

WHEN THE NEREID BECAME MERMAID

Arnold Böcklin's Paradigm Shift

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ABSTRACT: Arnold Böcklin's untraditional depiction of the Nereid as mermaid merges two strands that classical representations of the sea creature endeavoured to keep separate and that Roman iconography yielded to: the Nereid as idealised, anthropomorphic representative of the Olympian order in the treacherous realm that is the monster-breeding sea, and the erotically charged object of male attention. His intention, in his own words, was to fuse figure with setting and atmosphere, such that the Nereid was no longer simply a figure occupying the pictorial space, but embodied in her sensual shape and expression the drawing power of the sea, as well as the vertiginous suggestion of its abysmal depths. Böcklin concludes that the Nereid's fusion with her environment leads logically to her being conceived as a mermaid, with fishtail. The sea is now no longer, as was the case in ancient iconography, a medium where the Nereid takes gentle rides on the back of always contrasting sea creatures, without ever seeming to merge with, or be affected psychologically by, their disturbing *otherness*, their *difference* from her.

KEYWORDS: Mermaid, Nereid, Triton, Böcklin, Olympian, Rock

For Freud the unheimlich is only "outside the house" (the house of the self, the house of culture, the house of the cosmos) insofar as it is hidden within the house. It is a revelation not of the wholly other but of a repressed otherness within the self. The monster, as personification of the unheimlich, stands for that which has broken out of the subterranean basement or the locked closet where it has been banished from consciousness. (Beal, 2002: 8)

False Homogeneity

The Nereids are goddesses, who, by and large, occupy a relatively minor place in the Greek pantheon. They are often thought of as a collective, a group, traditionally of fifty sisters.¹ But within this corporate body, four names stand out: Thetis, mother of Achilles; Amphitrite, wife of the sea-god Poseidon; Psamathe, who created and sent a giant wolf to avenge the death of her son, the 'Seal'; and Galatea, who charmed the savage and recalcitrant Cyclops Polyphemus. In many ways, the story of the classical Nereid is this tension between the collective, corporate identity that is largely conforming and reinforcing of the Olympian

¹ Unsurprisingly, their various names connote characteristics of water (Fischer 1934: 2); less evidently, they can also relate to a number of social and civic virtues (Picard, 1938: 136; McNerney, 2004).

order, and the individual Nereid who exhibits the power to challenge and threaten that order.

These sisters have their home in the sea. Their father's ancient pedigree (Nereus is the 'Old Man of the Sea') anchors their identity within this watery world that, for the ancient Greeks, was also a prime medium for producing strange, hybrid creatures found only there. Hippocamps (Figure 1) and mermen (Figure 2), sea-monsters featured in a wide spectrum of shapes (Figure 3), or very commonly, dolphins (Figure 4), are the Nereids' routine companions and choice mode of transportation. The Nereids play with them, use them as easy ride, and frolic with them as a matter of course (see Muth, 2000). And yet, in contrast to their fishtailed, lobster-clawed, and, more broadly, hybrid playmates, the Nereids themselves remain staunchly anthropomorphic, their legs consistently (persistently, you might even say) human-like, their skin ever smooth and free of scales — their whole form an ode to anthropomorphism and of its resilience in a matrix known for its wild and unfettered experimenting with hybrid shapes.²

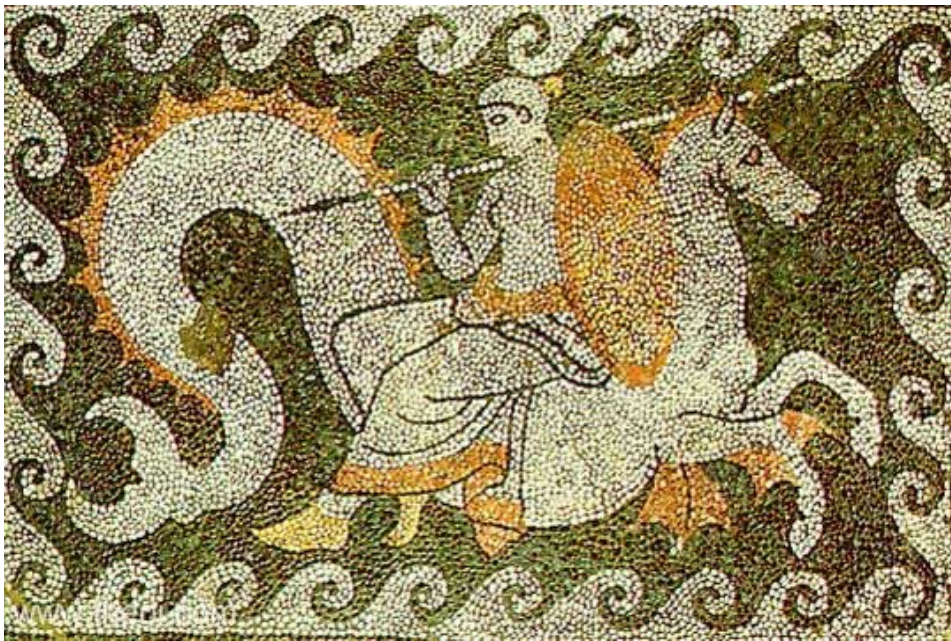


Figure 1 – Greek Pebble Mosaic, *ca.* mid-4th Century BCE (House of the Mosaics, Dining room, *in situ*, Eretria).

² Neither Judith Barringer's monograph on the Nereids (1995) nor Laura Slatkin's focused study of Thetis (1991) draws attention to the Nereids' lack of fishtail, particularly as pertains to an understanding of their ontology.



Figure 2 – Roman Sarcophagus, Marble, 3rd Century BCE (Museo Lapidario Maffeiano, Verona) showing a clear lineage to earlier Grecian models.



Figure 3 – Relief from Domitius Ahenobarbus Altar, Marble, 2nd Century BCE (Glyptothek, Munich).



Figure 4 –Red Figure Plate from the Greek settlement of Apia, c330-315 BCE (State Hermitage Museum, Saint Petersburg).

Of the inhabitants of the sea, only Poseidon-Neptune, who married Amphitrite, one of their kind, displays a similar imperviousness to the influence of the sea. One of the characteristics of Zeus' Olympian order, of which his brother in the sea partakes, is an undeviating anthropomorphism. The Nereids, too, would seem to lend support to this Olympian vision. This fact is all the more striking in that their father, Nereus, was not himself subject to the strict constraints of anthropomorphism that informed the lasting iconography of his fifty daughters: thus, although none of the earliest Greek literary sources describes Nereus as fishtailed, visual artists conceived him as at times fully human, and at others equipped with a tail.³ Some of this fluctuation may originate in a conflation or confusion with Triton, whom visual artists consistently depicted as fishtailed. These two examples, Nereus and Triton, one, the father of the anthropomorphic Nereids, the other, son of the anthropomorphic Poseidon and Nereid Amphitrite, give a relative sense of the unique status and uniquely fixed

³ In a detailed study of Nereus' changing iconography on Athenian vases of the 6th Century, Ruth Glynn (1981) shows a shift from representing him with a fishtail to depicting him as fully human.

representation of the Nereids: unlike these other two prominent figures of the sea, the fifty sisters have been consistently confined to bearing only and exclusively human legs.

The contrast between the “Olympian/anthropomorphic/civilised” ideal with its opposite, hybrid sea creatures, offers a heuristic tool that is key for understanding the reception of the Nereid figure in the work of the Swiss painter, Arnold Böcklin, whose artistic approach has some affinities with the Symbolist movement. Born in Basel in 1827, Böcklin studied painting at the Düsseldorf Academy. His unique style, however, did not truly develop until he spent time in Rome. Under the influence of the ruins of the classical past and of the sunnier climes, Böcklin’s palette took on a vividness that could be interpreted as shocking even today. At the same time, figures from Greek myth began to populate his canvases. But these were not the grand figures of the Olympian pantheon, nor the heroes of epic narrative. Böcklin’s sourcing at the fount of classical myth was motivated by a curiosity for characters better described as peripheral, or secondary: Pan, Centaurs, and, as we shall see, residents of the sea.

While it cannot be asserted that he is the first to have imagined the Nereid visually as fishtailed,⁴ his conclusion that herein lies her essence is the result of a sustained effort of reflection, of a step-by-step thought process. Historically, the Nereid’s close pairing with Triton occasionally led to her being blended, and confused with, the figure of the ‘Tritoness’. The latter, whose name is not based on ancient terminology and is strictly a term coined by scholars, is not a character of myth; her origin and chief function is exclusively visual, providing as she does a symmetrical balance to the male Triton, as, for instance, in a pair of gold armbands dating from the Hellenistic period (Figure 5). As we will explore here, Böcklin’s vision of the Nereid is part of a prolonged study rather than the product chiefly of free associations.

Through an Emotional Looking Glass

Before we can appreciate Böcklin’s treatment of the Nereid and his eventual decision to equip her with a fishtail, it is useful to keep in mind Böcklin’s contemporary reputation and the subsequent reception of his work, which can be gauged from this quote excerpted from a recent assessment of the painter’s impact then and now:

Had a nationwide poll been taken in 1900, it is highly likely that Arnold Böcklin would have been named the preeminent German painter of the fin de siècle. Today, Böcklin is hardly a name to conjure with. Few museum-goers (especially outside Switzerland and Germany) have seen his work; art historians ignore him; textbooks have trouble characterizing him and explaining both the origins of his style and the effects of his work on other artists. (Marchand, 2004: 129)

⁴ For instance, a 16th Century engraving believed to be a copy of a Jacopo de’ Barbari original (and currently housed in the British Museum) shows Triton (unusually bearded in what harks back to a scene of the *thiasos* [procession in honour of Dionysus]) and a Nereid embracing as they often do in classical iconography, but the Nereid features a prominently scaly lower half. One may also point to a marble bas-relief dating to 1783 by the French sculptor, Louis-Simon Boizot, that features a fishtailed female companion to Triton bringing an offering to a personified Friendship. Both examples contravene antiquity’s persistent representation of the Nereid as fully anthropomorphic and dependent on a sea creature for locomotion; nor is either the outcome of a studied exploration of the Nereid’s relation to Triton and of the context of their pairing.



Figure 5 – Pair of gold armbands, 2nd Century CE (Metropolitan Museum, New York City).

Böcklin's appeal, at least to his contemporaries, lay in his dissatisfaction with the accepted ways in which classical antiquity had been depicted and perpetuated in paintings. In 'Nessus and Deianeira', for instance, the Centaur, who is already by tradition a symbol of disorder, is brought here to a level of grotesque uncommon before Böcklin.⁵ The painter built his reputation as well upon a fresh, some might say garish, use of colour. But thematically, his innovative, if often unsettling, approach to antiquity can be seen especially in his depiction of hybrids and sea-creatures. Characteristic of this approach is his excising the documentary and archaeological, and his focus instead on *mood*.⁶ His middle class audience showed

⁵ Cf. Russo and Casillo, "Mystery, melancholy, the grotesque, sacral Dionysian joy — together with an uncanny dread that results from mixing these themes—are the dominant emotional keys in his finest works" (2011: 277).

⁶ Marchand summarises it well: "In the absence of historicizing details, his romantic staging of moods — not actions — turned the symbolism inward. Accordingly, the content of images became quite clearly psychological; viewers were not referred to any particular stories, but rather were invited to think about male/female relations (*Triton and Nereid*)" (2004: 277).

particular enthusiasm for his rendering the classical past through a psychological lens rather than one bound by the literary and *Museumkultur*: “Böcklin’s Gymnasium-educated fans of the fin de siècle lauded the painter precisely for breaking away from the stifling culture of the museum and making antiquity relevant by investing it with new emotional appeal” (Marchand, 2004: 135).

In his exploration of the Nereid he appears at first to be bound by her traditional (or, to be more precise), Late Classical, pairing with Triton (Figure 6).⁷ This pair was the subject of a series of paintings that will constitute the core of this article. Behind Böcklin’s persistent combination of Nereid with Triton lies an increasingly distinct motivation to reveal *asymmetry* in this female-male tableau. And this drive to intensify the Nereid’s pictorial and ontological dominance vis-à-vis Triton proceeds together with the painter’s desire to align the Nereid more closely with her medium, to fuse her with the place of her birth and the place where she resides. Ultimately, this tendency will culminate in the loss of her two human legs, and to her acquiring a fishtail in their place. In his own words, Böcklin’s aim was to fuse figure with ground, to meld, that is, the Nereid so completely with her native habitat, that one would naturally evoke the other (1910: 276) and become semantic mirrors reflecting meaning both ways — signifier and signified each.

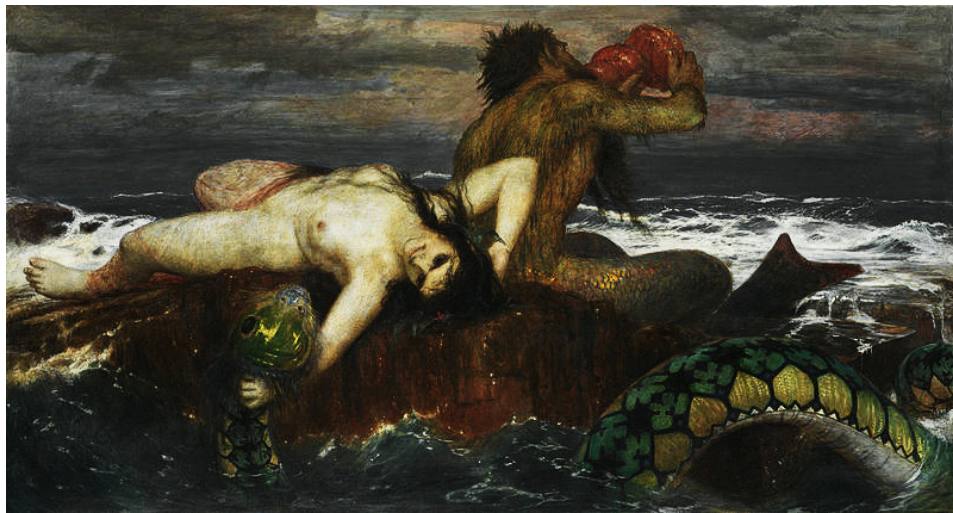


Figure 6 – Böcklin’s ‘Triton und Nereide’ (1873-4) (Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen, Munich).

Böcklin’s portrait of the Nereids is unsettling for it lays bare the paradoxical strands that made up the core of these sea creatures from their earliest instantiations in Hesiod and Homer. These strands might seem contradictory if examined at their surface: While their pleasing anthropomorphism anchors the Olympian ideal in the midst of the monster-breeding cauldron that is the sea, their tendencies to evoke *eros*, whether individually, through the prominent example of Thetis, or collectively, through their joyous abandon in the marine *thiasos* (Figure 7), a form of procession marked by cheer and loosened social

⁷ On this pairing, see Muth (2000).

rules, where their iconography often merges with that of Aphrodite and Venus,⁸ make the archetype they conjure up difficult to control.⁹



Figure 7 – Roman sarcophagus with marine *thiasos* and bust of deceased in an oval medallion, Marble, c 3rd Century BCE (Camposanto Monumentale, Pisa).

Aside from his choice to treat the Nereid with her classical male companion, Triton, another invariable in his reimagining her, which comes to be his signature rendition, is her languid pose on top of a rock washed over by the sea. Thus, Böcklin's first level of innovation is to divest Triton of his motile usefulness for the Nereid: he no longer appears with her because he provides her with a means of locomotion. Triton appears both as a pictorial reflex — across a range of media and for centuries, he had served as her visual companion — and as a foil for a new incarnation of the Nereid, one who is no longer dependent/leaning upon another sea creature, but one who has found a new permanent home on a rock, where she spreads out her languid frame and lavishly displays her contentment, showing deep satisfaction with the present moment. The rock becomes her anchor and a platform where she comes into her own, even as her companion, Triton, becomes increasingly less relevant to her, to her existence.

One striking element in Böcklin's first painting of the pair together (Figure 6), particularly as viewed against the traditional way that the Nereid and Triton had been rendered all throughout antiquity, is how the two are facing opposite directions, each involved and engaged in an activity that excludes the other: While he plays with his customary conch, her hand menacingly grasps at the neck of a thick sea-snake of giant proportions. Here, although she still has two legs, her whole body is clearly exposed to the action of a sea in full motion, with its foaming spray, and networks of seaweed filaments splayed over her body as over the rock that is here her habitat.

Böcklin's radically new presentation of the Nereid lies in his rematerialisation of the sea, in his giving back a sense of place and concreteness to the idea of the sea that had always been her home, but that had never been part of her ontological essence. The Nereid had always been a native and inhabitant of the sea without ever embodying anything perceptibly of it.

⁸ Our most extensive form of evidence for the marine *thiasos*, which is catalogued in Rumpf (1969), comes from Roman sarcophagi and mosaics from all parts of the Roman world.

⁹ A potentially fruitful angle from which to explore Böcklin's determined reimagining of the Nereid is that his interest in painting her, along with other relatively marginal (in all senses of the word) figures, including Centaurs, occurred after he nearly died in 1858 from typhus and grief caused by the death of his son, Robert.

In this new Nereid, the viewer can almost smell the sea, can feel the splash of the foaming spray, feel the coldness of the wet element, and faces here for the first time, the sense of dread and awe that being far out at sea must truly convey. Compare this painting with, for instance, her characteristic depiction on bas-reliefs of Roman sarcophagi, where the Nereid sits on Triton, navigates the sea on his tail, but without being affected by her environment (Figure 8). In his own words, Böcklin's intention was to deliberately fuse the marine creature with her marine environment (Böcklin, 1910: 276).



Figure 8 – Roman Sarcophagus, Marble, 3rd Century CE (Museo Lapidario Maffeiano, Verona)

Despite these radical points of innovation, Böcklin's representation of the Nereid here still follows the tradition that conceives her with two legs. This holds true again two years later, in a composition that maintains the sense of psychological (metaphysical?) distance between the Nereid and Triton (Figure 9). Here, although Triton is now turned to face the Nereid, his head and torso even twisted as if to address her more fully, the direction of his eyes, upwards and away from her, make their physical proximity that much more discomforting and strained. While she takes on a Venus-like, openly sexualised pose, the detachment of his gaze brings a disturbing tension to the scene, an uneasiness. The two are together yet very much separate. Here again, we see Böcklin's interest in positioning the Nereid on a rock, in depicting her sprawling over it as if it was her natural habitat, her personal perch. And together with the recurring motif of the rock is the carefree abandon of her pose. Dipping one hand in the water, she nonchalantly rests the other over her forehead in an attitude of seeming complete relaxation, plenitude, as if her existence consisted entirely in dallying on her rock, with nowhere to go to, and nothing else to attend to.



Figure 9 – Böcklin's 'Triton und Nereide' (1875) (formerly in the Nationalgalerie, Berlin; lost since 1945).

Following this, Böcklin appears at first to be returning to the classical motif of the Nereid riding Triton and using him as a mode of transportation (Figure 10). Most noticeable, however, are the skies, which have here turned ink-dark. The scene seems to be taking place as if in the moment right before a storm. Even Triton looks in danger of being toppled over. In his face alone, anxiety and uneasiness reflect the precariousness of their situation, making the presence of Cupid shooting his arrow in their direction all that much more incongruous, out of place.

In his next treatment, which we have in the form of a sketch (Figure 11), Böcklin returns to his former ideas, with the Nereid now stroking the snake, instead of seeking to choke it, and Triton facing her from above, leaning over a slightly raised rock. As in the previous paintings, Triton's gaze and attention are drawn away from the Nereid; although turned in her direction, he is not engaged with her. It is not possible from this painting and its previous model alone to determine, or guess accurately, what the reason might be. Only with a later painting will the answer impose itself. More certain is his expression of slight distress and uneasiness.



Figure 10 – Böcklin's 'Triton und Nereide' (1875) (in a private collection since 1953)



Figure 11 – Böcklin's 'Triton und Nereide' (1877) Tempera on paper mounted on wood (Museum Oskar Reinhart, Winterthur).

The Melding of Figure and Ground

Suddenly, with the next painting (Figure 12), things seem to have taken a dramatic turn. All that is left of it is a black and white photograph, as the original is now lost (it is assumed to have been stolen). Titled 'Tritonenfamilie', the painting shows a portly Triton lifting a child, whom he appears to have fathered with the Nereid, now corpulent, and most importantly, featuring legs that have already partially turned into fishtails. This imagery borrows from the classical Triton who was often portrayed with a double tail. This is not simply, as has been suggested, a scene designed to evoke chiefly quotidian life and make Triton and his family more relatable;¹⁰ more noteworthy is that it is an expansion, development of the classical Nereid's core essence: the *eros* that structures her mythography and the stories attached to her becomes fully expressed to its natural extension — with her being a wife and mother fully comfortable with her sexuality and freely flaunting it.



Figure 12 – Böcklin's 'Tritonenfamilie', 1880 (missing since 1945)

It is as if the moment that the Nereid displays her fertility, her femaleness, the ability to bear children and give birth, all conceits propping her figure dissolve, and she is free to express her connection to the sea. As she becomes mother and wife, so she grows the fishtail that is her natural birthright as resident of the sea. It is not surprising that the portrayal of the Nereid and presumed husband, Triton, has here the characteristic grotesque tone and mood that was Böcklin's signature style in rendering antiquity. As the painter calibrates his painting more closely to his vision of antiquity, colours, poses turn jolting to eyes

¹⁰ Cf. Andree (1977: 425) who interprets this vignette as simply marking Böcklin's evolving interest in "family anecdotes"

accustomed to a different, more decorous view of the Greek and Roman world. Here, the backdrop, too, reflects the heightened and dramatic connection with the sea and its primal energy: the brooding skies weave seamlessly with the crashing waves, both overwhelming, deafening the senses.

Seven years later, this family harmony reveals to be short-lived, as the Nereid in 'Meeresstille' (Figure 13) lies atop her wonted rock *by herself*, while Triton's body lies submerged in the water, his haggard face smeared with the grimace of death. The unsettling asymmetry of the Nereid above, rising languorously on her elbow, and Triton drowning below, his tail flickering weakly, shapes the composition of the painting. Here, the Nereid has become fully half-fish, what today would be classified as a mermaid. The radical choice to depict the Nereid with a fishtail — against the grain of her consistent iconography from the Greeks to the Romans, through Renaissance painters and up to Böcklin's own earlier paintings — as if she were a mermaid, is like a finalising statement about the natural merging of the sea-born and sea-dwelling maiden with her native habitat. The composition reveals precisely what her true nature is.



Figure 13 – Böcklin's 'Meeresstille' (1887) (Kunstmuseum, Bern).

This painting pointedly captures the *logical* development of the Classical Nereid. Her pictorial dominance (over Triton) reflects the potency that had always been part of her essence. The similarity in their respective tails, their echoing iridescence not only link them pictorially, they heighten the contrast between the two sea creatures: one is indisputably commanding (of our gaze and of the situation); the other, yielding, submits and suffers the effects of a dominion to which he is no match.¹¹ Here again, the landscape is not external to

¹¹ Poetter (1980: 51) reads the new configuration as an allegory of the inability of the artist (standing here as Triton) to face, relate to, be at one with, his source of inspiration, instantiated here by the life-filled, vibrant Nereid.

the Nereid, but an expression of her internal constitution.¹² The Nereid is here poised to take over her surroundings, as she has already begun to overwhelm the flaccid and leaden Triton, and deprive him, we may surmise, of life. This *false* calm marks what is merely the beginning of her deadly profusion over her world, starting with her traditional companion, and historically her mount, her means to move about in her medium. What had always been an oddity — that a creature of the sea should need external help to travel within her native habitat — is now fully done away with. The Nereid, we are now told in no uncertain terms, does not *need* external props and transport, nor does she need companionship. Her self-sufficiency is here complete, as she has in a way become the embodiment of the sea itself, lying on her rock with the same self-assurance as the rock itself. Like it, she needs no justification for being and occupies her space in the sea with the poise that comes only with the utter indifference to external factors, as if some timeless entity.¹³

Rock My World

Here, it may be apposite to quote a seminal essay in the burgeoning field of New Materialism. In it, Jerome Cohen, one of the creative pioneers of Ecocriticism, a sub-branch, reflects on the timelessness of stone:

If stone could speak, what would it say about us? Stone would call you transient, sporadic. The mayflies' analogy is apt. Stone was here from near the beginning, when the restless gases of the earth decided they did not want to spend their days in swirled disarray, in couplings without lasting comminglings. They thickened into liquids, congealed to fashion solid forms.
(2010: 57)

The Nereid's timelessness here, however, does not lie in her having literally lived since time immemorial; the Nereid seems timeless because the essence of female *eros* that she embodies is *perceived* to be deathless, without beginning or end. This idea can be traced back to some important strands in Greek myth: for instance, the three Gorgons as archetypal sexual predators, two of them immortal, balancing out the seeming vulnerability and mortality of the third Gorgon, lovely/horrid Medusa. The defiance of time and perceived remoteness of *female eros* is found as well in the motif of the Golden Apples, which grow at the edge of the known world, away from time and god-ordained regulations. Kept by the Hesperides sisters and a guardian snake, the Golden Apples are a divine treasure that configure *female eros* as an object of desire, precious and out of reach for mortals, located in an inaccessible garden. These Apples were a gift to Hera, as goddess of marriage, on the night of her wedding to Zeus. One of these was Paris' gift to Helen (via Aphrodite; his ill-advised choice in the fateful 'Judgment') in recognition of her peerless beauty, which earned her eternal life on the Isle of the Blessed. Böcklin's Nereid in 'Meeresstille' thus draws from an ancient Greek well, from a network of mythical motifs that depict *female eros* as a force transcending time and place.

The fishtailed creature of 'Meeresstille', lounging on her marine rock, gazing menacingly (at us, at anyone), and her fingers poised to grasp at air, rock, or whatever else, puts on display

¹² Andree does well to interpret this moment as silence before the storm (1977: 474).

¹³ Linnebach notes that the image of the sea creature perched on a rock as if on an island is unparalleled in Böcklin's oeuvre (1997: 199).

and combines the potency of the rock-dwelling Scylla and of the classical Nereids.¹⁴ It is as if these two seemingly different creatures — one, the symbol of the untamed maiden; the others, sisters unified at some level by some unspoken edict to represent and enforce conformity— are here merged into one. Like Scylla snatching hapless sailors who will never be seen again, so Böcklin's Nereid in 'Meeresstille' seems to have sucked the life out of Triton. The moment of his demise is all the more ominous as all we see is his already lifeless body, floating limply from a cause that is left for the viewer to surmise. The painting's dynamic force relies on this tension: the almost mocking self-confidence of the Nereid and the enigmatic drowning of her former companion; the rosy fleshiness of the corpulent, fiery-haired mermaid, and the blue deathliness of the male victim that confounds him with the sky above, as if he had receded into the landscape to leave her sole antagonist in the picture frame and in the story silently unfolding.¹⁵

From the first to the last, Böcklin's representation of the Nereid reveals, peels away at the conceit of the Nereid as a safely anthropomorphic inhabitant of the sea. The increasingly menacing aspect of her frame and languorous expressions emerge from the paintings like the snake that is featured in the first. It is as if this snake rises from the depths of the unconscious, at first external to her, her victim, her plaything, only to become merged with her as the Greek symbol of female *eros*.¹⁶ In a study of the painting series, Jochen Poetter (1980: 49) rightly argues that the cold-blooded snake and cool seawater are reflected in the reptilian imperviousness of the Nereid, and make only more suggestive the warmth beneath. The snake that his first Nereid grasps with domineering confidence is like the finally liberated erotic power of the sea nymph, which the Olympian ideal had kept under cap, and which Böcklin's preference for non-Olympian, non-heroic themes released and moved to the fore of his paintings, and of our consciousness.

The title itself, as reflected in the composition and mood of the painting, brings this sea creature close to Homer's Sirens, whose rocky island lies within an eerily dead calm: "But then—the wind fell, straightaway/Dead stillness/ Some god — it seemed — had calmed the swells" (Homer, *Odyssey* 12.168-9). Nor were the classical Sirens mermaids; rather, they were physically featured as birds of prey from the waist down. The ominous approach to their marine outcrop is announced in the flat winds, the oppressive calm and quiet that precede their eruption in the world and life of the doomed sailors. It seems deliberate that the dead calm forms a shocking contrast with the deadly power of the Sirens' songs, the fatal allure of their voice. Their music ruptures the air like a sensory explosion preceded by all their empty promise of bliss and comfort and knowledge. This was the Sirens' trap. The Nereid, by contrast, whether classical or reconceived under Böcklin's brush, does not even offer anything this concrete. The Nereid's *unheimlich* lies in the challenge of being able to point explicitly to what she stands for. The comparison with the Sirens is revealing on another level: like them, Böcklin's Nereid, most especially in 'Meeresstille', lives on a rock. Unlike them, she does not need to hide in a voice (Homer does not give a physical description of

¹⁴ Hopman (2013: 143; 160-172) locates Scylla and Thetis at opposite poles within the framework of the young girl's domestication; Scylla endures as the untamed *parthenos* (virgin), while Thetis, following an arduous and trying pursuit, becomes successfully tamed by Peleus and integrated through marriage.

¹⁵ Cf. Andree (1977: 474) who finds that Triton's submergence under water makes the composition less effective. I would suggest instead that Böcklin, in what is his last pictorial musing on her subject, does away with the conceit that the Nereid is essentially indifferent to her disconcerting companions and environment.

¹⁶ On the symbolism of snakes in ancient Greek literature, see Sancassano (1997).

the Sirens – they can be heard but not seen); she is *all there on her rock*. Compare her further with the other two classical female predators associated with a rock: the fishtailed Scylla, who hides *inside* her sea-bound rock, and the half-snake Echidna, who is confined *under* hers.¹⁷ This comparison makes Böcklin's rendition of the Nereid all the more revealing: neither lurking *inside* nor *under* her rock, this newly freed Nereid nonchalantly lounges *on top* of her marine outcrop. Openly herself, her sprawled body and the abandon of her pose express a newly exploded, newly exposed embodiment of the untameable female *eros*. One might say that this fishtailed Nereid is — for visual artists, at any rate — the natural mythical continuation of the half-snake Echidna and fishtailed Scylla. 'Meeresstille' blends together two constants in Böcklin's oeuvre: the representation of nature and deeply felt emotions. His Nereid tied as she is to her rock is a point of convergence for these interests: she becomes identified with the rock as much as the rock becomes a metaphor for what she is: enduring and indestructible.¹⁸



Figure 14 – 'Meeresidylle' (1887) (Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna).

Böcklin, however, did not simply rest content with the picture of the Nereid as a deadly mermaid. In the same year that he painted 'Meeresstille', he also revisited the Nereid not only as wife, mother, but also as two-legged (Fig. 14). The happy picture of married and family

¹⁷ See Tran (2015).

¹⁸ Cf. Marchand: "The representation of nature was always central for Böcklin, and in images featuring mythological demigods or sacred scenes, the trees, grasses, water, and rocks often seem to absorb more of the painter's (and viewer's) attention than the figures" (2004: 140).

life thus comes at the cost of her fishtail. The blissful matron would seem to be, under his brush, ultimately incompatible (or, uneasily reconcilable) with the fatal mermaid.

Embracing the Fishtail

In some ways, however, it was perhaps already too late. Böcklin's 'Meeresstille' had opened the door to a vision of a fishtailed Nereid, a mermaid whose erotic appeal seemed to demand that she be half-fish. Thus, his admirers, Max Klinger and Giorgio de Chirico, both of whom he influenced artistically (Poetter, 1980), followed the path paved by 'Meeresstille'. Their respective versions (Figures 15 and 16), however, have markedly departed from Böcklin's model: the Nereid is no longer anchored to her rock but floating on the waves like some buoy and reminiscent more of ladies enjoying a summer holiday than of Böcklin's uncanny vision of the menacing mermaid. What Klinger's Nereid and de Chirico's version also have in common with each other (but not with Böcklin's discovery of the Nereid as fishtailed and sinister) is her close connection with Triton and a more equal, balanced partnership with him. These visions do not instil fear or dread. We can appreciate in the works of Böcklin's admiring friends, his insightful development of the classical Nereid to her natural, fullest ontological expression. Splayed on her rock, she fuses the deadliness of the fishtailed Scylla, the half-snake Echidna, and the birds of prey Sirens without needing to hide *in* or *under* her rocky lair. She is fully at home displaying herself as what she is, solid and unyielding as the rock. Like a living embodiment of female *eros* forever perched on her crag, her pedestal.

It is worth remarking that even Klinger, who, like Böcklin, seems to have been part of a group of painters recognising the paradox behind the prevailing belief in man's evolution and his regression into primeval instincts, did not use the figure of the Nereid as far as Böcklin did to illustrate this idea. While Klinger recognised the modern devolution into instincts, chief among which, sexuality,¹⁹ and viewed the sea as a locus of primordial origin and primal sexual instinct;²⁰ his re-interpretation of the Triton-Nereid pair suggests a partial understanding of the art historical, and ultimately, psychological, pairing of these two ancient figures. The complete existential separation of the Nereid-Triton pair evinced in 'Meeresstille' intensifies the notion, explored variously in his several forays on the theme, that the Nereid's connection to the sea lies at the core of who she truly is: she is not merely *of* the sea; her voluptuous and carefree abandon to the splashing waves, sea-bound rock, and sundry hybrids roaming the watery depths, is like a yielding to her true nature. The sea is no longer, as was the case in her earliest representations on ancient Greek vase paintings, all the way to late antique mosaics throughout the Mediterranean world, a medium where she takes gentle rides on the back of always contrasting sea creatures, without ever seeming to merge with or be affected psychologically by their disturbing *otherness*, their *difference* from her. Böcklin, in what is his last (or penultimate, depending on the exact sequence of 'Meeresstille' and 'Meeresidylle') pictorial musing on the subject, does away with the conceit that the Nereid is essentially indifferent to her disconcerting companions and environment. Böcklin's innovation in linking the Classical past with German modernity has also been rightfully

¹⁹ Morton (2014: 13) notes that "Under the influence of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, Klinger appears to have drawn pessimistic conclusions from evolutionary theory: civilized man, beneath the surface, is a product of primeval nature whose behavior is directed by self-serving instincts, the most powerful of which are sexual."

²⁰ The point is made by Morton (2014: 14): "The sea itself, as well as other watery locations, is habitually used by Klinger as the site of sexual temptation and consummation. Association of the sea with Venus, fertility, and sexuality, however, now gained authority through the knowledge that all life originated in water."

reinterpreted as a merging of “memory” with “imagination” (Frank, 2016). To this, I would add that his reinterpretation of classical figures, particularly that of the Nereid, joins surface with depth, conceit with true essence.



Figure 15 – Max Klinger, ‘Triton and Nereid’ (1895) (Villa Romana, Florence).



Figure 16 – Giorgio de Chirico, ‘Triton and Siren’ (1909) (Private collection).

De Chirico's own reworking of the Nereid-Triton pair comes closer to the spirit of Böcklin's reimagining of the relationship between these two figures. Despite switching the name 'Siren' for 'Nereid', de Chirico clearly had Böcklin's Nereid in mind as his model. The seamlessness with which he could operate the change already testifies to the slippery boundary distinguishing these two creatures once Böcklin decisively gave the Nereid a fishtail. In all events, the pairing with Triton leaves no doubt that the Nereid is the original subject of his study, as the Siren has no connection, literary or iconographic, with the merman. What is distinctive in de Chirico's rendering is that, as has been noted by Roger Rothman (2006), Triton's preoccupation with blowing his horn in one direction, and the Nereid's blissful and unconcerned floating on waves, her face and body one image of beatific buoyancy as she stares into the vast heaven, capture some of his predecessor's insights. De Chirico, who himself acknowledges both the familiarity of Böcklin's images and the difficulty in pinpointing the how, why, or where of this recognition,²¹ seems to have absorbed the fundamental contrast and discontinuity that lies at the core of Böcklin's vision.



Figure 17 – Friedrich Ernst Wolfrom (undated) 'Poseidon und Nereiden' (currently under auction).

Beyond these two close admirers, Böcklin's recalibrated image of the Nereid paved the way for confounding her with the image of the mermaid, à la post-medieval Siren,²² and perhaps also for the confusion over what her appearance ought to be. Thus, Friedrich Ernst Wolfrom

²¹ In 1920, de Chirico stated: "Every one of his works gives that sense of surprise and unease that one feels when finding oneself confronted with an unknown person, but one whom one seems to have seen before, without being able to remember the time or the place, or when one enters a strange city for the first time, and finds a square, a street, a house in which one seems to have been already." (Cara [ed] 1971: 139).

²² For the evolution of the ancient Greek Siren from half-bird woman to the fishtailed creature emerging in the Middle Ages, see Holford-Strevens (2006) and Leclercq-Marx (1997).

in his undated 'Poseidon und Nereiden' (Figure 17)²³ depicts them, some with fishtail, and others with human legs. And in 1902, Gaston Bussière's 'Les Néréides' (Figure 18) shows the sisters happily moving in the water on their own, but without a fishtail. This oscillation in her image reflects the double nature of the Nereid as she has always been: *femme* and creature of the sea. But perhaps the choice of one or the other of her aspects is no longer that consequential. Once freed of her classical function as mourner, as conveyor of ships, as conventionally and properly wedded wife and tamed maiden, the Nereid could appear with or without human legs as she became defined chiefly through her liberated *eros*, unyoked and un beholden to any power but her own.



Figure 18 – Gaston Bussière's 'Les Néréides' (1927) (Private collection).

²³ The work was likely painted between 1896, which is when he begins to draw from Greek myth, and 1920, the year of his death.

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