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211

**Under the Volcano.
Warburg's Legacy**

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Under the Volcano. Warburg's Legacy

edited by
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“One talked all European languages”

Note on a Letter from Gertrud Bing to Luigi Meneghello (1957)

edited by Chiara Velicogna

This hitherto unpublished letter (Biblioteca Bertoliana di Vicenza, Carte Meneghello, Corrispondenza 24, c.14), sent from Gertrud Bing to Luigi Meneghello clarifies some aspects of Bing’s speech on the Warburg Institute at the conference held in La Mendola in August 1956, published in full on “Engramma” 177 (2020) with a foreword by Elisa del Prete.

One matter in particular is made explicitly clear by this letter and contradicts Del Prete’s statement that Bing wrote the speech in Italian and had it then revised by Luigi Meneghello: the letter makes it unequivocally clear that Bing actually wrote in English and proceeded to have the text translated to Italian by Meneghello. By 1956, he had been in England for ten years, was – together with his wife Katja – a friend of Bing’s and was close enough to the Warburg Institute group to have both the right linguistic abilities and the specific knowledge of the matter to ensure a proper translation. That Luigi Meneghello actively frequented the Warburg Institute – and its Library – in London is variously confirmed, from his own recollections in *La Materia di Reading* and *Il dispatrio*.

Being in this *milieu*, it is not surprising then that Bing thinks of Meneghello when planning the introduction to *La rinascita del paganesimo antico*: it should be noted that, again, the intention of writing in English – in this case, not in German – is explicitly stated. This remark opens up new questions about the final version of Bing’s Introduction and its translator. Information about the original publisher (Teubner) and title of the work, *Gesammelte Schriften* is given in the colophon, followed by credits to the translator of the work, Emma Cantimori. However, with the introduction being written on purpose for the Italian volume and not being part of the 1932 Teubner edition, it cannot yet be determined beyond all doubt whether Bing’s text was translated by Cantimori, Meneghello or even if Bing wrote it herself in Italian, a matter which will be clarified by further studies on archival sources.

Other interesting linguistic details can be gleaned from this letter, particularly regarding Bing’s use of language: she states that “one talked all European languages at La Mendola” and that she spoke French with Belgian and French scholars there, thus leading – through second-hand rumours – to Meneghello hearing that the speech had been read in French. Bing’s willingness to improvise in Italian as a last resort reinforce her own very favourable attitude to

the Italian language and remarks on its knowledge in the Warburgian circle expressed in the La Mendola speech.

The mishap around the wrong postage stamp, as well as the letter being sent close to five months after the conference lead Bing to use the idiom “you will heap fiery coals on my head”, with the meaning of provoking remorse by way of a good action, which felicitously has a direct German translation, with the same use and meaning, “feurige Kohlen aufs Haupt sammeln” (see for example J.W. Goethe’s letter of March 1773 to Johann Daniel Salzmann).

In the multilingual, international *milieu* of Humanistic Studies and – even more so – of the Warburg Institute, a German (Bing) wrote in English to an Italian (Meneghella) and spoke French, but still retaining, as an undercurrent, some traces of German – and further light will be shed by future studies on the details this letter just hints at.

Letter from Gertrud Bing to Luigi Meneghella, 16th January 1957

Dear Meneghella,

I hear from Gordon that there must have been a great deal of confusion about your translation of the speech which I gave at La Mendola. First of all I must tell you that I am quite sure that I wrote you a post card after I had given my speech, saying that it had all gone off well; unfortunately, I do know that I put the wrong postage on some of the cards which I sent from La Mendola and it is possible that this is the reason why your card did not reach you.

But the real confusion arises from the fact that someone told you that I spoke in French. Even if I had not had your translation I think I would have improvised an Italian speech rather than a French one. The error may have arisen from the fact that one talked all European languages at La Mendola and somebody may have heard me speaking French to one of the French or Belgian scholars who attended the meeting. At any rate, I read your translation, and I think the speech went down fairly well. I asked Momigliano afterwards how the Italian had sounded and he said that your translation was very good indeed, so you may be quite reassured on that count. But this whole matter has suddenly brought back to me a dreadful sin of omission. You will remember that when I asked you to do the translation I also asked you to tell me how much time you had spent on it, because I would not have dreamed of asking you to tackle the job without remuneration. I did not pursue the matter right away, because as you will also remember, your translation reached me after my departure, and I am sorry to say that when I returned to the Institute in October it had completely slipped from my memory. I hope therefore that you will be good enough to accept the enclosed cheque* with my very sincere

apologies for the delay. It is no proper expression of my sense of obligation towards you, but I hope you will heap fiery coals on my head by accepting it.

My thanks ought to have reached you from La Mendola, and I am sorry that I did not write to you immediately upon my return to London.

Incidentally, I have to write an Introduction to the Italian translation, from the German, of Warburg's writings which the Nuova Italia is publishing. I am planning to write this Introduction in English and I wonder if I might turn to you again for the translation into Italian?

I hear of you fairly regularly from Gordon, and I am always glad to hear that everyone is well, but it is a great pity all the same that there never seems an opportunity for us to meet. Do you and Katja never come to London nowadays?

My kindest regards to both of you, and with all good wishes for the New Year,

Yours as always,

G. Bing

*[handwritten] It will reach you through the university accountant instead of being enclosed with this letter.

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Abstract

We publish here a letter sent by Gertrud Bing to Luigi Meneghello on 16 January 1957, a few months after Bing's lecture on the Warburg Institute at the Humanist Studies Conference in La Mendola. The letter describes the conference's "European" atmosphere and represents important evidence to the new historical and intellectual context after the tragic years of the Second World War and the German intellectuals' diaspora. The text also provides details to the state of art on the Italian edition of Warburg's writings for La Nuova Italia, which Bing edited (and which would only be published after her death in 1966).

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keywords | Gertrud Bing; Luigi Meneghello; Arnaldo Momigliano; Donald Gordon; Emma Cantimori; La Nuova Italia.

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