

**114**

**marzo 2014**

ENGRAMMA • 114 • MARZO 2014  
LA RIVISTA DI ENGRAMMA • ISBN 978-88-98260-59-1

# Aby Warburg e Mnemosyne Atlas

a cura di Monica Centanni, Daniela Sacco

ENGRAMMA. LA TRADIZIONE CLASSICA NELLA MEMORIA OCCIDENTALE  
LA RIVISTA DI ENGRAMMA • ISBN 978-88-98260-59-1

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# Aby Warburg and his biographers

An intellectual portrait in the words of Giorgio Pasquali (1930),  
Gertrud Bing (1958), Edgar Wind (1970)

M. Centanni and G. Pasini, edited by E. Thomson

Warburg would say of himself that he was  
“just the right man to create a beautiful memory”  
(Gertrude Bing)

## I. Ernst Gombrich and Edgar Wind

*Aby Warburg: An Intellectual Biography* is the title of a famous book by Ernst Gombrich published in London in 1970 (see, in *Engramma*, a presentation of Gombrich's book). Until then, Warburg's name and his scholarly work were more or less unknown. By virtue of this successful biographical essay translated into all major European languages, he became an important reference point on the international cultural landscape. It is to Gombrich, therefore, that we owe the undoubted merit of having promoted and restored from amongst the great individuals of the 19th century the charismatic personality of Aby Warburg. The book, which stitches together biographical narrative, published and unpublished writings, diaries, fragmentary notes and private letters, projects an extraordinary, fascinating and tormented portrait of the German scholar. Paradoxically, it was the fortune of Gombrich's book, which in terms of diffusing the thoughts and method of Warburg, contributed to the phenomenon which Gertrud Bing had already exposed: “Warburg's posthumous fame is based more on hearsay than on the knowledge of his writings, and even today, he shares the fate of those authors who [...] are praised with more zeal than with which they are read”. Gombrich's biography was slated by one of the best interpreters of Warburg's teachings. Edgar Wind, in a review published a few months after its publication, underscored all the shortcomings in composition and interpretation that appear in the biography. “Born under a negative sign” the book, which was also accused of being grey, monotonous, as well as unpolished and dull, was criticised in three respects:

– The criteria which govern the composition of the essay, namely the discriminate and indiscriminate organisation of Warburg's published and unpublished material, its imprecise and chaotic organisation within an artful

structure which is meant to make Warburg speak “in his own words”, and which rather, produces the frustrating impression of convoluted thinking and groping in the dark.

– His reconstruction of the psychological make-up of Warburg, the man-scholar, whose tragic insanity he misunderstands, and who is presented as a “spectre with the appearance, fashionable today, of a tormented spineless person, shapeless, restless and sterile, perennially preoccupied with his own interior conflicts and senselessly compelled to exaggerate them by his uncontrollable itch for the Absolute” (see, in *Engramma*, an observation on Gombrich’s negative interpretation of Warburg’s reading of Laocoon)

– His reduction of the greatness of the man-scholar and the importance of his works to the intellectual adventure of a genius, inspired by insanity, who travels the intricate twists and turns of his own labyrinths, establishing the uniqueness of his genius, but in so doing embalming it and neutralising the revolutionary significance of his method.

## II. Gertrud Bing

The image of Warburg which Gombrich presents also contradicts the evidence of those who had occasion to work with him and to know him personally as a man and scholar. Of these, the one that particularly stands out is the recollection of Gertrud Bing, the most assiduous of Warburg’s assistants during the last phase of his life, and who after his death became the editor of the German edition of his essays (1933), and the passionate custodian of his memory. Bing, in the tribute written as the thirtieth anniversary of Warburg’s death approached (1958: see, in *Engramma*, the full text of the paper, *Aby M. Warburg*), re-established the image of a militant intellectual:

Warburg saw his scientific task as a mission; he would speak of the problem that drove him, and which he obeyed without rebelling despite his physical ailments, despite the lack of comprehension he frequently ran into, and despite the doubts he frequently entertained about himself.

His life and research were inseparably linked: his absolute rigour, sense of responsibility and his integrity never inclined towards compromise:

He applied the same gravity to matters concerning public life, and when referring to art or science he would always make them a personal cause. In these cases, too, he was never prepared to come to terms with mediocrity nor was it a habit of his stand on the ‘territory of the facts’.

Warburg however was always ready to face head-on the inevitable, self-appointed 'specialists', when "his sense of artistic and intellectual integrity was offended". "Without mercy" – Bing remembers – "but also without considering if in this way he made himself unpopular, he would throw himself into the skirmish with all the force of his pen and his cutting spirit. (...). For him it was a question of principle not to tolerate an optimism of inferior quality and not to abandon oneself to an arrogant sense of security". In this respect Bing quotes a characteristic anecdote which reveals a Warburg called unexpectedly as a consultant, who proves once again that he can be a difficult and embarrassing character when confronted by the obtuse pragmatism of bureaucracy:

One day, when he was called as an expert before a committee which had to decide whether to bring to an end or continue with the collection of chalk casts in the Kuntshalle, and was confronted by the customary bureaucratic reference to precedent and the huge expense, he observed that nature bestows chalk generously and in unlimited quantities. The word 'precedent' was like a red rag to a bull – all plans could be cut because of 'precedents'.

She recalls a Warburg who took part in tough controversial issues exposing the shabby intrigues of the academic world – from which he had always wanted to keep a distance – whenever it was necessary to back a valuable scholar and friend as occurred in the case of the philosopher Cassirer:

Warburg was not a trailblazer blinded by the idea that Hamburg had to have its own university [...]. But when, once the university was founded, it seemed likely that Ernst Cassirer would be transferred from his chair to Frankfurt, Warburg did not hesitate to enter the arena of the daily controversies. He had an article published in the *Hamburger Fremdenblatt* [...] because he was firmly convinced that the public at large had the right to know what was at stake in similar matters of academic summonses.

In Gertrud Bing's portrait, Warburg emerges as a master "who brought to everything he did, and to an extraordinary degree, the imprint of the unusual". He was generous with collaborators and scholars he admired: "There was no more faithful friend than he. Whenever he felt he could extend his recognition, he did so without reservation". However, even his closest followers had difficulty in reproducing the exceptional quality of his genius: "Not even his students or friends who found his scientific discussions unforgettable, will always be able to say in what way they were important and what it was that made them so extraordinarily powerful". He had an enthusiasm for teaching, which originated directly from his enthusiasm as a scholar:



His secret was in knowing how to make the things he considered important accessible to everyone, the young and the old, educated people and amateurs, even children. He thought it was more important to make the libraries already in existence known [...] to an increasingly wider circle of interested amateurs or, as he used to say, 'to show those potential readers the way of the book'.

Even in the field of research, Bing re-establishes the reputation of Warburg's methodological rigour and intellectual energy: his few essays are "masterpieces of scrupulous research, psychological sensitivity and a thorough understanding of the subject". Using a thoroughly innovative method, Warburg recognises the strict relationship between the formulas of pathos drawn from classical models and the "moulded form". This essential quality which "infuses figurative art with movement lies at the heart of Warburg's research", and influences the language he uses by conferring on it a characteristic sense of urgency". Nevertheless, his language always remains faithful to the "thing", "never straying from the historical event, which is the specific subject of his enquiry". His was a method that opened up new perspectives of research, which went beyond compartmentalisation and prejudice with regard to context.

In Warburg's day, no art historian would have been interested in the business contracts of the Medici, in the will of one of their colleagues in which art is mentioned, or in the letters of their representatives in countries beyond the Alps who complained about bad business. Matters of this kind were left to historians of politics and economics. According to prevailing opinion of the time, objects which served as domestic furnishings belonged to the realms of the craftsman, and their decorations appeared too distant in style and content from the production of the so-called liberal arts to be taken into account.

Warburg was the first to make the absolutely essential link between art and form in a systematic and rigorous fashion: "The problem of [...] whether the choice of figurative content was determined also by the use to which the objects would be put". With his multi-level investigative procedure that omits no detail, no trace, Warburg conceived a significant art historical method. "He has taught us – adds Bing – that even documents of little importance can be made to speak with a human voice". However, Bing observes, Warburg's teachings do not lie principally in his writings, but in his oral legacy and his construction of a new perspective – mental and real – of research: his teachings, his study notes, the Institute, the Library and the Atlas.

His essays present only a part of what his work and personality have come to signify in scientific research. To have the complete picture one would need to add to those essays the numerous fragments, cross-references, notes and sketches found amongst the papers he left [...]. One would have to be able to reproduce the lectures he held without a manuscript, for which we only have drafts and notes, and one would have to reconstruct the many conversations with his family in which he never tired of talking about his interest in science.

His legacy is the methodological approach that he bequeathed to his school. Bing observes: "Above all, one would have to include the works published during the last thirty-six years and edited by the Institute which bears his name. I think that in every one of them one could identify what in content or method is attributable to him". "Frequently self-mocking", and averse to acknowledging that he belonged entirely to one camp or another, he cultivated, according to Bing, an attitude of distinct disenchantment towards the Jewish culture which had defined the history of his family.

The pride in Jewishness which had always existed in the orthodox synagogue and which had developed under the pressure of anti-Semitism even among liberal Jews, was foreign to Warburg, who always rejected it firmly whenever he came across it. He always had a ready answer when asked what distinguished the Jews from the people of their host countries. 'We have endured universal history for two thousand years longer than they have'. That was all, but to those who knew Warburg it was not difficult to recognise in the formulation of his sentence the linguistic connection between the terms endure, suffer, pain, and passion: *amor fati*, love of fate.

As far as his illness was concerned, Bing also recalls his "wound" but she ascribes it to a kind of fruitful restlessness, a "holy dissatisfaction". His luminous spirit was at times tinged by a profound disquiet: the "tragic awareness that he was not permitted to live in untroubled harmony with himself and those close to him".

### III. Giorgio Pasquali

Gertrud Bing, in the Italian edition of Warburg's writings (*La Rinascita del paganesimo antico*, La Nuova Italia 1966), recognises in Giorgio Pasquali's recollection of Warburg dated thirty-five years earlier the "best tribute" to the teachings and the person of the master, a true intellectual biography, written in few austere, rigorous, essential and enlightening pages, in which every word, every phrase appears weighed with philological skill and care. Nonetheless, his comprehensive view manages admirably to capture Aby

the man and scholar in a light in which his life, personality and research interests appear tightly interwoven. In April 1930, only three months before his death, the Italian magazine “Pegaso” published the portrait of Aby, the man and scholar, written by the great classical philologist Giorgio Pasquali (see, in *Engramma*, full Italian text and English version).

When, during the previous autumn, scientific magazines began to spread the news of his death around the world, or at least the international world of intellectuals, [...] even university students must have asked themselves if the name, as well as belonging to an institute, belonged to a man too, because the Warburg Library for the Science of Culture at Hamburg was more famous than its founder and director, and together with other members of his family, its principal backer. The Warburg library is already the most complete of specialist collections of prints and iconographical material for those who wish to study the history of culture in general, and the history of the culture of the Renaissance in particular, with particular reference to the Renaissance in Italy, especially Florence. Once a month it transforms itself into a lecture hall for various disciplines – philosophy, the history of religions, the figurative arts, and astronomy and astrology, in as much as they all gravitate towards the history of culture [...]. That Warburg, the man, as well as Warburg, the great researcher, should disappear, and had done so whilst still alive, behind the institute which he himself had brought into being, was consistent with his intentions. He wanted first of all to be a teacher and organiser; he wanted his scientific thoughts, not many in number, perhaps, but significant and organically developed, to survive and bear fruit in the minds of his followers who from the beginning he considered his collaborators and successors.

From the beginning of his tribute, Pasquali recalls “the brotherly intimacy” which bound Warburg to Italy and Italian scholars. Perhaps it was no accident that of all these scholars (not only Italian), the only one who could find the most fitting words to describe his intellectual personality and who recognised early on the innovative and scientific value of his studies, was not an art historian but a classical philologist.

It may seem strange that speaking of Warburg here is someone who is not an art historian, or a friend from his early youth, but one who has not made a profession of his knowledge of the figurative arts and the Renaissance, but a very serious classical philologist, a scholar “without eyes”. Maybe this is not a bad thing: Warburg, who in his first work started from stylistic considerations, even then was not satisfied by them and, as far as I know, from that time onwards never showed any feeling for problems which were purely aesthetic or technical. Even at that time he investigated art as an expression of culture.

Pasquali detects in Warburg's first work on Botticelli his fruitful reception of Nietzschean thought as a key to fully understanding the hermeneutics of ancient civilisation.

Am I wrong if from this the first work of Warburg I have gained a perception of antiquity which is no longer the traditional one, the one of rhetoricians, which extols the tranquil nature of Ancient Greece? Warburg acknowledges that it had two faces, the Apollonian and the Dionysian, although he does not use these terms. The fatuous fairy-tale of peoples and eras with no experience of pain, even then, did not hold for him: he knew that indeed the most ancient forms of art are the daughters of suffering, because they are daughters of life, acquainted with drunkenness, passion and folly. Before Nietzsche, many had observed the wealth of contrast concealed in the heart of antiquity, perceiving the spirit of ancient culture as the fusion of two extremes. But no-one had defined this awareness in a formula, albeit, from a historical point of view, arbitrary, that was clear and that would distinguish the contrast between the Apollonian and Dionysian. This perception of Greek life was further developed and refined by a friend of Nietzsche, Rhode, who was perhaps the first to suggest, if not with these names, these concepts, and also by one of his rivals, Wilamowitz; that they shared this view for many years was unknown to both. This viewpoint has prevailed over the other, now considered an ahistorical product of Enlightenment thinking by all but a handful of provincial reactionaries.

Warburg's contribution not only to art studies is considered a felicitous affirmation of a suitably complex method, which is opposed to the simplification of compartmentalised knowledge and which Pasquali by then considered – rather optimistically – vanquished and on the road to extinction. Pasquali considered Warburg the first to acknowledge that the Renaissance was witness to the re-emergence of an antiquity that was essentially contradictory, which included at heart a Dionysian sensibility.

Antiquity bequeathed to the Renaissance the tools to clarify and express feelings and impulses that had lain out of sight for considerable time, allowing them to be aesthetically detoxed [...]. An era that aimed merely to reproduce the past could never have produced great art; and the men of the Renaissance were not, thank heavens, just humanists, any more than they were purists from the time of the Antonines.

Later, having summarised with masterly skill the extent of Warburg's studies and the ramifications of his research interests, Pasquali also observes:

Warburg cast his gaze with particular interest on the Dionysian and demonic elements which the Italian Renaissance absorbed from Hellenism

via imperial Roman art and medieval manuals from the East and Islam. A well-balanced researcher, Warburg never intended to deny that the Renaissance had also drawn from Antiquity those “Apollonian” elements of serenity and seriousness. Reaction against Winckelmann never led him to deny the much that was true, albeit excessively partial and exclusive, that is contained in the traditional perception of Antiquity.

So Pasquali acknowledges that Warburg’s view of the Renaissance is a complex fusion of ideas. In contrast with the gloomy image of Warburg which gains ground with later biographers, Pasquali offers a completely different portrait:

He was a born teacher. Indeed his most important discoveries, rather than reasoned in his head, were exposed briefly in lectures, leaflets or newspaper supplements, difficult to find unless received as a present from him, and even in this respect he was most generous. He possessed the most essential, elemental gift of a teacher: the warmth of his humanity. Warburg never felt that age was important, and when approached for the first time by a young person with oddly mixed feelings, half proud of a modest achievement, half uncertain as to what the famous man might think, would never allow the difference in their ages to matter. When times were difficult he considered it his duty to help beginners, even financially, without humiliating them, finding scientific paid work for them, and making many of them assistants in his most important undertaking, the Warburg Library.

He was a man who, precisely because he scorned the easy route, made his family’s advantageous status a resource for everyone. In this respect, Bing remembers the passion and tenacity with which Warburg would carry out his battles with institutions that, with their superficial political choices, impaired the image of the cities he loved, Hamburg and Florence. She also quotes from among his many preoccupations, his concern for the education of adults whom he sought to guide towards books because “culture never hurts”. “Warburg felt the need to expand. This man, tormented by terrifying apparitions, would suddenly regain his happiness; and he knew how to be calm and witty whenever he talked to a group of people who were prepared to understand him”. Warburg was a man who was generous with both his time and words, and who in his Library and his style of writing calls for his interlocutor to interact.

I don’t know whether he was a good conversationalist in the conventional, rhetorical sense of the word, but I know that he talked for far longer than the academic hour, sometimes for two; and yet I never tired. As he never thought of the form, but of the thing, he was always lively, never tedious. He

talked without a manuscript, often without notes, with nothing before his eyes other than the necessary figurative material. He spoke from the fullness of his heart, without concealing his patrician Hamburg accent, which annoyed certain Germans of the South more than it did us foreigners. Nor did he hesitate to interweave his talks with gibes, if gibes came to his lips, or to turn to someone in the auditorium when he knew that something in particular would have been of special interest to him or her. He was therefore a spontaneous speaker: a few colleagues of mine would probably have considered him devoid of academic dignity. However, his didactic style (and his style was always didactic), was more lively than austere, he did not shun images from daily life, fashionable phrases given new meaning, adages": he used cynical or even stoical invective, perhaps, or Socratic and Platonic exchanges of ideas, but his conferences were never sophistic.

Only at the end of his intellectual biography does Pasquali recall Warburg's illness. But he manages to include this infirmity in his intellectual history and makes it an important chapter in his research on what was most certainly not a peaceful existence, but was spanned by periods of anxiety, a life which "for reasons which were not contingent, but essential, was not always happy".

From 1918 to 1924 Warburg fought against mental illness. Authoritative witnesses reveal to us now after his death that at a certain moment he had begun to live his illness not only as historical reality. The impulse to discover not only what internal reality might have animated the magic and astrology of the Hellenistic era and the Renaissance, but also the magic practised by primitive men, with him from the Bonn years onwards, became little by little central to his being. In a certain sense he believed in magic, and felt all the irrational fears of primitive man. The illness in a certain sense was the continuation of his scientific research, and, what is stranger, he continued his scientific research throughout his illness, profiting from the experiences of his illness. His closest student relates: "In 1920, the professor would talk of Luther during the afternoon" (his incisive and rational study on Luther and astrology during the Reformation was finished during his period of mental illness), in the afternoon he would write wonderful pages on logic and magic; during the morning he had been a man who believed in magic, who believed in demonism and inanimate things. But he knew how to endure his illness, defeating it by means of scientific reasoning and activity. In a strange splitting of his personality, Warburg never ceased to observe himself, and to find in himself primitive man whose rationalism is rooted in magic.

This idea was taken up by Ginzburg who in 1966 wrote: "His study of astrology and magic during the Quattrocento and Cinquecento was dramatically interwoven with the mental illness which affected him for long peri-

ods of time – as though the strength required to master these ambiguous forces with reason, half connected with science, half connected with a dark, demoniacal world, came at a tragic personal cost”. Pasquali observes that the illness was unleashed by fear. “I saw him calmer and happier when he returned to Italy in 1927, than when I left him in 1915, frightened at the thought of the inevitable war between Germany and Italy, which would, he feared, create an abyss between the two countries he loved”. Pasquali’s far-sightedness when observing the life and works of Warburg made him view his death as an autumnal euthanasia: the sudden death of a life which was nonetheless “in a certain sense finished”. The conclusion to which Pasquali refers, is *Mnemosyne*, which unlike the superficial specialists and readers to come during the fifty years that followed, he considered a “completed” work.

“He left a figurative atlas ready for publication, which has the name of memory, *Mnemosyne*, which shows how different countries and different generations [...] have successively conceived, and having conceived transformed, the “pathetic”, Dionysian legacy of antiquity. It was his intention to live for future generations in his Atlas”.

Warburg’s legacy as teacher and scholar is recapitulated in words that have surprising relevance in the conclusion of Pasquali’s narrative. “

Young scholars will work according to his intentions, if not according to his spirit, if they do not accept with conviction concepts that are closely linked with his own powerful personality, and if instead they use the atlas as a touchstone for their own thoughts”. His, therefore, is not a closed, mummified message, but a journey, a comparison, a guiding star on which to construct a route of enquiry. Art historians and cultural scientists have the duty to make Warburg’s work fruitful, allowing it to work on them, thereby transforming it.

These are exemplary words, because they refer to the fundamental problem of knowledge: progressing at a slow pace, via successive changes of route, without inflexible or preliminary postulates, but with the distinct purpose of interpreting and comparing different hypotheses, which, by interaction and reciprocal transformation, create sparks of knowledge. Words on which eighty or more years later it is now time to reflect.

Reissue in “Engramma” no. 114 (March 2014)

First edition was originally published in “Engramma” no. 1 (September 2000)