

Alma Feldhandler

Who's the Captain of All These Boys of Death?

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Press release

Archive fever is an irresistible fever to interpret traces, to give them meaning and to prefer one trace over another. Therefore, to prefer to forget is not only to prefer to keep. The archive [...] is not a matter of the past, it's a matter of the future; a matter of love.
Jacques Derrida

For is the Talmud not, above all, the book of exile, being nothing but questions?
Edmond Jabès

Alma Feldhandler's paintings harbour feelings that cannot be named without the risk of collapse. They are filled with wounded creatures, tattered existences and anxious forms that seem to be waiting in the corridors of time. The boy on his bed knows a thing or two about that. Above him, puppets perform a frightening dance, but this doesn't detract from the strange gentleness emanating from his convalescent body. Who's the captain of all these boys of death? Who commands these figures that pass through my body?

In French, the index card or small wooden board used in libraries to mark the place on a shelf where a book belongs while it is being consulted is known as a *fantôme*, a phantom. If the book isn't returned, the phantom stays there, sometimes forever. It is this definition of a phantom that interests me here. I imagine Alma at the Jewish Museum in Berlin, exploring a collection of works, objects, images and traces arranged like a funeral composition. Each of these traces is like the phantom of an absent book. In this sense, the photographs are almost a phantom of a phantom, since they not only represent a bygone past, but also, in the context of the Jewish Museum, bear witness to an attempt to completely erase even the memory of that past.

In this way, Alma Feldhandler collects these 'ultra-phantoms' of sorts – frail creatures signalling that something is missing from the shelves of this strange library, or to be more precise, that everything is missing, although not everything has actually disappeared. However, Alma's approach does not end with this act of collection, but rather finds its point of departure there. I imagine her walking through Berlin, wearing a heavy woollen coat with pockets full of phantoms. Strangely, these phantoms make her feel lighter, even though this lightness is lined with an ancient sadness. Affixed to the walls of her studio, they form a host of missing or lost creatures. The melancholy expressed here is not so much that of a painter succumbing to the ailments of phantoms as she moves from one archive to the next

as it is that of the painted creatures themselves, who have come from afar to become part of our lives and help us transform the world. Alma Feldhandler's paintings do not document this aspiration, but rather re-enact it in their own way. That is why each canvas, each drawing, has the power to transport me to a world where colourful creatures, each going about their own business, conspire to realise the tenderest redemption. When faced with such emotions, how could you not feel completely helpless?

This raises the question of painting. The question of the nature, function and role of painting. Because it seems obvious to me that Alma Feldhandler's paintings and drawings are not simply the transposition of a phantom onto another surface using a different medium. There is something more secretive at play in the lines and colours; something that achieves, I believe, a genuine transmutation of the subjects represented. It is as if – using phantoms as a point of reference – Alma Feldhandler is not trying to rewrite these missing books but to rediscover their texture, their tonality, their unique way of resonating and being world-building worlds. There is something about her that almost resembles a (spiritual) medium, but in a gentle, silent way; she doesn't force anything, doesn't coerce anything, simply lets things happen. This explains why there is something oddly energising about the brilliance of Alma Feldhandler's work: as if painting, by virtue of its distinctive qualities, was able to use these phantoms to reach back to the actual reality of the scenes depicted.

But if I let myself drift off into my daydream, other things appear. I come to realise that the word phantom might not be correct or adequate. That perhaps other creatures, also resembling mediums, are there to remind us that those we believe to be dead are not; that from a quantum perspective, death is nonsense; that the slightest gesture, the slightest word, the slightest sensation exists in an eternal present that is also an eternal past and an eternal future; and that art, in this regard, is perhaps simply a way of honouring this, of practising time travel as obviously as we practise writing, sewing or dancing.

The more I think about this subject, the more the angel motif seems to symbolise this kind of quantum mediumship. Angels are not the intermediaries between humans and gods, because the world cannot be reduced to these entities. Rather, angels are the intermediaries between what is, what has been, what will be and, consequently, what could have been. Their role as intermediaries can be fulfilled in many ways. On the quantum level, temporal planes become entangled and entwined, so that past and future exist in the present, present and past in the future, present and future in the past, and so on. As intermediaries, the angels spread messages through these entangled temporal planes. In Hebrew, the word for angel is identical to that for messenger: *mal'akh*. The word tradition comes from the Latin *traditio, tradere*, from *trans* 'across' and *dare* 'give', and thus means 'to pass on to someone else, to hand over'. Exactly what angels do as messengers. Tradition, like angels, is about passing something on. But every act of passage implies a transformation. Tradition is always a metamorphosis, and angels are always experts in this subject. Mutant, winged creatures, moving in cohorts towards better worlds.

That's why, when I look at these painted figures, I feel a rustle of wings pass beneath my sternum.

It's not surprising that this rustling has already been associated with Jewish studies. 'In every word', maintained Levinas in *Quatre lectures talmudiques*, 'there is a bird with folded wings awaiting the reader's breath.' Study and interpretation allow this bird of meaning to spread its wings, but we still need to be able to jump on its back and soar through the air towards the stars. This is what Alma Feldhandler's work is all about: in each image, creatures wait, wings poised, for the eyes of the viewers, which have become breath, to allow them to take flight.

So, Alma Feldhandler's work begins in the archive and its phantoms, but it doesn't stop there. The painter does not resurrect anything here, but instead relies on lines and colours and all the techniques of pictorial art to reach what she is painting. She allows the artistic medium to fully embrace its role as a spiritual medium, and in so doing communicates, communes, creating shared forms and common time – because yes, all time is common, and we are thus contemporaries of everything that precedes us, of everything that succeeds us, of everything that was, is, will be or could have been. It is an act of faith, no doubt; but isn't that what makes us write, paint and love? Are we not constantly responding to the remonstrances of those who continue to live in other times? Are we not conspiring together to create another history, another world? And in doing this, are we not attempting, on a quantum level, to circumvent the traps of force and violence?

Of course, I'm speaking as a poet, so I inevitably make mistakes. I pronounce the name of the angels because I feel that something in the way they appear and disappear, the way they stay in one place and then move to another, the way they smile and cry, is connected to what moves me when I allow myself to be enthralled by the paintings and drawings of Alma Feldhandler. I'm not talking about vertigo or fascination here. Something else is at play. And this something also touches me when I read Bruno Schulz – whose most famous work, *Cinnamon Shops*, lends its title to one of the paintings presented here – as well as Walter Benjamin and Franz Kafka, who are both part of the family of heterodox Jews that Michael Löwy has made the subject of one of his most penetrating books. It is, I think, this mixture of angelology and Jewish heterodoxy that strikes me about Alma Feldhandler's work, and makes it particularly literary in my eyes, as if her brushstrokes were books and her canvases libraries filled with whispers. And it's true that the writers I've just mentioned resemble the angels who came to mind earlier. So, I look for what it is that unites them. I examine the few photos I can find of them, I re-read their biographies, and each detail seems to confirm my intuitions, but without clarifying anything. They are neither phantoms nor spectres, but creatures uniquely connected to the underbelly and the shadows of the world; creatures who seem obsessed by the prescience of their early demise – and who were absolutely right; hybrids of sorts who, like Odradek, the beast described by Kafka in *The Cares of a Family Man*, resemble a spool of thread as much as a star, the most immediate unreality and the most distant reality.

It is in the nature of angels to be exiled. As intermediary creatures, they are constantly travelling, connecting things across the multiplicity of time. Their exile is the very condition of their infinite actuality: angels always come to us in the present, and it is in this present that they will communicate our messages to those creatures whom we do not know, but who need us as much as we need them.

The archive fever, captured in pictorial form, becomes an operation of love. The sick are phantoms, the phantoms are angels, and the angels, through their messages, teach us to live and to love. Of course, dread persists. The spectre of violence still looms threateningly. Fear is there, lying in wait, ready to pounce. Worry lingers, like the puppets above the boy confined to his bed. But painting can conquer all of that, too. From canvas to canvas, message to message, the world is transformed. I'm reminded of a quote by Benjamin, cited in a text by Adorno that I can no longer find: it is only for those without hope that hope is given. It is this hope, this fragility, that I find in Alma Feldhandler's paintings, in the colourful bodies of these phantoms turned angels.

Messages reach us here from across temporal planes. Ultimately, the bed of the young tuberculosis patient is a spaceship. Here is an angel who has succeeded in his mission. He soars through the darkest of universes to deliver messages that have nothing left to hide. Alma Feldhandler takes care of the rest. She trusts paint because paint knows everything, and this knowledge is a promise of reparation. Yes, we are obliged to the angels; the stories they spread demand that we break the cycle of domination and dismantle the traps of authority, because only love can endure eternity.

Romain Noël