean-Auguste Ingres make an authentic effort in this respect. Some developed a romantic form, even through the sublime, from a Neoclassical subject matter imbued with the spirit of the Enlightenment, while others produced a sterile academism.

With respect to music (in Neoclassical style), Gluck's *Alceste* (1767) seems to be very representative. In the dedicatory letter, the author condemns superfluous ornamentation and, in the spirit of Winckelmann, recommends noble simplicity and clarity. But, let us not forget Luigi Cherubini. His *Requiem Mass* in D minor (1816) is based on a clear model of classical taste, in consonance with the representation model of Canova, Appiani, and David. The tragic content dissolves in the measured forms of elegance and smoothness. This kind of style was already acknowledged in his opera *Medea* (1797), a wonderful example of dramatic music. Its primary components can be reduced to three: the theorization (prescriptive and hermeneutical), the symbolic value (in the variation of the reference models, from Augustus to the *signori* (rulers) of the Renaissance for whom imitation of antiquity functioned as a strategy to revive symbolically the golden age), and the sense of history (the cold, nostalgic gaze directed toward the past and the example of tradition). On the level of style, the principles of impersonality and the suppression of subjectivity prevail. In general, we see classicizing aspects and efforts where there is a desire to bring about the elimination of the clash

among the structural elements of a work, in order to realize control and reconciliation of opposing impulses.

When we refer to the Baroque, we usually think of taste for the bizarre, wavy lines, an obsession with tumultuous forms, the use of clever schemes, intricate draperies and folds, the tireless movement of architectural forms and ornaments, the complex network of daring metaphors, the pleasure of optical illusions, an opulent style, and a soft, frenetic, and sometimes agonizing, sensuality, etc. At any rate, we should keep in mind that all of this is a response both to a more or less hidden restlessness and a genuine quest for novelty.

Let us now try to identify specifically the concepts of the Baroque by referring to the theses of Arnold Hauser and Giuliano Briganti, for whom the essence of the artistic products of the 1600s cannot be reduced to a single principle. There are, in fact, different tendencies in art, from a return to the sources of nature to the expression of an openly subjective attitude, to formal play, and from a desire to persuade to a new way of conceptualizing the world in terms of impressions and experiences. To this we can add the fact that, in literature, the creation of a very ornate expressive technique based on subtlety and wonder leads to Marinism and the heroic-comic adventure poem in Italy, the picaresque novel, Gongorism, and conceptism in Spain, *préciosité* (preciosity) in France, as well as euphuism and metaphysical poetry in England. During this time in England, the principal theme of the questions pertaining to the Baroque is *wit* or sharpness of mind, defined by Lyly and Sidney in the area of Neoplatonism and by Bacon, Hobbes, and Locke in that of empiricism. In general, we find a double pathway in all the arts: the path of detailed or morbid representation, epitomized in the form of obsessive realism, and the path of the sense of instability and anguish caused by the collapse of mankind's centrality relative to the complexity of the world around it. Finally, we can identify different currents within the universe of the Baroque: the naturalist, the classicist, and the decorative.

Henri Focillon declared that the Baroque is a moment in the life of the forms and undoubtedly the most free. The forms detach themselves as they grow and tend to invade space in all directions, perforating it and exhausting all its possibilities and we might say that they seem to delight in this process. In short, the Baroque extends from the last works of Michelangelo to those of Borromini, from the daring analogies and metaphors of Shakespeare to the lyric of the English metaphysical poets (Donne in particular), from the poetry of Torquato Tasso to the science of Galileo, from Gongora to Metastasio, from Giordano Bruno to Giambattista Vico and Leibniz, from Caravaggio to Rubens, from Tintoretto and El Greco to Rembrandt, from the melodrama of Monteverdi to the polyphonic 'arrangements' of Bach and from the fountains

of Caprarola to the scenographic conceptualizations of Bibiena. In this notion of intoxication, where we appear to be drawn either to architecture or music, we can note a paradoxical fact, that is, the mixing of conflicting elements: the picturesque and classical harmony. We can see the grandeur, surprise, and fantasy provided by the picturesque married to the principles of architectural composition (for example, Bernini's *Fountain of the Four Rivers* in Piazza Navona, Rome). In my opinion, irregular form becomes, at least in certain cases, an amplification or 'logical' reconsideration of the classical formula.

Finally, behind its vitality and freedom, we find an invitation to nullification, an anguishing presence of death, as if all those impulses and pursuits collapsed into an immense void as a result of agony and exhaustion. It is a final and conscious gesture. As we can understand from the authors and works cited, grace is not foreign to the Baroque; in fact, it is well-suited to it. It rejects canons and accepts freedom, even if it is conflicting. Despite the Counter-Reformation, ornamentation and poses sustain, rather than render sterile, that sublime atmosphere typical of grace in an absolutely spiritual and sensual meeting of sacred and profane gracefulness. In French Neoclassicism the theories of Boileau, inherited from Renaissance erudition and its Mannerist successor, teach and delight. Like arabesque, the serpentine line is a manifestation of the Christian divine and the revival of the gods of Olympus in a unique celestial dance.

We can explain the romantic attitude starting with two famous, enlightening observations. The first is by Stendhal and the second by Baudelaire. In *Racine et Shakespeare* (*Racine and Shakespeare*, 1823), Stendhal jokingly declares that Classicism provided the literature that gave the greatest pleasure possible to his ancestors. In *Salons* (1846), Baudelaire, who condemns the preciosity and perfectionism of a certain romantic style, thinks that Romanticism is nothing but a way of feeling. For this reason, he adds that the most worthy representative in painting is Delacroix, for his modernity. Historically, some Neoclassical elements dissolve into the romantic. For certain reasons, it is possible to say that there is no clear contrast between the classical and the romantic. As some critics contend, we could even speak of the Classicism of the Romantics and the Romanticism of the classicists. At first, Romanticism and Classicism seem to be somewhat vague approximations; the features that define them, however, are the subject of a line of thinking which is useful for understanding complex conceptual worlds. Romanticism can be read and analyzed as a disturbance of the emotions, an obsession borne on the bewitched and perverse wings of the imagination, the perverse side of grace (see Pt. II, ch. 1). The fantasy of a nature unveiled by the freedom and devices of the picturesque draws nourishment from an aggressive sensibility

for which the fatal beauty of a 'Medusa' the symbol. It is a passionate, obsessive melancholy in the work of various authors, from Goethe to Shelley, from Walpole to Baudelaire, from Chateaubriand to Keats, and from Byron to D'Annunzio.

The works of Romanticism bring into relief the subjective element, be it 'typical' or anomalous, in an atmosphere of suffering and mystery. The relationship between art and life is also exalted, restoring the sense of history, on the one hand, and the feeling of Nature in a process of participation with the whole cosmos and in an exploration of the profundity of life, on the other hand. This is also evident in painting, from Goya to Friedrich. The quest for emotions, restlessness, and poetic vision in a series of different experiences, subsequently caused the formation of an attitude of eclecticism within the romantic sphere an eclectic, which implied a beauty with multiple forms. These are modern experiences because they do not rely on classical models, which are deemed to be universally valid, but on the romance culture, which is permeated with Christianity or local myths, and on the medieval re-evaluation of the 'primitives.' Consider, for instance, the English revival with is simultaneous and fused with romantic humor.

In England, Romanticism is born with the gardens organized in accordance with a taste for the exotic and the picturesque, the pleasure of ruins, the sense of nature offered by the lake painters (Wordsworth, Southey, Coleridge), the sublime and the visionism of Blake and Füssli, a painter of Swiss origin, and the 'novelistic' writing of Richardson and others. What results is a strange combination of bliss and gloom.

A concept dear to the romantic spirit is that of the 'beautiful soul,' which has a particular poetic register. In the *Diary* inserted in *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship and Travels*, Goethe says essentially that the beautiful soul is pious, without lapsing into feverish states, and it is thoughtful even if happy. It is attentive to itself, without being rigid. It examines and perfects without engaging in forms of punishment; virtue, devotion, and pity are natural and dear to it. The sum of these features constitutes the texture of the beautiful we call graceful, that is, something that appears to possess grace. To clarify the meaning of the 'beautiful soul' in the 1700s and the 1800s, we need to consider its origin. The concept of the 'beautiful soul' goes back to Plato, primarily the *Republic*, the *Phaedrus*, and the *Symposium*. We can find traces of this concept in medieval and post-medieval mystical literature. It appears in Rousseau's *Nouvelle Héloïse* (*The New Heloise*), and is present in Enlightenment philosophy and religious pietism of the second half of the 18th century in Germany. As we have seen, Schiller's analysis of this concept in his essay "Grace and Dignity" is especially important. In the 18th century lay religiosity and Christian religiosity stand side by side. In the beautiful soul,

harmony, serenity, and peacefulness are interwoven with virtue, thereby providing an image that joins together moral sensibility and exquisite taste. This is the ideal of the late 18th century. This is grace in the time of the Romantics. It is no longer the beauty of balance, but the splendor of genius streaked with disquiet and melancholy.

20.

Critique of Aberrations

Caillois saw in the fantastic something other than the surprising and the unexpected elements we find in fables and myths. For him, its identity and authenticity derive from the treatment of the object by the subject and from the break with the conventions that have historically prevailed in interpreting it. In this study, the fantastic reveals a hidden treasure that charms us and a mystery that ensnares us. This is because we can see in objects a grand and captivating capacity for astonishment that winds its way among indecipherable and secret signs, both in depth and on the surface. In response to this position, the universe explored by Jurgis Baltrušaitis offers us, rather than a fantastic exaltation, a 'heart of wonders,' which is the most lively and moving part of our acting and imagining: a panorama of extraordinary things. The vision that he proposes, however, occasionally touches on and occasionally embraces certain aspects of the fantastic that Caillois identified, mainly in those areas where he strives to reach what is hidden or arcane beyond the form and the canons of historical classification. Baltrušaitis does not so much intend to describe a specific aesthetic knowledge or creative intelligence as to shed light on a special memory of humanity, a set of itineraries and signs that share an identity often underestimated and, at the same time, essential. This is a memory that allows us to decipher strange allegories, visual incongruities, and the delights of hybridity. It is the opposite of grace, but how valuable this world is! The topic invites us to identify a certain similarity between the viewpoints of Caillois and Baltrušaitis.

The system of symbols upon which such a memory rests indicates an 'excellence of ambiguity.' The expression suggests the organicity of an overturned norm, which is the full legitimacy of a cluster of anomalous and frightening beauties set aside by mankind in our recent history, even though they are suited to us. In all of his works, Baltrušaitis has composed a true 'praise of wonder.' In the context of the delirium of the unusual and the unreal that has always existed, like a tempestuous passion of humanity, sublime craftsmanship appears, producing catoptric chambers, machines that change humans into animals, globes of fire and awe-inspiring auras, multiple suns, apparitions, split personalities, optical illusions, mutant physiognomies, picture stones, Gothic phantasmagoria, and mysterious hieroglyphics. Power, which is the excellence of admired objects, derives from the reappraisal of the 'alchemical alphabet' because the figures studied express something more than simple illustrations or mere descriptions of elements and facts. Comparing art and nature, Baltrušaitis formulates a cosmological theory

based on the study of the forms of representation. Due to timeless and universal consonance, 'archetypes of the imagination' emerge from different cultures and traditions. The praise of wonder thus provides a cluster of primordial and recurring images in which we see reflected the collective unconscious. Geometric patterns, vegetation, roots, minerals, and explosions in the heavens, are all swept up in an 'ontology of the dissimilar.' In this search for common features and different models, there is an emphasis on the represented form whose inherent genius lies neither in the intention of the artists nor in the subject of the work or allegory, but, rather, between the two. It is the genius of the transition and transformation for the purpose of instituting a realm of supreme delights. This occurs in a light, swift, and powerful spirit capable of creating an entire morphology of change, a demon of discovery and invention that conjures up alchemical images. Artists and viewers find themselves united in the aesthetic rapture that presents nature and transforms it, on a path to perfection, as well as its opposite, in a harmony and a breakdown of light and contours. The analogy, the instrument of a 'monstrous' hermeneutics, prevails here with its very rich array of images. The analogy also confronts myth, for example, that of Isis, because such a quest is similar to an 'aberration' as Baltrušaitis himself affirms: the quest gives birth to a legend of forms and is borne out by the optical distortion known as 'anamorphosis.' We, therefore, travel through different fields of knowledge and Egyptian theogonies toward another point of perspectives falsified by the attempt to unveil metaphysical truths, which are connected to the world of alchemy and esotericism.

The cluster of wonders that Baltrušaitis offers us is the product of a light, airy, but provocative speculation; he paints the other side of the sky, the other side of beauty. Caillois recalls Baltrušaitis' extravagant adventure that is his study of the symbol. Citing *Réveils et prodiges le gothique fantastique* (1960), he underscores the fact that in examining, for instance, the image of the Apocalypse, Baltrušaitis does so by removing the image from the Biblical text. He treats the image in the context of a magical transition from the Cologne Bible edited by Heinrich Quentel (1498) to the 17th-century frescoes on Mt Athos, passing through Dürer (1498) to the canvasses of Jean Duvet (1561). In doing so, according to Caillois, Baltrušaitis wanted to offer a solitary and exhilarating *rêverie* of the process of translating one art form into another, a space full of fascinating ideas, a movement consisting of magical exchanges between literature and painting, and between word and image. The meaning of the text, thus, changes through its iconographical translation, which involves a variety of aesthetic motifs. This confirms the idea previously mentioned regarding the creative flight as the epitome of a 'marvelous system of forms.'

Baltrušaitis distinguished himself in the history of European culture for having proposed very innovative methods, interpretations, and hypotheses. His work builds on the complex network of threads that link together Western knowledge, Oriental symbolism, and a rich assortment of interesting, exotic elements. André Breton, Jacques Lacan, and others have expressed appreciation for his work, but his fame comes from the fact that he produced an original study of the spheres of iconology, stylistic analysis, and philology of art in a continuum between the artistic culture of Europe and that of Asia. Like Erwin Panofsky, Marius Schneider, Aby Warburg, and Edgar Wind, he appears to be a very important figure in aesthetics and in the theory of European artistic culture. The theory of art forms proposed by Baltrušaitis is expressed in terms of the 'morphological model.'

From a majestic and enchanted scenario emerges 'the truth of fables and fantasies,' a very special truth, which corresponds to various types of representation: the beast within mankind, picture stones, Gothic forests, and picturesque *trompe l'oeil* gardens: an *alethea* (verity) of metamorphoses and a secret biology of the cosmos. This is so because the human being, the limits of whose intelligence we want to describe, is himself or herself already a wonder, a creature without precedent. Sophocles has his chorus say: "Wonders are many, and none is more wonderful than man" (*Antigone* 2. vv. 332–33). The human mind is the workshop that produces such precious stones. According to Baltrušaitis, legends which followed each other naturally in the oral tradition subsequently became the subject of speculation and science as philosophers, scholars, and artists were swept up by interest in the oddities contained in those legends. The absolute power of the imagination and its prodigious effect reveal themselves in periods of transition, between art and science. Humans have animal features, and natural science museums catalogue minerals that reveal ruins and living worlds; cathedrals rise like giant trees and gardens are overgrown by vegetation from distant epochs and lands, as though they were ancient quotations from a rare text. It is a display of learning and mythology. In general, we can say that we find here the miracle of transformation that assimilates the Druidic forests and Gothic cathedrals, the pyramids of Egypt and dreams of eternity and wisdom. A universal and dramatic phantasmagoria is thus evoked.

The pleasure of so-called 'optical aberrations' operates both in the sense of a bewilderment or a deviation of the mind and in the sense of 'another' reality relative to the appearances to which the aberrations refer. On the basis of texts and cases that can seem marginal, Baltrušaitis uncovers the structure of human civilization. Along these lines we find that aberrations too contain metaphysical truths because, as Wilde said: "metaphysical truths are the truths of masks" (*The Truth of Masks*). Truth can be grasped through the de-

vices of astuteness and falsehood. We need only think of perspective, which Baltrušaitis considers to be an artifice, while it is commonly deemed to be a factor in the production of realism, in the form of a scientific organization of space. We can also think, however, of the history of representations, like the Kuntskammer collection of curiosities and wonders and like an intellectual game, through which human history is presented. And this history is an enormous and invaluable illusion-making machine. In the 1700s and 1800s, forms fold in on themselves, thereby reaffirming the autonomy of aesthetic feeling. Form no longer appears to be the science of reality, but an instrument for the production of hallucinations. And it does so by virtue of that fragment and irregular evolution to which we have referred in the context of metamorphosis.

The passage from Psalm 115 (v. 11) reads as follows: "Omnis homo mendax" ("All men are liars"). Falsehood is in the world and in us. It has always been an aspect of knowledge and know-how. It is a sign of ingenuity, as Harold Weinrich claimed. All the arts conceal a secret, which is linked to truth, in one way, and to falsehood, in another. As poetry and literature are bearers of falsehood, so too is visual and plastic art. In the same way that words can seem to be imaginary, so can the elements of an object that is seen. In the broad spectrum of profound themes and motifs, from the charm of Narcissus to the communication of angelic truths or diabolical falsehoods, the mirror has the capacity both to reflect truth and to distort it. The mirror creates a whole host of rare and prohibited pleasures related to mystification and deviation. The laws of optics and perspective are distorted in the intermediate zone between reality and deception. Here, once more, we have the issue of the ambiguity and illusionism of the 'spellbound' places of Jan Van Eyck, Hans Memling, Quentin Metsys, and Diego Velásquez. In addition, the mirror stands out as an enchanted instrument that activates something absolute; it is a consuming *mise en abîme* in which Marcel Schwob, Stefan George, André Gide, Hugo von Hofmannsthal, Rainer Maria Rilke, Jean Cocteau, and others have noted a profound sense and meaning. Georges Rodenbach (*Le Mirroir du ciel*) warns us that the path of the mirror leads to madness; the mirror steals a person's image and returns only the body.

All these 'monstrous graces' revolve around an apt statement made by Cornelius Agrippa, which Baltrušaitis uses as a sort of esergue for his study on anamorphosis: "There is nothing more dangerous than tampering with reason." But how wonderful it can be to do so, we might add. The seductive power of the books of our 'affected philosopher' is similar to that of the surprise of the iconisms and wonders of Athanasius Kircher, who was a master par excellence of omnivorous erudition that spans Epyptology, optics, natural and ceremonial magic, the hermetic and cabalistic traditions, astrology, mu-

sic, etc. In Baltrušaitis, too, we find the buds of the gems of the *ars magnetica* (the art of magnetism), which is a blend of curiosities and forms of knowledge connected to each other by analogy. These are the last gleams of the *Musurgia universalis* and the marvel machines. Along with the delirium of truth and reason, what dominates is a very special art of memory at the core of which we find the fire of an 'enlightenment of falsehood.' This is because extraordinary things contain the greatness of humanity, constituting a catalogue of goods turned upside down; praise of the marvelous is, in reality, praise of *vanitas*. Baltrušaitis rejects the light of reason in favor of a doctrine of illusion. Behind the wonders of contrived reality, there is, however, a discourse on the purpose of existence and the emptiness of life. The pursuit of liberty and *eudaimonia* (happiness) as a description of a different story of mankind is actually a meditation on death.

How, then, do we arrive at a morphological and analogical vision? It is the cult of excess that leads to this representation of *vanitas* paradoxically via a perversion of metaphysics. The emptiness and the ephemeral nature of earthly things come out of a secret apologia for aesthetic taste. Neither the aspiration to truth, nor to the reassuring aura of Venus, nor the Christian hope in salvation prevails here.

21.

The Mourning of Art in the Modern Age

After Canova and the poetics of Romanticism, we witness in the 1800s the decline of the topic of grace resulting in a legacy of stereotypes and conventions. The idea of the death of art and the notion of the avant-garde upset the system of the Fine Arts as did the industrial revolution and the techniques of reproduction; we have the start of the 'anti-graceful' of Futurism. The myth of inspiration is exhausted; in 1909, F.T. Marinetti issues a 'challenge to the stars'; Giovanni Papini calls for 'necessary massacres'; Umberto Boccioni encourages us to "destroy and trample even the things that have become dear to us by force of habit." The 1900s constructs a climate of violent revolt on the ruins of grace. Different aesthetic motifs prevail in this century, including shock, provocation, the new, kitsch, and an endless succession of isms. The charm of emotion comes to an end; the aura of sensibility disappears as new myths pertaining to speed and reproducibility emerge.

Twentieth-century taste, however, reaches the saturation point and it too shows signs of exhaustion, as though after a serious and sudden illness; its love of extreme and contradictory gestures is destined to come to a quick end. Thus, after one hundred years, we can rethink the parabola of grace and the loss of the enchantment of seeing and feeling. We can do this by reinterpreting the final chapter of its history with the power of the words of Eugène Delacroix when, in his diary (28 February, 1851) he paints a masterful portrait of Chopin, writing that, as in antiquity, the gods belong to few humans; only grace allows us to see them as though these heavenly gazes could enter the void between things and deities, peering deeply into existence in search of essence. It is precisely this space that is freely created between the sky and the earth, between human figures and objects, providing light for the art of the future.

In a certain sense, it is a backward journey and we know that journeys into the past are illusory and impossible. From these words, however, we can at least extract the power of memory, an invitation to rethink art and history. This is our starting point, because no writer or architect can say that he or she has forgotten those who came before. Thus, in tradition we see continuous passages: one poem or painting recalls another; there is no invention that is not the result of a preceding invention. There is a thread of continuity that restores to us the dignity of being heirs and guardians. Every celebration, spectacle, and ceremony provokes a memory; human beings live attempting to give a universal meaning to the past, which develops in the mind in a process of continual transformation. In this perspective, we do not sacrifice con-

templation, knowing all the while that there are no absolutely new ideas, because there is a myth of origins. As Jean de La Bruyère says in the opening of the *Caractères*, "Everything has already been said and we are more than seven thousand years too late."

We may be naturally inclined toward an idealized vision of the past, which is both a danger and a magical illusion. Schiller imagined the Greek world in a dream of memory dense with emotion: "Where are you, beautiful, serene world? / Come back to us, enchanted youth of nature!" (1911, p. 17). The wonder has come to an end. Now we inhabit the world in mourning because the gods have vanished. The grace that was once everywhere, like radiance that turned objects and events into a miracle of space, has dissolved in time. In that epoch, indeed, "nothing was sacred except beauty, / and god did not reject any joy. / The Camenae goddesses blushed, but the Graces reigned" (Ibid. p. 15).

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