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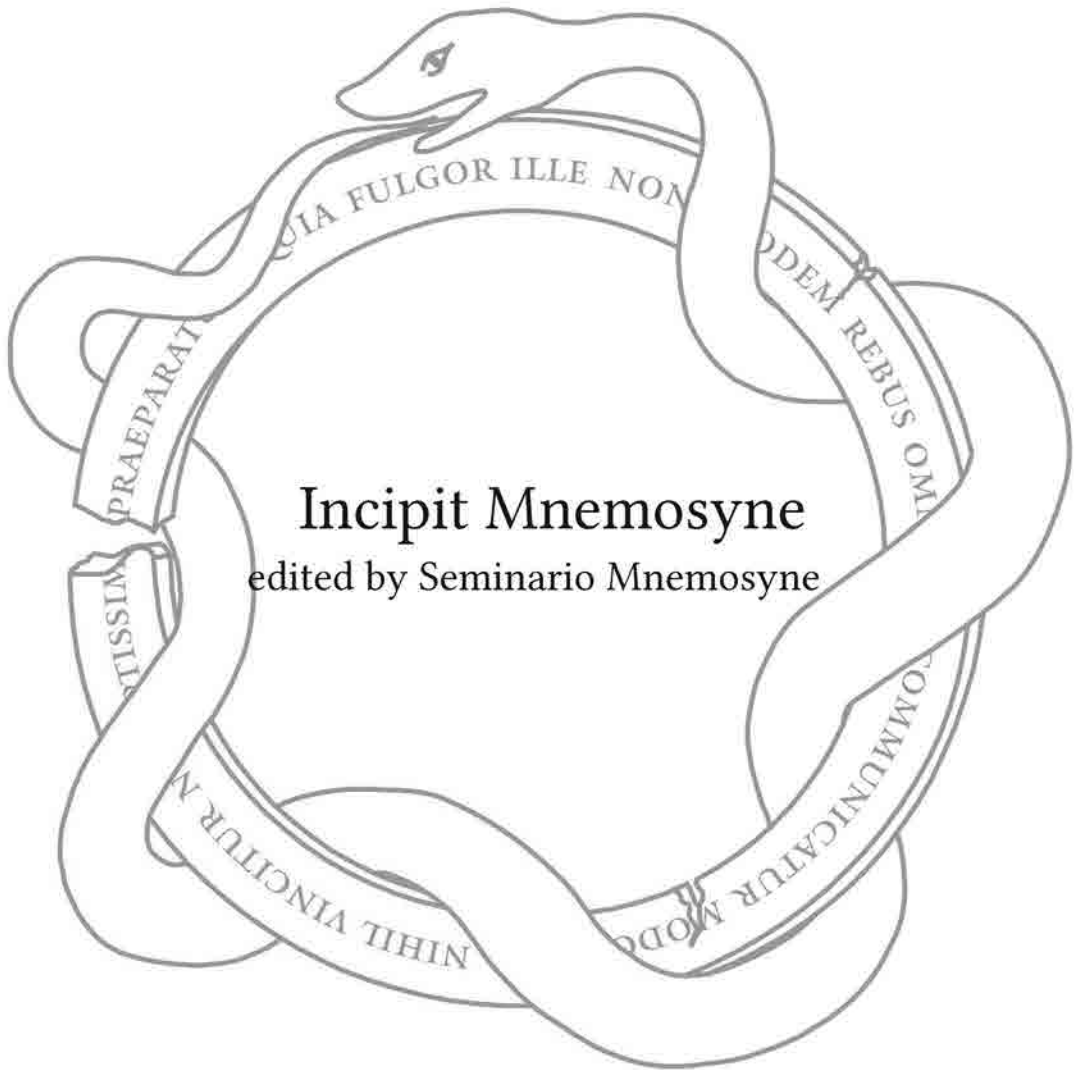
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# The archaic and its double

## Aby Warburg and Anthropology

Alessandro Dal Lago, translated by Elizabeth Thomson

“The philosophers of history regard the past as a contrast to and preliminary stage  
of our own time as the full development.

We shall study the *recurrent, constant* and *typical* as echoing in us  
and intelligible through us”.

Jacob Burckhardt, *Reflections on History*

“The gods exist”

Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Möllendorf, *Der Glaube der Hellenen*

### THE VITALITY AND DECLINE OF MYTH

It can be unsafe to discuss the work of Warburg in a philosophical and anthropological context. His name is, in fact, linked, even in Italy, with a specialised area of art culture, iconography. His own writings do not seem to allow excursions into fields unrelated to historical research. How does one handle their dominant, obsessive theme – the wanderings of certain forms of artistic expression from the classical world to the culture of the Renaissance and the modern era – if one is not directly involved in iconology in the philology of art? Warburg’s essays are impenetrable, packed with references to half-buried or bizarre traditions and forgotten authors. And above all, the problems that are examined in them are specialized: the genealogy of the female figure in the masterpieces of Botticelli, the artistic exchanges between North and South in the Early Renaissance, the identification of some of Ghirlandaio’s characters, the enigmatic astrological symbols in the frescoes in Palazzo Schifanoia in Ferrara, the belief in divination and portents held by Luther and his circle<sup>1</sup>.

Conventions of research inaugurated by Warburg have maintained and amplified these features. With his writings, and especially his self-effacing yet pioneering teaching, iconology has established itself as an autonomous field of knowledge. Generations of students have followed each other, and the brilliant but fragmentary insights of their founder have become treatises. At the same time, the Institute that bears his name is now a temple and a point of reference for the study of cultural history.

As a result of these developments, Warburg has become the focus of a small cultural legend founded on his individuality and strengthened by the loving discretion of his disciples as well as the intrinsic value of their research. However, as often happens in legends, the icon that is central to the story, has become blurred. The figure of the secluded scholar and book-lover, the researcher who investigates the secrets of librarians from all over Europe; a method of enquiry both scrupulous and audacious, like a Monsieur Dupin of the library; expressions like *Pathosformel* or *Nachleben der Antike*: all this is now governed by the pool of delicious clichés which educated men love to draw on. One gets the impression that these references are often superficial; that thanks to them the figure of Warburg has become mannered and dull. One is also inclined to think that a cultured memory retains the detail to the detriment of meaning; that, in short, when people love to quote his well-known axiom “The good God lurks in the details”, they are more interested in the details than the gods<sup>2</sup>.

Reading Warburg’s published works and the wide selection of unpublished texts available today in Gombrich’s biography of Warburg confirms this vague sense of uneasiness, and is at odds with the image of the self-satisfied scholar absorbed in research<sup>3</sup>. In fact, a restless spirit resides in the heart of this learned scholar. It is not necessary to call into question Warburg’s personal vicissitudes which Gombrich himself handles with much discretion. The concern in this case is in fact a problem with the philosophy of culture. The *Wanderungen* of the ancient gods from pagan times to the imagination of the modern era is not for Warburg a matter of cultural tourism. At the dawn of the modern era, the gods, dressed as clowns and demoted to astrology, or else transformed in Renaissance art, resound with echoes of antiquity: cosmic harmony steeped in melancholy which will be taken up in the work of Dürer, and pagan pathos revived in the representation of passion in the figurative arts in the fifteenth-century. Warburg, who in a very particular sense can be considered a follower of the enlightenment, is not attracted by caricatures of Dionysus, by gods in the guise of goats that *fin de siècle* travellers believe they see in Mediterranean landscapes<sup>4</sup>. He discovers through experience, rather, that certain emotional elements of myths, having survived adventurous journeys in images, still speak to modern sensibilities.

This problem, for a man born a few years before the publication of *The Birth of Tragedy*, and educated in the wake of Burckhardt, transcends the history of art. It is a problem of artistic expression, but also involves



the art of expression, culture itself: the ways in which man symbolically connects with the world in which he lives and the sky that towers above him, recalls the past and sketches out the future. Nietzsche spoke of the decline of myth, to be displaced by metaphysics and demoted to the “pale and tired religions” of modernity<sup>5</sup>. Warburg discovered that the process of demythification and the dialectic of enlightenment, can be witnessed in just a few paradigmatic instances in the complicated and problematic advent of reason — Humanism, the Renaissance, the Reformation<sup>6</sup>. Is it true that the modern world has been completely emancipated from classical myths? How was superstition defeated by reason? These questions, which are part of a consolidated historical perspective that lead him to a wider and more rugged terrain, require that the issue of the cultural function of myth be studied. Has the triumph of rationalism, although inevitable, perhaps led to an impoverishment of humanity? Which myths, in the age of reason, replace of the ancient gods or their substitutes? These are paradoxical questions that partly explain some of the difficulties of Warburg’s study. However, even if cloaked in the apparent obscurity of scholarly research, they lead us to the heart of contemporary philosophical debate. If it is legitimate to mention Heidegger, a thinker who few would compare with Warburg, the problem of the survival of the ancient gods necessarily refers to the mythopoetic life of humanity<sup>7</sup>.

Debate on the nature of the divine cosmos, and its disenchantment, is of course a minefield. It resurrects the ghosts of irrationalism, or a sterile spirit of nostalgia, evoking the names of thinkers now cursed or obsolete. Carlyle, whom Warburg often cited in his notes, had in the past, in *Sartor Resartus*, celebrated symbols as expressions of a divine, transfigured life. But if we want to call to mind a philosophical context with problems that Warburg undoubtedly shares, though not accepting definitions or solutions, we can think of the Stefan George circle. The connection between symbolism and the gods is one of the primary interests of an eminent philosopher who was part of the circle, Ludwig Klages. Ludwig Klages believes in a particular style of knowledge, opposed to intellectualism, described as “an apparition of a deity (epiphany, parousia)”<sup>8</sup>. For Klages, this different way of knowing, the “vision” (*Schauung*), is connected with the symbolic nature of the world. As symbols, objects are not inert objects that only the ordering and forming capabilities of a transcendental intellect can conquer. Rather, through images and their “aura”, they convey the voice of a daemon. Images, through which the world is perceived, are not mere likenesses, but active and animated principles. Warburg distances himself from

this extreme type of symbolism, which, at the beginning of this century sought to refute the rationalistic intellectualism then prevailing, especially with neo-Kantianism. Above all, he rejects any sacrifice of the intellect, and the subordination of reason to the demonic power of images or intuitions. However, the deep-rooted concern underlying his research is precisely the relationship between rational representation and magical representation of life in images. He questions whether man or the artist has a passive or enlightened relationship with the daemon of an image whose ability to fascinate, however, Warburg never denies. At the beginning of his research, he explores this relationship in the light of the positive and progressive values of reason. Thus, in his essay on the “*Birth of Venus*” and “*Spring*” by Sandro Botticelli, the artist’s observance of the erudite obscurities of the humanists, and his pre-Baroque indulgence in the rendering of exaggerated movement, seem to Warburg symptoms of the withdrawal of reason. Later, however, his research into the pagan and anthropological roots of these “formulas of pathos” led him to define much more openly and problematically the conflict between reason and superstition, between restraint and wildness in images, and between rational and magical depictions<sup>9</sup>.

Against the backdrop of these concerns, the precursor of iconology does not appear quite the guardian of a minor or classified branch of knowledge, the founder of an original method (circumstantial, symptomatic or shallow), nor even a mere hunter of pagan treasures of Renaissance symbolism or trashy astrology. Even if some of this is true, he is, rather, a singular breed of philosopher of culture. Singular, because his painstaking research leads to paths that radiate to places of danger: the fear that drives primitive man to symbolise and to deify nature; the tortuous battle of the intellect against monsters born from the imagination, the struggle of Athens against Alexandria; the sting in the tail of the centaur, which muddies any reference to the classical tradition, and yet lashes the modern spirit; the melancholic triumph of reason over superstition and myth, from which it also originates; the wasteland which is heralded by the rationalization and rarefaction of symbols.

The contemporary philosophy of Warburg knows these topics. After Nietzsche and Burckhardt, they are various aporias resulting in the maturation of classical rationalism, the tumultuous birth of new sciences which announced the decline of philosophy but whose predicament they share, the emergence of rationality and practices which would defeat myth but which today have equally become myths. Warburg’s enterprising and private research leads to the places where our fears reside. It is only in this

sense that he should be separated from the reassuring legend of his scholarship and methodology. His research, in fact, unveils the agitation of the precursors, masters or merely shadows, the fathers of our crisis.

#### THE GAZE OF THE GODS

To confirm Warburg's philosophical role just one example will suffice, though strangely, it is merely hinted at in the hagiography that has grown up around him. Warburg's premise, the survival of paganism in artistic expression, is the inverted mirror of the great problem at the heart of Hegel's lectures on aesthetics: the dissolution of paganism, and the death of classical art<sup>10</sup>. This is not surprising in the case of Lamprecht's enthusiastic and eccentric student. But as a result of a kind of Hegelian irony, the problem of overcoming aesthetic phases conflicts, in Warburg's case, with evidence that reverses the very logic of historical reconstruction. According to Hegel, the beginning of the end of pagan art was due to a lack of self-consciousness, and before that to an absence of subjectivity<sup>11</sup>. The eye of the classical statue is empty, it cannot see or be seen. The pagan gods of Hegel are sad, as though forewarned of their demise. Stillness and melancholia are marks of these gods, whose accidental nature, individuality and unconscious anthropomorphism pave the way for solution and a higher synthesis. Opposing Schiller ("When the gods were more human, men were more divine"), Hegel emphasizes the *necessity* of the death of pagan art, solution and Christian synthesis. The end of pagan anthropomorphism is the condition for the re-emergence of a new spirituality: "Whereas, according to the truly Christian view, renunciation is only the factor of mediation, the point of transition in which the purely natural, the sensuous, and the finite in general sheds its inadequacy in order to enable the spirit to come to higher freedom and reconciliation with itself, a freedom unknown to the Greeks"<sup>12</sup>. If for Hegel the dissolution of pagan art is a step in the maturation of subjectivity, for Warburg, like Nietzsche, the persistence of pagan forms of expression is a kind of tragic and passionate objectivity that escapes the process of alienation – appropriation of the spirit. Consciousness cannot dissolve the anthropomorphic paganism within itself because it is, ultimately, its *heir*, even if a reluctant one. Just when it seemed that reason – Renaissance individualism and the ethical rationalism of the reformation – was appealing to classical antiquity as an ally against superstition, certain instances of paganism, particularly Dionysian, that Hegel had neglected, or minimized in his synthesis, emerge forcefully into consciousness.

For Warburg too, therefore, classical plastic art is a significant touchstone. But unlike Hegel, who followed Winckelmann and his traditional conception of a “noble simplicity and quiet beauty”<sup>13</sup>, Warburg sees something different in ancient statues: the wind-blown garments of the Maenads, the desperate tension of the dying Laocoön, the monsters, beasts, satyrs and centaurs that characterize Greek antiquity as much as the majestic stillness of the temples on the Acropolis. Nor does Warburg call subjectivity into question: the gaze of his gods of stone is equally unconscious. However, it is the unconsciousness of ecstasy, frenzy and hallucination, not the unconsciousness of empty eye sockets and abandoned marble.

His attraction for the most disturbing roots of artistic expression, as well as his attempt to dominate them rationally is a constant of Warburg the theorist’s personality. In a note to the conference on the ritual of the serpent in 1923, he returns to the manifestation of this tension in his early years: “I devoured these books [on Native Americans] in masses, for they obviously offered a means of withdrawing from a depressing reality in which I was quite helpless... the emotion of pain found an outlet in fantasies of romantic cruelty”<sup>14</sup>. This was my vaccination against active cruelty. However, the depth of his pagan experience, his rejection of Winckelmann’s vision, his awareness of ancient *hybris* as an inevitable cultural matrix, appear mainly in his first consideration of the classical tradition. The scholastic theme of the battle of the Centaurs is for the young Warburg an opportunity to bring to light the residual Dionysian that transcends art history and aesthetics:

The animal strength with which the Centaur grips his victim and the savage desire which even approaching death cannot stifle, are splendidly rendered... and yet the best thing is absent from this style: beauty. For beautiful these groups are not. If one says of them that they show passionate movement without losing in clarity, this is the highest tribute one can pay... A particularly attractive feature is the drapery of Group Number 3, where it flutters as if in passionate excitement... In Olympia a rude archaic art attempts to fit its more vivid but ugly figures into the confines of the pediment<sup>15</sup>.

In Warburg’s first major study, his dissertation on Botticelli, the theme of the rebirth of this expressive factor appears coyly, still dominated by a view that privileges balance and the realm of forms. However, in his analysis of the influence of the ancients on humanism, albeit obliquely, the emergence of these traces comes to light. The dilemma posed in the essay is the artist’s ability to recognize paganism without succumbing

to its lure, without re-translating the ancient forms of expression into mannerism. Botticelli succumbs to their lure because he applies to his static compositions the learned instructions of Poliziano: refinement in the rendering of the folds of garments, ornaments and hairstyles. In the “accessories in motion” depicted by Botticelli, whose iconological and erudite genealogy he reconstructs, Warburg does not perceive the passion of antiquity but a mere *surrogate*<sup>6</sup>. Botticelli and his compliance are opposed to Leonardo and his ability to follow the ancients “only where he saw it as a precedent that demanded respect”<sup>17</sup>. The force of the classical tradition manifests itself differently, namely, in the *gaze* of Botticelli’s figures.

Warburg takes up the metaphor of the *gaze*, which in a sense is contrary to that of Hegel. The opacity of the gaze of the nymphs and goddesses does not refer to a vacuum but to the richness of a living, albeit dreamy, sensuality:

One is tempted to say, of many of Botticelli’s women and boys, that they have just woken from a dream to become aware of the world around them; however active they may be in that world, still their minds are filled with images seen in dreams<sup>18</sup>.

In a note on the same passage, Warburg adds:

The duality of involvement and detachment is conveyed in Botticelli’s faces partly through the way in which the highlight is not located in the pupil, as a dot of light, but in the iris, where it sometimes takes the form of a circle. This gives the eye the appearance of being directed toward external objects but not sharply focused on them<sup>19</sup>.

Warburg attributes this dreamyness to the “artistic temperament of Botticelli, based on his predilection for composed beauty”. However, beauty that bears traces of sleep, and that suggests an active nightlife, is exactly a pagan way of appearing. One is tempted to add that this sensuality about to re-awaken, and gazing lazily through to the outside world, is like that of feline goddess, of the orgiastic woman mentioned by Nietzsche: “I saw her halcyon smile, her honey-coloured eyes, now deep then veiled, sometimes green and lascivious, a trembling facade: the sea in her eyes flows, lewd, sleepy and trembling”<sup>20</sup>.

In his essay on Botticelli, Warburg again treats the antiquicising mannerism of the humanists severely, and whilst criticising it, he agrees with the idea that both Rossetti and Ruskin could form of the *Quattrocento*;

the influence of paganism ends up making itself felt almost despite the suggestions of the humanists. Warburg criticises Botticelli for yielding to a style he himself feels inclined towards. The fragment on “The Nymph”, and his exchange of letters with Jolles, in which his relationship with pagan forces is now direct and personal, are dated shortly after the Botticelli essay, and are unmediated by his apparent criticism of the humanistic theme; the nymph, the dreamy goddess, is now a symbol, or a danger, close to hand, and for this very reason to be turned into something else:

Now I should catch it again, but I am not equipped for this kind of locomotion. Or, to be exact, I should like to, but my intellectual training does not permit me to do so. I, too, was born in Platonía and I should like, in your company, to watch the circling flight of ideas from a high mountain peak; I should like, at the approach of our lightfooted girl, joyfully to whirl away with her. But such soaring movements are not for me. It is given to me only to look backwards and to enjoy in the caterpillars the development of the butterfly<sup>21</sup>.

Warburg had in the past raised the issue of the influence of antiquity in relation to the use, legitimate or not, that artists can make of tradition. Now the problem was revealed to him independently, and with full force. The ancient gods were not merely a rhetorical device, imposed on artists by the court humanists. Their ability to convey *emotions*, despite the decorative shield of mannerism (both Botticelli’s of the fifteenth century and that of the pre-Raphaelites in the nineteenth), thus becomes, in a certain sense, an anthropological constant. It is the power of human emotion which almost forces its way into the renewal of classical themes, representing the meta-historical message of paganism. The Hegelian notion of the transition from classical antiquity to Christianity and romantic art – the theory of the progress of subjectivity which Warburg had upheld via Lamprecht’s psychology-based history – gives way to a *tragic* vision of culture. From now on, all Warburg’s research will address the problem of the relationship between *emotion* (cosmic fear, desire, greed, hostility) and the rules of *formal* expression into which it is translated. The notion of the tragic emerges here as a conflict between the essential aspects of the human condition, such as perennial dualism (in the sense of Burckhardt) and not as the conflict between evolutionary trends or historical periods. The equilibrium in which it can sometimes end is not so much the outcome of a historical movement, of progress, but a temporary, intermittent power – one could say it is the *gift* – of the artist to combine those forces in an innovative way. So conflict can find a temporary reso-



lution in different forms: the *control* of pagan emotion, the judicious use of the classical tradition that knows how to distinguish between genuine inspiration and mannerism (Leonardo, Dürer, Rembrandt), and, from another point of view, by relying on the breath of life emanating from antiquity, and shaking off the weight of tradition as can be seen in the female figure advancing suddenly into the austere composition of *The birth of St. John the Baptist* by Ghirlandaio<sup>22</sup>.

That the conflict Warburg refers to is not intended to lead to a gradual and unilateral resolution, but – to use a typical definition in the philosophical terminology of his time – remains instead as an immanent opposition between *life* and *forms* or between opposing instances or *polarisations*<sup>23</sup> of life, is actually demonstrated in his most mature essays, where it almost seems that he proposes to undermine the evolutionary notion of cultural history. Traditional periodisations fail when the profound contradiction between the vitality of the forces expressed in the classical tradition and the formalism of styles is exposed. When, for example, it seems that the baroque is about to stifle the expressive freedom of the Renaissance, a particular use of classical allegories in festivals and performances sponsored by the Medici opens the way to modern melodrama:

At the height of the Baroque style, we witness a momentary rebirth of a subtle, Florentine artistic sense: capable of ridding the antique of all the erudite accretions that in 1589 had so much preoccupied all those involved – from the poet to the costumer – and capable, at the same time, of remaining true to its classical ideals while looking for a new way to involve not only the minds but the hearts of the spectators.

*The tragedia in musica* addressed a twofold public demand. On the one hand, it referred to the antique, through its plots; on the other, through the intensity of feeling evoked by the new technique of the *stile recitativo*, it offered a replacement for the rarefied delights that audiences had previously found in the studied inventions of the Intermedi<sup>24</sup>.

So antiquity acts as a catalyst for the typical inclination of humanity to focus on basic emotions; it reawakens, once and for all, the opposition between the Apollonian and the Dionysian, between excess and harmonization, that Warburg believes stretches well beyond ancient Greece.

The most notable examples of this *bi-polarisation* of life are to be found in Warburg's research, which seems more concerned with analysing and reconstructing the environment and the historical and social *milieu* in

which Renaissance art develops. However, historical research is for Warburg, as it is for Burckhardt, an *instrument* for bringing to light typological and trans-historical conflicts. For instance, the Florentine merchant Sassetti, patron and client of Ghirlandaio, close friend of Lorenzo and the humanists, and equally familiar with the courts of the North, was actually a pious man, imbued with medieval beliefs and concerned with the struggle between religious factions<sup>25</sup>. Yet this man, who divided his interests between *pietas* and an anxious concern for his wealth, was equally sensitive to the pagan values introduced or, rather, re-awakened and re-shaped by humanism: in his darkest hour he commended himself to God, whilst relying on Fortune, the goddess who controlled the winds, to plot an auspicious course for his heirs, and chooses as his emblem a centaur throwing a stone. Like Warburg, the problem Sassetti faces is to reconcile his demons in images that symbolise at one and the same time power and the power to defuse the potential to destroy. The conflict between these contradictory themes, between *pietas* and paganism, has a paradoxical solution only in his burial chapel where “an antique marble sarcophagus serves to proclaim the victory of the Christian Church over paganism, by serving as a crib for the Christ child and as a manger for the ox and the ass”<sup>26</sup>.

Warburg's interest in these apparently episodic conflicts transcends the figures involved. The conflict of Sassetti, as indeed those of Dürer, Rembrandt and Luther, is the perennial dilemma of man in the face of cosmic forces: recognising their power to shape events without being trampled by them, and using their vitality without turning it into rhetoric, mannerism or an instrument of superstition. Whether on a strictly philosophical or anthropological level, he takes the opposite view of Hegel. There is no objective spirit or instance of transcendental knowledge that can guarantee a teleological or formal solution to this immanent conflict. Culture is constantly exposed to the risk of being overwhelmed by those vital powers which it *must* call upon if it does not want to wither into formalism. Nietzsche and Burckhardt offer two complementary answers to this dilemma: Nietzsche rejection, and Burckhardt aloofness and detachment. However, for both, the rejection of the objectivity of the spirit and a reassuring recognition of cosmic forces was complete<sup>27</sup>. Warburg shares this rejection, and by extending his research to the unpredictable relationships between superstition, mythology, and science (between astrology and astronomy), and steering his enquiries in the direction of anthropology he retraces the paths that first historicism had avoided or rendered impassable, and revives, in the era of the triumph of history, the



perennial problem of the balance between human knowledge and dangerous cosmic forces.

#### BEYOND EVOLUTIONISM

As he would demonstrate with his journey among the Navajo Indians, Warburg's problem was to establish the relationship between expressive primitive forces (of which paganism, or its Dionysian features is a particular aspect) and the *mythical* representations that, in culture, have the function to controlling or directing such forces<sup>28</sup>. *Images* are for Warburg the point of suture between the two instances. They link both the primitive emotion and the control of emotion by the projection of the causes that have led to it. Warburg had taken from positivist culture (and especially from Vignoli, whom he met through Usener<sup>29</sup>) the idea that myth is the first stage of the symbolic transformation of the world. The primitive, according to Vignoli, is a rudiment of the *cosmos* projecting its characteristics into the world by which it is surrounded, shaping it in its own image and likeness, and *personifying it*. In this anthropomorphism, positivism (ultimately, not unlike the aesthetic historicism of Hegel) sees the start of a symbolic representation that contains the seed of the rise of science and reason. Once the anthropomorphic symbols have been deprived of their inner life (the soul) and outer life (the ability to influence human affairs) and are therefore reduced *to signs*, to abstract notations of the outside world, scientific rationalism can develop freely<sup>30</sup>.

The positivist Vignoli can justly speak of a mixture of myth and science in the phase preceding the birth of modern reason: he builds the same history of gnoseology, from Plato's images to the thing in itself, as the survival of a kind of animism. Vignoli points out the symbolic origins of scientific knowledge to prove that science needs to finally rid itself of even the slightest traces of myth. But Warburg, whose point of departure is the same, reasons that the relationship between man and his images, between the cosmos and the world, between symbol and sign, between myth and science, cannot follow such a linear development. In fact, half-way through his research, he becomes aware that the influence of the ancient gods, and therefore, of their forces and primitive emotions, does not dissolve – if anything, it disguises itself, while remaining the driving force of representation. He had seen that the call of the archaic, man's primitive emotions, became, in certain critical phases, the catalyst for artistic renewal. Nature is not something that the artist can conjure up directly, without mediation. The theory of social memory that Warburg

developed in his later years<sup>31</sup> assumes that access to sources of emotion is permitted only via certain trigger images, the formulas of passion. The nudes in the “*Déjeuner sur l’herbe*” by Manet – argues Warburg – are placed at the peak of a complex genealogy of images that go back to Raphael and the gods portrayed on Roman sarcophagi. Expressive renewal does not consist in the suppression of the past, but in its reshaping, in drawing on those ancient sources that historical deposits have covered:

After all, the immediate impact of his work could tell the world that it was only those who shared in the spiritual heritage of the past who had the possibility of finding a style creating new expressive values. Such values derive the power of their thrust not from the removal of old forms but from the naunce of their transformation<sup>32</sup>.

The coordinates of the imagination are therefore necessarily *historical*. But for Warburg history is a heritage, a heritage that derives from an original bequest. The stratification of forms does not suppress their origins, it echoes them, even if the echoes overlap in an indistinct background noise. The metaphor that Warburg has chosen to define his research, that of a seismograph recording distant earthquakes, simultaneously expresses the *pietas* of the historian who, like Burckhardt, wants to go back to the original perennial, pulsations of emotion, and the memory of the artist who, like Manet, summons up and reshapes them to express the natural and eternal nudity of the human body in a natural landscape. In this sense, history and memory do not destroy the past, appropriating it to dissolve it, but they *safeguard* it to express its eternal newness.

Applied to cosmology, this particular historical style can only reverse the sense of the positivist reconstruction of progress. Where Vignoli sees the triumphal march of rationalism as a defeat of symbolism and myth, Warburg perceives an original link to humanity and nature – the projection of animated images into the cosmos – as perennial and non-instrumental bearers of meaning and knowledge. Unlike art, which does not have to respond to any ultimate code, and must therefore eternally resolve its conflicts, the history of knowledge is bound to a cultural necessity, to an ordering meta-language, or, perhaps, a determination to power claiming emancipation from myth as a necessity. In his research on astrology and the origins of cosmology, in Ferrara, Greece and America, Warburg, who had drawn his own research tools from positivist evolutionism, applies the *pietas* and memory capable of preserving in order to renew, which he had identified in Botticelli, Rembrandt and Manet – thus managing to

cast doubt, ethically as well as anthropologically, on the need for knowledge to be emancipated from myth.

Warburg had come across the history of astrology while analyzing the mysterious frescoes in Palazzo Schifanoia in Ferrara<sup>33</sup>. His problem was to explain the strange presence in a work made for one of the most enlightened courts of the Renaissance of astrological symbols in which the superstitions of the Hellenistic age had been revived. In the frescoes painted by Cossa, the Olympian gods of Greek cosmology have become *decans*, gods from the Egyptian calendar which had tortuously survived in the Mediterranean until the arrival of Humanism. This disguise expresses the historical degradation of ancient cosmology. Warburg does not stop though, like anyone who follows “a lack of adequate general evolutionary categories”<sup>34</sup>, at the matter of astrological pollution. He condemns neither the deviation of astrology from the straight path of the knowledge of nature, nor the depreciation of the cosmological heritage of antiquity. Nor does he condemn the use of Hellenistic astrology. Through the vagaries of Hellenistic astrology, the voice of antiquity can be heard. And, through the revival of ancient astrological imagery, the Renaissance feels the impulse to project human dilemmas into the cosmos.

Our sense of wonder at the inexplicable fact of supreme artistic achievement can only be enhanced by the awareness that genius is both a gift of grace and a conscious dialectical energy. The grandeur of the new art, as given to us by the genius of Italy, had its roots in a shared determination to strip the humanist heritage of Greece of all its accretions of traditional “practice”, whether medieval, Oriental, or Latin. It was with this desire to restore the ancient world that “the good European” began his battle for enlightenment, in that age of internationally migrating images that we – a shade too mystically – call the Age of the Renaissance<sup>35</sup>.

The theme of the recovery of antiquity during the Renaissance, therefore, involves recognition of the perennial power of tradition. In this recollection of the past, conflicts and dangers are inevitable. The rhetorical use of ancient symbols can give rise to a simple inflation of gestures, and prepare the way for the Baroque, as Warburg shows in relation to the school of Raphael, or Rembrandt’s fight against the antiquicising rhetoric of the Dutch<sup>36</sup>; it can survive in the struggle against the religious reformers of the traditional church as in the case of Luther and Melancthon, still victims of astrology and its political uses<sup>37</sup>. All these cases are purely evidence of the formal survival of the Dionysian, an excess of expression. But Warburg’s use of antiquity more than anything signifies the recon-

quest of the integration of *humanity* and *nature*. Just as he had overturned the Hegelian perspective demonstrating the vitality and therefore the *relevance* of the ancient gods, Warburg now overturns the evolutionist reconstruction of the progress of knowledge, showing the necessarily mythical and anthropomorphic nature of all knowledge.

A more detailed account of this subject can be found in the conference on the ritual of the serpent. An earlier study dated 1911 on astrological engravings demonstrates the dual, double-edged character – as Gombrich points out – of all depictions of human nature. The projection of animated images of the cosmos, with the inevitable parallels with the natural cosmos and the human and corporeal cosmos, of macrocosm and microcosm, involves man and his dependency on the magical powers of fetishes. On the other hand, the projection of images is the only condition for the development of *representations* of the natural world. The dilemma is, therefore, not the abolition of the humanisation of the sky (as Vignoli suggests), but the reconciliation of this type of representation with abstract thinking:

The celestial globe, the customary symbol of the heavenly vault, is a genuine product of Greek civilization arising from the dual gift of the ancient Greeks: their talent for the immediacy of a concrete poetic imagination and their power of mathematically abstract visualization.

It was through a system blending these two powers, as it were, that the Greeks created order in the universe. Thanks to their power of poetic and anthropomorphic visualization, their human and animating empathy, they created order among the flicker of infinitely distant heavenly bodies by grouping the stars into constellations and projecting into their imaginary outlines beings or objects after which the constellations were named. Thus they turned them into individuals identifiable by the human senses<sup>38</sup>.

Warburg's studies had always taken into consideration phases and problems relating to the time which can be regarded as the dawn of European rationalism. It is, therefore, natural that he should focus on the ambiguity – artistic, scientific and iconographic – of this era of renewal. Concepts such as the polarisation or the rebirth of antiquity, in fact, refer to *mergings* and the inability to dissolve the relationship between man and symbols in evolutionary systems. As regards these mergings, Warburg's position is ambivalent. He always draws attention, at one and the same time, both to the need to appeal to the imagination of the ancients, and to the danger

that this appeal could turn into reliance on images — the baroque in art and astrological superstition in natural philosophy. But when he has to compare antiquity with the contemporary era, and ancient symbolism with modern symbolism, his ethical concerns can only radically change direction. In the current age, the danger of magic is infinitely less present than the danger of the waning — or disappearance — of the mythopoetic capacity. Ancient cosmology, inasmuch the foundation of a symbolic order, provided an ordered space for thought that allowed the imagination to dwell on *pensiveness*<sup>39</sup>. For Warburg, *Denkraum* is precisely the introduction of a measure of distance, or of the harmony necessary to correct the Dionysian element that is the basis of expressive capability. Pensiveness, the characteristic of Dürer's *Melancholia I*, as well as Rembrandt's patriotic works, allows for a reflective distance to be established between man and his passions, between man and his cosmic concerns. But if this distance opposes the immediacy of the magic of astrology or the inflated frenzy of the Baroque, it also opposes the obliteration of distances inherent in the automatic transmission of signals in the destructive abstraction of technology — in short — the transformation of symbols into signals. When Warburg makes his ethnographic journey to the United States — a surprising event only if one ignores the complex, ethical and natural implications of his research — the problem is no longer how to control images, but the modern inability to produce them: not the risk of the Baroque and astrology, but the sterilization of culture.

The conference on the serpent ritual is for Warburg a double occasion — one being the experience to which it refers (his visit to the *Pueblos* of the Zufri Indians), and the second being the exceptional but emblematic circumstances in which it was held (Binswanger clinic in Kreuzlingen where he was hospitalised)<sup>40</sup>. Nothing more than this text makes it clear that Warburg was unable to limit his research to iconology or art history. At the time of his inaugural lecture, Warburg had lived through the trauma of war and his painful severance from Italian culture. In front of his unusual audience, he defines himself as an “incurable schizoid”, but he has in mind something other than his personal condition. He refers in fact to the schizophrenia of a human race that has built its culture on expressive capabilities, but has corrupted it to such an extent that it cannot create original myths and images. His trip to America offers Warburg a chance to experience the immediate future of European culture. In one of his preparatory notes for the conference, he justifies his decision to travel to New Mexico because once in the United States, he was repulsed by the empty materialism of the well-to-do life on the East Coast. America does

not have a classical tradition on which to draw, or an ancient history to reshape, but a mortified “paganism” in the reservations. In New Mexico, Warburg has the chance to find a living example of a mythological civilization that his research is centred on, and to measure its anguish before the advancing tide of the culture of technology. He can thus evaluate the essence of paganism outside history and its travesties.

In the serpent dances of the *Pueblo* Indians, Warburg rediscovers an archaic ability to produce representations, gestural or pictorial, as “visible assimilations of the alien into the appearance of that which is familiar”, (Heidegger). The dance is not only a test of tribal courage: by manipulating the snakes, symbols of lightning, the Indians establish a practical and empathetic relationship with the cosmos, and give rise to a cosmology and a direct relationship with the forces of nature. With their exposure to danger, which magically transforms a deadly creature into a symbol of fertility, the Indians dissolve the ancient tension that exists between humans and the deep, destructive forces of nature. Similarly, snakes that adorn the Maenads, or those sent by the vengeful gods that strangle Laocoön are in ancient Greece transformed into symbols of reconciliation with nature (the snake deified in the cult of Asclepius). The primitive dance of the serpent thus has the same function as the astrological images with which a hostile and subterranean force has become a divinity symbolising medical practice. In both cases, the direct and destructive link with the subterranean is transformed into a cosmic representation, and therefore into a space for thought. The Indians, like the ancient cosmologists, have created a *symbolic space*. Warburg, not unlike Marcel Mauss<sup>41</sup>, has thus identified a universal function of ritual magic. The timeless field of the production of images, of the mythopoetic capability, extends, therefore, beyond the historical world of the international migration of images in which Warburg had started his research. This simple and sad conclusion to the conference appears not to cause Warburg to harbour any illusions about the fate of this capability:

How is mankind freeing itself from this coercive bond with a venomous reptile in which it sees the cause of things? Our technical age does not need the serpent to explain and control the lightning. The lightning no longer frightens the dwellers in our cities, nor do they long for a storm as the only hope of relief from drought. We have our water supply, and the lightning-snake is led down into the ground — by the lightning-conductor. Scientific argument puts an end to mythological explanation. We know that the snake is a reptile which must succumb if we set our minds



to it. Where the technical explanation of cause and effect replaces the mythical imagination, man loses his primitive ears. But we should be loth to decide whether this emancipation from the mythological view really helps mankind to find a fitting answer to the problems of existence. [...]

The American of to-day no longer worships the rattle-snake. Extermination (and whisky) is his answer to it. Electricity enslaved, the lightning held captive in the wire, has produced a civilization which has no use for heathen poetry. But what does it put in its place? The forces of nature are no longer seen in anthropomorphic shapes; they are conceived as an endless succession of waves, obedient to the touch of a man's hand. With these waves the civilization of the mechanical age is destroying what natural science, itself emerging out of myth, had won with such vast effort – the sanctuary of devotion, the remoteness needed for contemplation<sup>42</sup>.

#### THE PROTECTION OF THE SEA

The exceptional circumstances of the conference in Kreuzlingen could lead one to underestimate the significance of these words, to reject the reversal of perspectives – regarding both the positivism and the previous positions held by Warburg himself – implicit in this sad contemplation of the mythopoetic capability in its death throes. Gombrich himself seems to attribute this “deviation” to the personal circumstances of Warburg. But this approach to technology and modern civilization (which, moreover, is widespread in the philosophy and anthropology of the early twentieth century) also characterizes the historicism and positivism of Warburg's formative years. The same words that, over two decades later, will bemoan the demise of myth, reverberate in a text on the funeral of Böcklin (1901):

[...] the open vault is faced by impertinent one-eyed staring cyclops of the technical age, the photographic camera. In our age of traffic, of distance-destroying chaos, he [Böcklin] could still be found to stand against the current and forcefully to assert the pirate's right of a romantic idealism: to evoke through the mythopoetic power of the image<sup>43</sup>.

These words, like those that conclude the conference in Kreuzlingen, are of no interest for their romantic tone, but for the special light they throw on Warburg's research in general. For Warburg, the rationale behind the development of culture is not dialectical or teleological, as in Hegel, or evolutionist, as in positivism, but is terminally perverse. Myth gives rise to the cosmos and the opening of a space for thought, but on this terrain of reason grow the forces that destroy thought and myth. If we compare

this position, which most certainly emerges in a contradictory, uncertain, and intermittent fashion in Warburg's fragmentary work, with the philosophical positions with which it has traditionally been compared, we can only observe its substantial distance from it.

At this stage, calling Cassirer to mind is essential. Not only because Cassirer saw in Warburg's research a source for his own philosophy of symbolic forms, or because he was adopted as the philosophical patron of the Warburg Institute, but because his great systematic work is the most consistent attempt to overcome whatever tragedy inevitably marks all contemporary research on the sources of myth. At the time of Cassirer, in fact, the dispute over the origins and meanings of myths hinged on the need to tackle the problem of myth "it being impossible to live the myth, to take part in genuine mythical epiphanies or evoke them"<sup>44</sup>. This sense of tragedy, which Nietzsche was resolved to tackle, dominates the humanities at the turn of the century in the thinking of Durkheim, Mauss, Weber, as it did Burckhardt's before. Extreme positions such as those of Klages, or new interpretations of classical mythology as in Otto or Kerényi, express precisely the attempt to overcome the impasse caused by the sad passing of myth. But even in the more traditional areas of research, such as classical philology, the motivations of the more enlightened sciences no longer seem sufficient. There is something ironic, a kind of posthumous revenge, in the fact that Wilamowitz-Möllendorf himself, the champion of historical method in philology who in his youth had panned Nietzsche, rediscovered in his old age the power of myth, and the existence of the gods. The purpose of Cassirer, in the background of these unpredictable returns of the myth, is precisely to overcome tragedy, to make the science of myth and symbols flow into the field of gnosology.

The philosophy of Cassirer, and in particular his program of a general philosophy of symbols, includes both the Hegelian notion of an objective spirit, namely of a culture that sums up dialectically and progressively earlier stages, resolving and incorporating them, and, more importantly, the Kantian idea of a transcendental rationality. According to these coordinates, myth is not the remains of primitive humanity, but the first phase of the unveiling of the spirit. The human capacity to produce forms of knowledge that provide the only access to reality materialises for the first time through myth:

From this point of view, myth, art, language and science appear as symbols: not in the sense of mere figures which refer to some given reality by



means of suggestion and allegorical renderings, but in the sense of forces each of which produces and posits a world of its own. In these realms the spirit exhibits itself in that inwardly determined dialectic by virtue of which alone there is any reality, any organized and definite Being at all<sup>45</sup>.

We are apparently on the same grounds as Warburg, the link between myth and language, between symbol and expression; but, on closer examination, the relationship between the form and the meaning of the mythical image is, in Cassirer, reversed. The symbolic nature of art and language is not passive, it is not related to the *transmission* of a voice (what Cassirer describes as “a previously given reality”) or deep forces. It refers to their ability to teach, the function of symbolic forms. For Cassirer there is no doubt that myth dissolves in language. The intuitive concreteness of a mythical image must be abandoned, “if language is to grow into a vehicle of thought, an expression of concepts and judgments [...]”<sup>46</sup>. Myth, just like language, exists as substance on which the spirit draws, dominating but not wanting to be dominated. Once its concreteness is lost, myth survives spiritually in *lyric poetry*, as tension devoid of realism: “The greatest lyric poets, for instance Hölderlin or Keats, are men in whom the mythic power of insight breaks forth again in its full intensity and objectifying power. But this objectivity has discarded all material constraints”<sup>47</sup>. The reference to Hölderlin here is really emblematic of Cassirer’s effort to overcome his melancholy for the absence of myth. Hölderlin’s failure to tune the voice of myth with the need of the spirit has no place in Cassirer’s systematization. Nor does it accord with the theme of guilt, of the intellect that has arrogantly separated itself from the gods, that overshadows, in *The Death of Empedocles*, the grand theme of Hölderlin, the reunion of man with nature. Tragedy, on the other hand, is not entertained in Cassirer’s philosophy of forms. He never mentions Nietzsche, and often argues with the anti-intellectualism of Klages: “The course of our enquiry always leads us through the world of forms, through the region of the objective spirit”<sup>48</sup>. Tragedy for Cassirer is a cumbersome residue, which he will frequently strive to minimize. But the irreducibility of the tragic, its constancy, was Warburg’s starting point, and he analyzes it in its artistic and cosmological manifestations, and finds it in the images of Sassetti, Rembrandt and Nietzsche. This is not ignoring the essential dimension of existence and expression, but is a test of the possibility of reconciliation and equilibrium. Reflecting, a little later, just before he died, on the dangers looming over those who give heed to deep forces, Warburg returns to the impossibility of dissolving, or resolving *a priori*, their conflict:

It has been granted to us to linger for a moment in the uncanny vaults where we found the transformers which transmute the innermost stirrings of the human soul into lasting forms – we could not hope to find there the solution of the enigma of the human mind; only a new formulation of the eternal question as to why fate consigns any creative mind to the realm of perpetual unrest where it is left to him to choose whether to form his personality in the Inferno, Purgatorio or Paradiso<sup>49</sup>.

It would be wrong to confine this relationship between unease and fate to a personal and autobiographical reflection. An individual's oscillation between Inferno, Purgatory and Paradise refers to an idea of cultural development that is not unequivocal. According to Warburg, European culture is the result of conflicting tendencies, in which "[...] we should look for neither friends nor enemies, but rather the symptoms of psychological oscillations swinging uniformly between the distant poles of magico-religious practice and mathematical contemplation – and back again"<sup>50</sup>. Warburg's unfinished project, the great *Mnemosyne* atlas, should not be perceived as a mere inventory of the history of images but an attempt to preserve the oscillations of these cultural poles. By way of these oscillations, in which the figure of the maenad, for example, is transformed into an image of a *pietà*, or pagan symbols are placed at the service of Christian redemption, humanity weakly conquers a space for consciousness. Weakly, because no cultural conquest – as was apparent in the conference on the Pueblo Indians – ensures the sublimation of *pagan hybris* or protects against a reduction of symbols.

Not surprisingly, therefore, the notes he prepared for his last project do not provide a solution to the dilemmas, the travesties and the logical and symbolic reversals brought to light during his research on the history of images. Or rather, the only solution, which offers no comfort, is the receptiveness of *memory* to the contradictory impulses of those conflicts:

Sometimes it looks to me as if, in my role as psycho-historian, I tried to diagnose the schizophrenia of the Western civilization from its images in an autobiographical reflex. The ecstatic 'Nymph' (maniac) on the one side and the mourning river-god (depressive) on the other [...]<sup>51</sup>.

It would be ridiculous to read these notes, as private as they may seem, from a psychoanalytic perspective. As conflicts between Dionysian frenzy and rationalistic depression are objectively rooted in culture, those who venture into exploring them do not possess a rational construct in which to place them. Returning to Freud's metaphor, one might state say

that, at the height of modernity, the edifice of the collective psyche is shaky. The dark forces of the basement are covered with debris, and the higher floors of consciousness are undermined by cracks. Consciousness for Warburg is a “dream”. It is, rather, the desire for the unconscious to be redeemed from demonic forces – which can happen only in Memory – the distant, unreachable North Star of the Historian.

Warburg’s theory of social memory is therefore somewhat opposed to the progressive historical conceptions from which he had started. Of positivism, Vignoli or Darwin, he retains an interest above all in their ideas on the roots of expression, on what we would now call *cultural ritualism*, the survival in the most advanced forms of expression, of archaic functions. But Warburg’s call on a perennial “fund” of human expression, on what according to Burckhardt is a “pathological consideration” of man, brought to light a fatal danger. This danger is inherent in any act of interpretation, including the particular type of hermeneutics known as figurative iconography. By finding a far more decisive fund for the historical settings of tradition, he threatened the very survival of history. Research that delves into tradition to rely on the safest anchors may end up destroying its very foundations. Alongside the iconoclasts, who, by proclaiming the overthrow of old systems can often ensure their survival in a new guise, work archive researchers like Warburg, who have no intention of threatening anyone, but who can crush traditions that are hundreds of years old. Hegel is perhaps the antidote to these dangers when he conceives the movement of historical knowledge as an alienation of past thought and a triumph for its place of origin, for itself. In this movement, in this self-consciousness, thought does not suffer from vertigo but relies on the past and then recomposes itself.

The risk from which the historian must therefore protect himself is – as happened to Warburg – being captivated by the object, being captured by the forces discovered in the depths of tradition. The notion of objective thought, for Hegel, Dilthey, Cassirer et al, is the attempt to avoid destroying tradition, and to create a reassuring notion of history. The wanderings of thought from the past, like waves that add sand to the shore, will not be lost. The sea is benign, and eternally adds matter, constructs culture as a concept that resists time. But, of course, this concretion is made of sand. The recovery of the past is done as part of a movement that must subordinate every find to itself. True, thought relies on the other, the past or antiquity, but it captures it, and imprisons it in a hierarchy which culminates in itself. We have already seen how Hegel places the

old gods in a sequence that provides for their dissolution, their yielding to the need for self-consciousness. This castle built of the sand of history is what Warburg indirectly undermined. His *Mnemosyne*, the compassionate deity that guards – but does not hide – the roughness or the depth of the seabed – is opposed to the subjective destruction of the historian. Like Benjamin, who was allied with him in the attempt to redeem the tragedy, Warburg could be called a “pearl diver”<sup>52</sup>. But Warburg does not descend into the depths of the past to offer exhibits for museums. He knows how, on the banks, “the living world gives way to the ruin of the times.” Eternity is not a debt owed to what has been left behind, but to the fragments that risking their existence detach themselves from the seabed. The image of the pearl diver, with which Hannah Arendt concludes her essay on Benjamin<sup>53</sup>, revives the two-faced portrait of the historian, and his uncertainties and risks. The man who thought he would work for the museums of the present, in reality threatened its foundations. There is, after all, no more disquieting idea than that of a historical world, even if applied to the history of arts and culture. The objects collected in museums remind us mockingly that their life is longer. Eternity besieges the present from all sides. Museums, archives and libraries turn to dust – but the pearls kept in subterranean hideaways, like the seabed, continue to shine.

#### NOTE

<sup>1</sup> The first edition of Warburg’s published works is *Gesammelte Schriften*, Teubner, Leipzig-Berlin 1932, in two volumes. An early and partial Italian translation including his most important essays in *The Renewal of Pagan Antiquity*, with an introduction by Gertrud Bing, was published by La Nuova Italia, Florence 1966; the first English edition *The Renewal of Pagan Antiquity: Contributions to the Cultural History of the European Renaissance*, translated by David Britt, with an introduction of Kurt Forster, was published by Getty Trust Publications, 1999 (hereinafter cited as *RPA*, this edition is indicated by the translator); a recent reprint of several essays in German can now be found in Aby M. Warburg, *Ausgewählte Schriften und Würdigungen*, edited by D. Wuttke, Koerner, Baden-Baden 19802 (cited here as *ASW*); this publication publishes a wide range of critical texts on the figure and works of Warburg, as well as information on unpublished works and manuscripts preserved in the Warburg Institute in London and other European and American institutions. Of crucial significance is E. Gombrich’s *Aby Warburg: An Intellectual Biography*, The Warburg Institute, London 1970 (hereinafter cited as *AWB*). The publication contains important extracts from unpublished works, note-books, diaries and conferences, as well as a bibliography updated to 1983. For the history of the library, (later the Warburg Institute) see F. Saxl, *The History of Warburg’s Library*, in Gombrich, *Aby Warburg*, Phaidon Press, 1986, pp. 325–38; *Die Bibliothek Warburg und ihr Ziel*, “Vorträge der Bibliothek Warburg”, 1921-1922, pp. 1-10; id., *Die Kulturwissenschaftliche Bibliothek Warburg in Hamburg*, 1930, now in *ASW*, pp. 331-334; id., *The History of Warburg’s Library, 1886-1944* in the *Appendix* to *AWB*, pp. 325 and foll. In addition, see the brochure published by the Warburg Institute, London 1978, for information on the Institute’s activities and the arrangement of the library. The question of Warburg and his reception in Italy is a chapter apart. We merely point out that until recently, Warburg was

associated with the school of iconology, and that the least "iconological" and more contradictory aspects of his theories were minimized. See for example E. Garin's introduction to F. Saxl, *La storia delle immagini*, Laterza, Bari 1965 (in the 1983 reprint of the same publication, Warburg is given more attention). C. Ginsburg, in *From Aby Warburg to Ernst Gombrich: A Problem of Method in Clues, Myths and the Historical Method* translated by John Tedeschi and Anne C. Tedeschi, Baltimore/London, John Hopkins University Press 1989, pp. 17-59, provides much information on Warburg and the school of iconology. The re-evaluation of Warburg in terms of the theory of culture begins with G. Agamben, *La scienza senza nome*, in "Settanta", July/September 1975 (reprinted with comments in "Aut Aut" 199/200, 1984) *en tr.*, *Aby Warburg and the Nameless Science*, in *Potentialities: collected essays in Philosophy*, Stanford University Press 1999. Interesting observations on Warburg can be also be found in S. Settis, "Introduzione", in J. Sez nec, *La sopravvivenza degli antichi dèi*, Boringhieri, Turin 1980. Finally, for a recent general overview of Warburg's works, see V. Hofman, *Warburg et sa méthode*, Cahiers du Musée National d'Art Moderne, 3, 1980.

2 We do not wish to raise the matter of the relationship between Warburg and iconology. We can however, make two types of observations. Firstly, this type of research, which for Warburg was merely instrumental (see *AWB, passim*), was for Saxl and even more so for Panofsky (just to cite the more important exponents) an autonomous cultural system, a methodology that has become value; see for example, E. Panofsky, *Introduction to Studies in Iconology*, Harper Torchbook, 1962. Secondly, the central theme in Warburg — *emotion* as a source and indelible presence in symbolic representation, a clearly Nietzschean-inspired theme — disappears completely in iconology. In Warburg's theories, this problem was a source of ethical complications and solutions; in iconology, it gives way to a brilliant, but in the end arbitrary, genealogy of symbols. The most significant example in this sense is perhaps demonstrated by the different way in which the theme of *melancholia* is handled by Warburg and his successors. For Warburg, what is at stake is the ethical and trans-historical problem of the artist's emotive forces; so for Warburg, Dürer represents a balancing point between the symbolic tradition sustained by both superstition and *pathos*, and the new rationalism of the Renaissance. The elements coexist in the engraving of *Melancholia I*, in which *pathos* is put to the service of the active contemplation of the cosmos. Warburg's problem, therefore, is the interweaving of myth and enlightenment as an essential component of western thought. These anxieties disappear in the learned but unemotional analysis that Saxl and Panofsky developed on the same theme: see R. Klibansky, E. Panofsky and F. Saxl, *Saturn and melancholy: studies in the history of natural philosophy, religion and art*, London, Nelson, 1964. For these stylistic and theoretical differences, see also Ginzburg, *op. cit.*, pp.33 and foll.

3 Gombrich's work fills a lacuna, critical rather than biographical. Even though he distances himself from the less disciplinary aspects of Warburg's research (his affinity with Nietzsche and Burckhardt, his disinterest in strictly stylistic and aesthetic matters in the history of art, etc.), he presents Warburg's personality in all its complexity and fruitfulness. The fact that nowhere in the work is Cassirer's name mentioned is significant. After Warburg's death, Cassirer was in fact considered to be the official philosopher of the Institute. Warburg's positions were often levelled with those held by Cassirer whose reconstruction of symbolic and cognitive forms was evolutionary and transcendental, and certainly not in tune with Warburg's which were tragic and dualistic. For typical parallelisms between Warburg and Cassirer in which Warburg is presented as an empirical researcher and the latter as a theoretical systematizer, see F. Saxl, *Ernst Cassirer*, in *The Philosophy of Ernst Cassirer*, edited by di P.A. Schilpp. Tudor Publishing Co., New York 19582, pp. 47-51. That the manifesto for Cassirer's philosophy was adopted by the Warburg Institute was probably derived from E. Panofsky, *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, originally published as *Die Perspektive als "Symbolische Form"*, in "Vorträge der Bibliothek Warburg", 1924-1925, Leipzig and Berlin, 1927, pp 258-330.

4 The extent to which the theme of pagan emotion was common at the end of the C19th is demonstrated by the fact that even a philologist like Wilamowitz-Möllendorf, who slated Nietzsche's *The birth of Tragedy* from the outset, was not immune to the "epiphany of Pan: "I too had an epiphany of him (Pan) when riding through Arcadia, I suddenly saw, appearing above my head, between the branches of a tree, a solemn billy-goat [...] (cited in F. Jesi, *Mito*, Mondadori, Milan, 19802). An entertaining summary of these epiphanies can be read in E. M. Forster, *The Story of a Panic in the Celestial Omnibus*



and *Other Stories*, first published in 1911. For a discussion of these themes in a wider philosophical context, see W. F. Otto, *Theophania: Der Geist der altgriechischen Religion*, Hamburg 1999.

5 F. Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, Cambridge University Press, 1999, p. 87.

6 The reference to Adorno and Horkheimer here is not incidental. Regardless of their different philosophical frameworks, I think that one of Warburg's principal themes is, as I will try to demonstrate later on, the interweaving of myth and enlightenment in the origins of modern European consciousness. See M. Horkheimer and T. V. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Verso, London, 1997, in particular pp. 45 and foll.

7 In *Aby Warburg and the Nameless Science*, cit., in *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen, Stanford University Press, 1999, pp. 89-103, Giorgio Agamben links Warburg's research with Heidegger and the hermeneutical circle. It seems to me that other Heidegger notions, writing poetry, for example, as a way of measuring oneself with the divine, can describe the deep concerns of Warburg. I refer, not only to the essay *On the origin of the work of art* (in M. Heidegger, *Off the Beaten Track*, Cambridge University Press 2002), but also to passages similar to the following: "The essence of the image is to let something be seen. [...] This is why poetic images are imaginings in a distinctive sense: not mere fancies and illusions but imaginings that are visible inclusions of the alien in the sight of the familiar. The poetic saying of images gathers the brightness and sound of the heavenly appearances into one with the darkness and silence of what is alien. By such sights the god surprises us. In this strangeness he proclaims his unfaltering nearness". (M. Heidegger, "Poetically man dwells..." in *Philosophical and Political Writings*, Manfred Stassen Ed., New York Continuum, 2003, p. 275).

8 L. Klages, *Vom Kosmogonischen Eros*, Müller, München 1922, en tr. *Cosmogonic Reflections: Selected Aphorisms*, Arktos Media Ltd., 2015; see also Klages' main work, *Der Geist als Widersacher der Seele*, now in *Sämtliche Werke*, I e II, Bouvier, Bonn 1969, and the collection of essays, *L'anima e lo spirito*, edited by R. Cantoni, Bompiani, Milano, 1940. I am unable to confirm any direct link between Klages and Warburg. It is, however, possible that Klages who often quotes writings on mythology and art, was aware of the activities of the Warburg Library. For Klages, too, the Nietzsche of *The Birth of Tragedy*, and Burckhardt are fundamental writers. In addition, it is surprising that the concepts on which Klages is most emphatic – the notion of symbol, image and polarisation – are also decisive for Warburg. However, Warburg would not have accepted Klages' animism, nor his rejection of all rationalism. Gombrich gives some information on the relationship between Warburg and symbolism (*AWB*, pp. 239 and foll.).

9 Warburg's swings on this point can be measured by comparing his views on Botticelli in 1891 and 1913. In his essay, *Sandro Botticelli's "Birth of Venus" and "Spring"* (*RPA*, pp. 141-142), Warburg reproaches Botticelli for his acquiescence towards the Humanists and their programme of antiquising style. In 1913, Warburg overturned his opinion: "Botticelli thus took his material from existing tradition, but he used it in an entirely ideal and individual human creation. He owed his new style to the revival of Greek and Latin antiquity [...] and above all to the sculpture of antiquity itself, which had shown him how the gods of Greece dance to Plato's tune in higher spheres" (*Italian Art and International Astrology in the Palazzo Schifanoia, Ferrara, RPA*, p. 585).

10 G. W. F. Hegel, *Aesthetics*, translated by T. M. Knox, Clarendon Press, 1975, p. 502 and foll.

11 *Ivi*, p. 504.

12 *Ivi*, p. 508.

13 Disagreement with Winckelmann's views, and particularly his interpretation of Laocoön, is a crucial point in the development of Warburg's theories. The following quotation demonstrates the extent to which Warburg followed in the wake of Nietzsche, and opposed the line taken by Hegel and Winckelmann: "Due to research into the religion of the ancient Greco-Roman world, we are learning more and more to see antiquity as symbolised, as it were, in the two-faced herm of Apollo and Diony-

sus. Apollinian ethos together with Dionysian pathos grow like a double branch from one trunk, as it were, rooted in the mysterious depths of the Greek maternal earth”, *The Emergence of the Antique as Stylistic Ideal in Early Renaissance Painting* (1914) in *Art History as Cultural History. Warburg’s Projects*, edited by R. Woodfield, Amsterdam 2001, p. 28. Winckelmann’s authority had already been at the centre of the controversy initiated by Wilamowitz-Möllendorf over Nietzsche’s *The Birth of Tragedy*; see U.v Wilamowitz-Möllendorf, *Zukunftphilologie!*, Berlin 1872; en tr. *Future Philology!* by Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorf, translated by G. Postl, B. Babich, and H. Schmid (2000).

14 Notes for the lecture on the *Serpent Ritual*, 1923, AWB, p. 20.

15 *Über die Darstellung des Centaurenkampfes*, 1887, AWB, p. 38.

16 *Sandro Botticelli’s “Birth of Venus” and “Spring”*, RPA, pp. 141-142.

17 *Ivi*, p. 140.

18 *Ivi*, p. 141.

19 *Ivi*, p. 156, n. 187.

20 F. Nietzsche, *Posthumous Fragments*, see [www.nietzschesource.org](http://www.nietzschesource.org) (indicated by the translator).

21 AWB, p. 110.

22 For the figure of the “Nymph”, see AWB, pp. 112-113; for Ghirlandaio, his patrons and the solution to conflicts concerning ethics and style, see *The Art of Portraiture and the Florentine Bourgeoisie. Domenico Ghirlandaio in Santa Trinita: The portraits of Lorenzo de’ Medici and His Household*, RPA, pp. 185 and foll.

23 For this concept, fundamental for Warburg, see also E. Wind, *Warburgs Begriff der Kulturwissenschaft und seine Bedeutung für die Ästhetik*, 1931, and ASW, pp. 401 and foll.

24 *The Theatrical Costumes for the Intermedi of 1589. Bernardo Buontalenti’s Designs and the Ledger of Emilio de’ Cavalieri*, RPA, pp. 386.

25 *Francesco Sassetti’s Last Injunctions to His Sons*, RPA, pp. 223 and foll.

26 *Ivi*, p. 247.

27 See Burckhardt-Übungen, *Notizbuch*, 1927; transla. Burckhardt and Nietzsche, in “Adelphiana”, numero unico, 1971, pp. 9-13.

28 F. Saxl, *Die Ausdruckgebärden der bildenden Kunst*, “Bericht über den XII. Kongress der Deutschen Gesellschaft für Psychologie in Hamburg vom 12-16 April 1931”, now in ASW, pp. 419 and foll.

29 It is known that Tito Vignoli’s book *Myth and Science*, originally published by Dumolard, Milano, 1879, and Darwin’s essay *Expressions of Emotion in Man and Animals* particularly influenced Warburg. In this regard, please see AWB, pp. 67 and foll.; for the relationship between Warburg-Usener-Vignoli, see M. M. Sassi, *Dalla scienza delle religioni di Usener ad Aby Warburg in Aspetti di Hermann Usener filologo della religione*, Seminario della scuola Normale Superiore di Pisa, 17-20, february 1982, Giardini Pisa 1982, pp. 65 and foll.

30 See also T. Vignoli, *Del mito nell’interpretazione scientifica della natura e della storia*, “Il pensiero italiano”, 24, 1892, pp. 548 and foll.; the specific influence of Vignoli on Warburg should not, however, be overestimated. That fact that science emerges from mythico-religious thought is a widespread acquirement of social sciences and anthropology at the end of the 19th. See for example, É. Durkheim, *Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, Ed. Mark S. Cladis, translated by Carol Cosman, Oxford University Press 2001.

- 31 *AWB*, pp. 239 and foll.
- 32 *Manet*, *AWB*, p. 274.
- 33 *Italian Art and International Astrology in the Palazzo Schifanoia, Ferrara*, *RPA*, pp. 563 and foll.
- 34 *Ivi*, p. 585.
- 35 *Ivi*, p. 586.
- 36 For information on the lecture on Rembrandt see *AWB*, pp. 228 and foll.
- 37 *Pagan-Antique Prophecy in Words and Images in the Age of Luther*, *RPA*, pp. 597 and foll.
- 38 *Über astrologische Druckwerke aus alter und neuer Zeit*, 1911, *AWB*, pp. 199-200.
- 39 On the subject of *pensiveness* as a space for reflection, as thoughtful hesitation, see the short text by H. Blumenberg, *Nachdenklichkeit*, "Neue Zürcher Zeitung", Zürich, 21 november 1980, which echoes, almost literally, Warburg's thought.
- 40 *Images from the Region of the Pueblo Indians of North America*, a lecture held at Kreuzlingen on 25 april 1923; for the background to the lecture see *AWB*, pp. 216-227.
- 41 For the social functions of primitive magic, see M. Mauss, *A general theory of magic*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972. For affinities between the notions of Mauss and those of Warburg, see D. L. O'Keefe, *Stolen Lightning. The Social Theory of Magic*, Continuum Books, New York 1982, an essay whose title is clearly inspired by Warburg.
- 42 A. Warburg, *A lecture on Serpent Ritual*, translated by W. F. Mainlan, "Journal of the Warburg Institute", vol. 2, n. 4 (Apr., 1939), pp. 291-292.
- 43 *AWB*, p. 153.
- 44 F. Jesi, *Mito*, cit. p. 66.
- 45 Cassirer, *Language and Myth*, Harper and Brothers, (1946) 1953, p. 8.
- 46 *Ivi*, p. 98.
- 47 *Ivi*, p. 99.
- 48 E. Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, vol. III, Chapter 1, Yale University Press, 1965, p. 67.
- 49 *AWB*, pp. 258-259.
- 50 *AWB*, pp. 262-263.
- 51 *AWB*, p. 303.
- 52 For the relationship between Benjamin and Warburg, see W. Kemp, *Walter Benjamin und die Kunstwissenschaft*, 2. *Walter Benjamin und Aby Warburg*, "Kritische Berichte". 3, 1973, pp. 30-50 and 1, 1975, pp. 5-25.
- 53 H. Arendt, *Walter Benjamin*, "Merkur", 22, 1968, pp. 50-56; 209-223; 305-316; english translation in "The New Yorker", 19 october 1968, pp. 65-156.





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