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CARLO CORSATO

“Hoc est corpus”

Guide to reading Plate 79

“Seminario di Tradizione classica”, coordinated by Monica Centanni and Katia Mazzucco

translated by Elisabeth Thompson

Plate 79 is the panel that ends the final version of *Mnemosyne* on which Warburg himself worked. In many respects, the way it is assembled reveals and unveils fundamental aspects that form part of the structure and scheme of his entire work.

As in the early panels of the Atlas – cfr. especially plate C – the impagination of plate 79 appears to be simple and straightforward. It is possible to identify three vertical sections. To the left and grouped together are works of art, sculptural (St. Peter’s See, figs. 1, 2, 3) and pictorial (Raphael, Giotto, Botticelli respectively, figs. 4, 11, 12). The images of St. Peter’s See, an ebony throne probably belonging to the Carolingian era (fig. 1) framed in Bernini’s complex baroque structure (fig. 3), function as the beginning of the plate. They bring together and emphasise the themes suggested by the association of the images: Rome and the Vatican, and Peter the Apostle, and the origins and the foundation of the Catholic Church.

The pillar to the left, and the whole composition of the plate are given special emphasis by Raphael’s fresco from the Vatican rooms representing *The Bolsena Mass* (Fig. 4), and the miracle of the Host which gave rise to the feast of Corpus Christi, a subject that introduces the theme of the central panel. This part of the montage (figs. 8, 10, 13, 14, 15, 19) is formed by images of current events, photographs taken during the Eucharistic procession of Pope Paul XI which took place Rome on 25th July 1929. Below, arranged symmetrically in relation to a photograph of a military procession, are pinned two C15th prints, (one of northern origins, fig. 18, and the other Italian, fig. 20), both of which represent desecrations of the Host.

Above, the photograph that appears to be out of place representing a ‘sepuku’ scene (fig 5, cfr. Fig. 6), introduces us to the right hand section of the panel, which once again is made up of images, in this case newspaper

cuttings true and proper, depicting current events: two pages from the illustrated supplement to the *Hamburger Fremdenblatt* dated 29 July 1929 (figs. 9, 17); two cuttings with news of the signing of the treaty (1925, fig. 7), and of a railway accident (fig. 21), also arranged symmetrically in relation to the two sheets from the magazine, and introducing and closing the column of newspaper cuttings.

The inclusion of figs. 9 and 17 – particularly the first, which is a whole page – overturns and complicates the order of reading suggested by the tripartite scheme, so revealing the inadequacy of the orientation provided by the first grid, and providing a window through which to view the way every plate in the Atlas functions.

On 30 July 1929 Warburg held a class in which he commented on the very sheet of newspaper represented in fig. 9. He was attracted not only the news it contained (threads that were woven into the itineraries of the plate and not left in abeyance), but also by the style of language and devices used to compose an illustrated current event. During the course of the lesson, Warburg defined the sheet as 'a salad of images'. However this description, seemingly contemptuous, conceals a meaning that goes beyond pure irony and self-mocking which are far from absent in the montage of the plate. Warburg's opening words at the 30 July lesson stated that an illustrated supplement of a daily paper is not only meant to revive a debate that has become slightly stagnant. Rather, it has a more ambitious purpose, and on that particular day of celebration it served to found the mission of the KBW.

As Wolfram Pichler and Gudrun Swoboda, during the course of a conference held in Siena in 1998, pointed out, plate 79 places the viewer before a montage within a montage. The newspaper sheet is composed of photographs relating to the most diverse events (a golf match, a committee meeting on harbour studies, a boat race, a banquet, a religious procession, a swimming race, a horse race) accompanied by brief captions and paginated according to editorial requirements. In this sense, the sheet portrays an internal duplication of the plate, and it is in this way, observe Pichler and Swoboda, that the newspaper articles and the Atlas are mutually informative.

However, there is a difference between the montage of the illustrated page of a magazine and the composition of a Warburg plate. A newspaper needs to accommodate all the photographs in a circumscribed area in an order

that is based on purely spatial criteria, and according to a hierarchy dictated by visual impact and readership attraction – the most important news (according to the editorial department on the basis of its reading public) earns more prominent space, form and margins. Conversely, the scheme of the photomontage adopted by Warburg – and openly declared by the presence of fig. 9 in plate 79 – is entirely freed of the dangers of trivialising, misinterpreting, and inflating the significance of the images (the so-called ‘salad effect’) and becomes the opposite – a composition that by identifying parallels, juxtapositions and variances in what is represented creates meaning.

Furthermore, within the hermeneutic structure of the plate (as well as in the arguments expounded in the lesson held by Warburg on 29 July), the illustrated page is rescued from the chaos of non-meaning, and is activated by the images that surround it into a manifestation of contemporary thought: the catharsis of ritual violence (fig. 5) in the gesture of the sports champion (the golf players, fig. 9), the powerful (and misinterpreted) contrast between the presentation of the physical body (the swimmer, fig. 9) and the ostentation of the mystical body (the entire central section of the panel).

In the light of Warburg’s theory of symbols and the polarities of their signification, therefore, the images arranged on the newspaper sheet become parts of a single complex scheme that are loaded with conflicting meanings. In turn, each photograph that forms part of the illustrated page can belong to a different order when polarised by catalysing images other than those established by newspaper editors for commercial purposes. Warburg, an able deconstructor and enhancer of meaning, shows that he is able to exploit even this potential by using single stories in the illustrated page of 29 July within the montages of other plates (Plate 72, figs. 5, 9; plate 77 fig. 2). The very same images that form part of the structure of fig. 9 in plate 79, due to effective associations, acquire an eloquence of their own and offer new formal connections and meanings

Both from a compositional and thematic standpoint plate 79 is the ‘programmatically opening’ to the Atlas. This is interesting because it is the last *Mnemosyne* plate. According to Pichler and Swoboda it is a statement of the present, and of the aims and methods of the Atlas, placed at the end rather than at the beginning of the work. The central theme of the plate is the sublimation of the sacrifice of the body in ritual acts, which in Warburg’s terms is defined as the exclusion of the crudely material aspects of sacrificial acts. The first form of ritual activity is still violent – the body is sacrificed in harakiri style (fig. 5). However, the plate includes two exam-

ples of symbolic interpretation and sublimation that keep the body central, whilst going beyond all residual literal meaning: the ostentation of the mystical body in the Eucharist, and the display of a sportsman's body. Figs. 4, 8, 10, 11, 13, 14, 15, 19 recall the ostentation of the divine body in Eucharistic rites. Figs. 9 and 10 draw one's attention to displays of physicality. From a mystical perspective, the body that is symbolically more powerful – the body of God-Man – is offered for sacrifice. However, beforehand, in the Last Supper, Christ prefigures and transfigures the bloody sacrifice that will be carried out on his own body, by instituting the Eucharist. The transubstantiation into flesh and blood of the wine and bread, and the distribution of his body to his disciples, is at once the symbolic prefiguration of the sacrifice, a key to interpreting the event as a Dionysiac sparagmos and a declaration of its repeatability in the liturgical rites. Warburg, in the lesson of 29 July 1929, played on the conflicting statements 'Hoc est corpus meum' and 'Hoc meum corpus est'. The second statement could be the motto for another kind of sublimation of the ritual act that emphasises the body as a formal paradigm and places the stress on another semantic and cultural register – the physicality of the athlete. Warburg focuses on this aspect of the body without placing it lower in the hierarchical scale in relation to the ostentation of the mystical body, the Host. On the other hand, one of the opening plates of the Atlas is significantly dedicated to the centrality of the human body, and anthropocentrism in particular (Plate B).

The display of physicality has its *topos* in the figure of a sportsman. As can be seen in the relationship established between the posture of the golfer (fig. 9) and that of the executioner (fig. 5), it is another example of sublimation, an model posture, but also, however, a catharsis after violence. As a whole, Plate 79 can be read, therefore, as the translation of an act of violence into a symbolic one.

In this sense, the Pathosformel – for example the gesture of the golfer, and the posture of the athlete (in fact the latter is more attributable to a Statusformel), should be considered as the scar of a sacrificial act (Pichler and Swoboda), a sign of an original wound, but altogether a form of cultural conversion from the original violence of sacrifice. Athletic movements, entirely physical expressions of pathos, produce catharsis, what Warburg himself describes as 'motory catharsis'.

In the anti-Semitic prints representing a stabbed Host (figs. 18 and 20), the two forms of sublimation into symbolism – ritual and sport – undergo an

inversion of meaning. The profanation of the mystical body, still a ritual act, has a meaning that is distinctly negative.

The profanation is portrayed as a violent derivation of the sublimation of a ritual act. If the institution of the Eucharist is the sublimation of the literary meaning of sacrificial violence, stabbing the Host, even if considered on the same level as an inverted ritual act, restores the sacrifice to its original status of literal violence. Warburg suggests that the inverted Jewish rite is a counterpoint to the sublimation of Christian culture.

Reading these historical documents as offensive anti-Semitic propaganda, it is impossible not to be struck by a biographical detail that hints at Warburg's self-mocking spirit, or at least a certain Renaissance haughtiness. It is however, important, in this light, to remember the heated defence that Warburg himself made of his conversion to Catholicism during the lesson he gave whilst he was putting together the montage of the plate.

Warburg emphasises that the unreachable rift between Christianity and Judaism lies in their respective recognition and refusal to recognise God's incarnation and the institution of the Eucharist ("Hoc est corpus meum"). The Jews not only put Christ to death, physically. They also scorn (and in anti-Semitic propaganda, stab and desecrate) the symbol of his body, the Host. The insistence on Jewish human sacrifice, a topos of anti-Semitism from its origins to date, apart from inferences of demonisation, is a reflection of the material fact that the Jews were hostile to Christ and to the Eucharist, but also of the primitive, unsublimated nature of their rituals.

The theological dispute over the sacrificed body par excellence – the body of God made man – does not only put Judaism in conflict with Christianity. It also puts northern spirituality in conflict with the religiosity of the Mediterranean.

The image most prominently shown in the order of the plate (fig. 4), is Raphael's fresco commissioned by Pope Julius II (whose portrait appears amongst the prelates at prayer) that has its subject the miracle that occurred in 1263 at Bolsena as a result of which pope Urban IV instituted the feast of Corpus Christi. A Bohemian priest who entertained doubts on the transubstantiation, saw the consecrated Host drip blood during the celebration of Mass. Want of faith in the Eucharist, which would become one of the crucial aspects of the Reformation – miraculously reconverts

the symbol of sacrifice to its basic literal meaning – the real blood of the sacrificed victim. By placing Raphael's *The Mass at Bolsena* in one of focal positions of the plate, Warburg appears to want to emphasise the Corpus Christi as its central theme. On the other hand, in the text of the lesson he gave to his undergraduates on 30 July Warburg weaves biographical detail with his research in his customary fecund manner and describes his own religious journey as a process that leads from North to South, as a conversion not only from Judaism to Christianity, but as a journey from Northern literalness to a specifically Catholic and Mediterranean religiousness.

The dense semantic plot of plate 79 betrays an undeniable conflict between the current events portrayed (the display of the human body, the ostentation of the Host), but no markedly misoneistic intention is present. Even when Warburg talks of 'degradation' what he really is concerned about (and places at the centre of his figurative discourse and theoretical reasoning) is the survival of postural formulas and powerful thematic units. What remains and persists is important, not what is lost in transmission – there is no nostalgia, no wish to recover the past. There is no sense of violation – as Pichler and Swoboda observe – in the migrations of current events into religious themes, of the profane and pagan into the arena of what is sacred.

Even Warburg's apparently disparaging observation on the 'salad of images' relating to the newspaper sheet cannot be interpreted in a negative way, as a sign of a 'crisis in the collective memory of society' that would be expressed in a casual disorder that is devoid of sense. The reverse is true. Warburg seems to propose an opposite reading of the document reporting current events. Even a sheet of newspaper, seemingly chaotic and confused, can render sense, and be a symptom of a cultural climate, a witness to a discourse on the body, a fragment with which to reconstruct a meaning that is constant in our cultural memory. Warburg's work has been to confer meaning, to find connections, in material which is seemingly chaotic, and which current events – always, not only now – invite one read and interpret as if they were a text.

It is in this sense again, that the reproducibility of images, enhanced by modern technology, lies at the opposite extreme of Warburg's view of printed images as 'wings of figurative ideas'. Even in terms of method and research, Warburg had a totally positive attitude, with no hint of prejudice or pioneering spirit in the use of modern technology. The negative, antimodernist opinions arising from the ending of the Serpent Ritual which have gained

importance, seem to burden established views of the techniques and modernity which Warburg championed.

The process of cultural memory, without idealisation, is precisely this – and is visible in plate 79. Communication, even much maligned mass communication (especially during the C20th) is not disordered inactive material. Rather, it contains within the minutest detail of its documents, heuristic values for understanding history.



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