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**A Companion  
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# A Companion to Warburgian Studies

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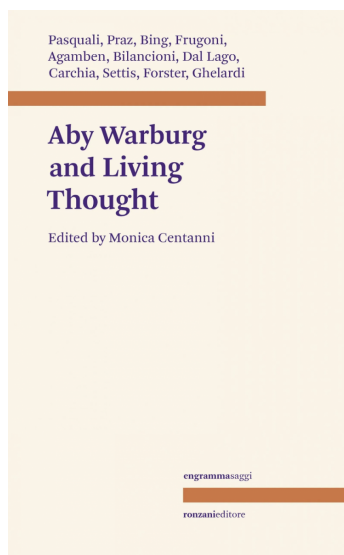
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# Expanded Warburg

## A Review of: M. Centanni (ed.), *Aby Warburg and Living Thought*, Ronzani 2022

Gabriele Guerra



M. Centanni (ed.), *Warburg and Living Thought*, Dueville 2022.

In his wonderful 1936 essay on *The Storyteller*, dedicated to the figure of the Russian writer Nikolai Leskov, Walter Benjamin at one point quotes the German writer Moritz Heimann (a German Jew a generation older than the Berlin thinker), according to whom “a man who dies at the age of thirty five is at every point in his life a man who dies at the age of thirty-five” (Benjamin [1936] 1968, 100). Benjamin comments:

Nothing is more dubious than this sentence —but for the sole reason that the tense is wrong. A man —so says the truth that was meant here— who died at thirty-five will appear to ‘remembrance’ at every point in his life as a man who dies at the age of

thirty-five. In other words, the statement that makes no sense for real life becomes indisputable for remembered life (Benjamin [1936] 1968, 100).

This formula is fascinating, even with Benjamin’s reservation; what does not really sound convincing in Heimann’s statement is the fact that a life —any life— offers itself, if anything, as a summary protocol of many chapters of the book of life, sometimes very different from each other, sealed by the fact that it ended at that precise moment and not at another;



in this sense, what Benjamin states, that this statement is valid for the remembered life, not for the life actually lived, is really incontrovertible.

“Remembered Life” therefore means life as it is consigned to the memory of posterity, to the game of posthumous interpretations, to the history of its effects (or *Wirkungsgeschichte* to use a term dear to the German philology), in an attempt, often in vain, to restore an overall image of that life lived, and of its many chapters.

This premise applies very well, as is evident, to those intellectual biographies that have spanned several seasons, both in terms of the chapters they are composed of and the history of their reception; and it applies even more so —and *pour cause*— to the intellectual biographies of German Jewry from first half of the twentieth century. Such a model applies, in even exemplary forms, to the lived life of Aby Warburg (1866-1929), even better to his “remembered life” —for which is really to apply what the Italian scholar of Persian Literature Gianroberto Scarcia writes in his *Afterword*, which closes the *The Paradox of Monotheism*, a collection of writings by the French scholar Henry Corbin:

We have been living ‘Corbinianically’ enmeshed [...] two nostalgias similar to those which, in Islam, are two half-lines by which one flees, from Today, to Eternity: one from here to the Non-Principle, one from here to the Non-End (Scarcia 1986, 163, author’s translation).

One could say, in short, that we too —all those, and there are many of us, who have been seduced by this figure— have lived Warburgian-style in this “two nostalgias” of the Non-Principle and the Non-End, and have applied this time to the vertigo of history in general, not just of art.

However, the two definitions of Non-Principle and Non-End, typical of Islamic mysticism, are not so far from Warburg’s perspectives, which are in essence anti-historicistic, and always aimed at problematising those philosophical categories —principle and end— that inform any historical-artistic conception.

And finally, this is precisely the reason why so many have remained so attached to Warburg’s figure and intellectual posture, rather than to his

thought, which is also, first and foremost, a theoretical attitude —which obviously also has its risks. Monica Centanni, in the long and passionate essay that closes this collection of Italian texts on Warburg from 1930 to the early 2000s (programmatically titled *Aby Warburg and Living Thought* [*Aby Warburg e il pensiero vivente*]), rightly emphasises that:

His name is cloaked in a captivating aura, with varying degrees of light and shade, forming a dense nebula of ideas that are all vague, all approximate and unclear (Centanni 2022, 319).

This is undoubtedly true, but it is so in a broader sense: because the captivating aura seems somehow consubstantial to Warburg's profile.

Chief among the many merits —among the many— of this collection of essays is the title itself, in that definition of “living thought” applied to Warburg that, if with the noun it constantly refers to the always rigorously theoretical and methodological dimension of his intellectual performance, with the adjective it decisively brings it down —with a Nietzschean gesture— within his personal parabola; and not to Olympically realise some airy interconnection between life and works, but rather to constantly underline the tensions, polarisations, and vertigo.

“Warburg felt the need to expand”: thus the celebrated Italian philologist Giorgio Pasquali in his recollection of the recently deceased scholar (Pasquali [1930] 2022, 52). This need for expansion has an immediately spatial dimension, in the continuous and obsessive growth of his readings, that is, of his books (for which, as is well known, he renounced his right of primogeniture in his great family of bankers), and therefore of the library, which rapidly took on his own intellectual features; but this necessity also possesses an intrapsychic dimension, of rhizomatic expansion of neuronal connections, inside his head, between ideas, figures, and gestures that rearrange themselves into new constellations of meaning. It is incredible, reading it now, to see how an Italian philologist could grasp, *in statu nascendi* as it were (significantly, seen from the end of Warburg's existential parabola) all the dimensions of the thought of an art historian and iconographer.

This entire book —and this is another of its merits— attests to the attention, acumen, and even passion that a significant part of Italian culture (the one furthest removed from Croceanism and Gramscism) dedicated, right from the start, to a complex figure such as Aby Warburg. In this sense, it is no coincidence that the first edition of his writings outside of Germany dates back to the Nuova Italia edition, from 1966, strongly desired by Delio Cantimori and his wife Emma Cantimori Mezzomonti in agreement with Gertrud Bing, Warburg's 'secretary' (more on this later). But it was precisely from the year after his death that determined sectors of Italian culture showed they were taking up Warburg's teachings and indications: Mario Praz, for example, who reviewed the German edition of Warburg's writings in 1934 (presented in this volume), and, above all Giorgio Pasquali, who not only, drew a complete picture of his multiform genius, but also recognised its more eccentric but vital components —starting with his mental illness, to which Pasquali dedicates the conclusions of his article, not to emphasise Warburg's greatness despite his pathology, but on the contrary to underline how "his illness was in a sense a continuation of his scientific research" (Pasquali [1930] 2022, 54). It is a hermeneutic path that needs to be claimed, precisely because Warburg's legacy, indeed his *Nachleben* —to use a word dear to him, which we could literally translate as 'posthumous life'— has long remained confined within the recognisable but anaesthetising spaces of academic labelling. This can be seen in the attitude of Ernst Gombrich, who published in 1970 his famous biography of Warburg —which smoothed out the corners, particularly those of Warburg's illness (but also of his last undertaking, the *Mnemosyne Atlas*, reduced to a sort of 'sticker album' for the amusement of its author in his later life and which was condemned to oblivion at the Warburg Institute for several years). It was again an Italian who, reviewing in 1984 the Italian edition of Gombrich's *An Intellectual Biography* on Warburg, programmatically declared how wrong Gombrich was in describing Warburg as was "a man lost in the labyrinth, whereas Warburg was truly its lord" (Bilancioni [1984] 2022, 108).

Warburg is therefore the lord of mental and physical expansion, the lord of the labyrinth of books and knowledge built with patient fury throughout his life: we have enough to see confirmed Gershom Scholem's more general intuition contained in his autobiography: "I used to define the

three groups, the one gathered around the Warburg library, Max Horkheimer's Institute for Social Research and Oskar Goldberg's metaphysical magicians, as the three most relevant 'Jewish sects' produced by German Judaism" (Scholem 1994, 162). Basically, all three of these 'Manifestations' of the Jewish spirit within German culture in the first half of the twentieth century possess the features of 'magical' thought, i.e. which is governed by a series of formulas immediately evocative of an entire theoretical system, whose rules elude rational thought: In the case of the *Institut für Sozialforschung* it is the dialectics of the Enlightenment; in the case of Warburg—and his 'sect'— a panoply of concepts-images of great fascination and not immediate comprehension, which spread, nonetheless, that "captivating aura" Monica Centanni speaks of: magic formulae, in short, one must know how to use them, for they remain inert fascinations otherwise. This has led to easy misunderstandings in the attempt to focus on his methodological proposals concerning the history of art, but not exhausted within that disciplinary enclosure; this is the reason why the philosopher Giorgio Agamben felt the need to write, in 1975, an essay that was in many ways fundamental (and punctually reproduced in this collection: *Aby Warburg and the Nameless Science*). For Agamben, it is first and foremost a matter of restoring a profound and extensive hermeneutic dignity (that of the Heideggerian method, to be precise) to Warburg's multiform device, trying to trace the individual points that form its complex conceptual architecture, without crystallizing it into a 'system':

Warburg's hermeneutical circle can thus be figured as a spiral that moves across three main levels: the first is that of iconography and the history of art; the second is that of the history of culture, and the third and broadest level is that of the 'nameless science' to which Warburg dedicated his life and that aims to diagnose Western man through a consideration of his phantasms (Agamben [1975] 1984, 2022, 98-99).

According to Warburg, it is precisely these, ghosts stories for adults, "Gespenstergeschichten für ganz Erwachsene", that we are dealing with in his *Bilderatlas* (and Agamben's other merit, especially in his 1983 *Postilla*, consists in underlining the theoretical innovation offered by the atlas of images that Warburg awaited throughout the final part of his existence), precisely in the sense of a procedure of re-emergence of the

Western repressed in the form of a series of images condensed in a single gesture. In this way, according to the Italian philosopher, Warburg constitutes that “iconology of the interval” which, according to Warburg’s own definition, represents the theoretical incunabulum of his thought:

Iconology of the interval: Art historical material towards an evolutionist psychology of the oscillation between the positing of causes as images and as signs (Gombrich 1970, 253).

This interval (*Zwischenraum*) is significantly defined as “an ‘a kind of no-man’s-land at the centre of the human” (Agamben [1975] 1984, 2022, 93).

Warburg’s “nameless science” is thus a ‘magical’ science grafted onto the Modern —precisely because Warburg appears from the outset to be intimately convinced, following on Nietzsche’s footsteps, of the operative presence of hidden energies in the human that produce explosive fields of tension. In fact, this is how Cassirer expresses himself in his funeral oration in memory of Aby Warburg at the KBW:

That uninterrupted chain of books seemed to me to be steeped in the aura of a wizard, an aura that was there suspended like an extraordinary set of norms (Warburg, Cassirer 2003, quoted in Settis [1985] 1996, 2022, 178).

The main one of which is the one marked by the names of the philosopher of Röcken himself and the Renaissance historian Jacob Burkhardt, linked by knowledge and discipleship. And which, in Warburg’s view, become the poles of a profound dialectic:

Sometimes it seems to me as if, in my role as psycho-historian, I tried to diagnose the schizophrenia of Western civilization from its images in an autobiographical reflex; the ecstatic nymph (manic) on the one side, the mourning river-god (depressive) on the other, like the two poles between which the sensible person, faithfully giving form to his impressions, searches for his own style in the creative act. The old game of contrasts: *vita activa* and *vita contemplativa* (Warburg [1928-1929] 2005, 91).

These are two poles, as can be seen, of remarkable internal articulation and stratification, inherent to the profound dimension of culture. As

Alessandro Dal Lago has convincingly emphasised in an insightful essay, contextual to his translation of the Gombrich's biography and present in this sylloge:

Culture is constantly exposed to the risk of being overwhelmed by those vital powers, but it must call upon them if it does not want to wither into formalism. Nietzsche and Burckhardt offer two complementary answers to this dilemma: Nietzsche yields and collapses, while Burckhardt remains aloof and detached (Carchia [1984] 2022, 128).

So much so that it becomes irresistible, at this level of reasoning, to see in these two polarities also two precise behavioural typologies, applicable not only to Warburg (who will see them triumphantly reunited, so to speak, in the diagnosis made by Ludwig Binswanger of the manic-depressive syndrome which afflicted the patient-Warburg) but also for much of the German Jewry of the time, whose socio-cultural psychogram could precisely be characterised, on the one hand, by Dionysian 'mania' and, on the other, by melancholic temperament. A rather eloquent dyadic *figura* for an intellectual attitude that characterises, after all, the very form of German-Jewish intellectual life in the first part of the twentieth century.

Another element worth adding to this psychogram of German Jewry captured here exemplarily in the type-Warburg is the one pointed out by Gertrud Bing. Her 1960 essay, simply entitled *Aby A. Warburg*, contains not only the affectionate recollection of a pupil, but also precious lines of reflection and interpretation (and Monica Centanni rightly laments the scholarly silence on Bing's papers, still incomprehensibly bound to the old-fashioned image of the faithful secretary in the shadow of the genius, when in fact there is so much work to be done on his papers: Centanni 2022b, 395). In particular those contained in two significant phrases by Bing. First, "Warburg the scholar was no stranger to worldly matters" (Bing [1958] 2022, 62), which clears the field of an overly simplistic image lurking in the shadow of the Warburg "lord of the labyrinth" of the books in his library —that of the scholar enclosed in his ivory tower. Second, when he remembers, in him, "the linguistic connection between 'pathos', 'patience', and 'passion': *amor fati*" (Bing [1958] 2022, 77). This too, one might say, is an explanatory formula of much German Judaism, which fully expresses that linguistic, theological and cultural constellation of pathos,

*passio* and patience conceived as a true behavioural model, as well as a cultural genealogy (Auerbach 1941).



Aby Warburg and Gertrud Bing.

In short, a Nietzschean Warburg who is “excited”, but also humanistically reserved, as well as Jewishly “passionate” and “patient” —all summed up in the manic-depressive diagnosis, therefore in “patho-logical” forms: perhaps this could be precisely the *Pathosformel* applied to the individual, that grand existential recapitulation that shows “at every point in his life a man who dies at sixty-three years of age” (Warburg in 1929). A *Pathosformel* that exhibits a timely catalogue of first and foremost cultural *Stimmungen*. Indeed, Kurt W. Forster, in a wide-ranging 1999 essay published to illustrate Warburg’s *Mnemosyne Atlas*, rightly defined him as a “cartographer of passions” (and this is the title of the essay, also present in this volume, Forster [1999] 2022), underlining, once again, his being a “magician” of thought:

Warburg was practising a kind of conceptual magic. He loaded individual words and groups of words with an intensive context of meaning that frequently led him to reiterate the formula, once found, with an almost invocatory force (Forster [1999] 2022, 286).

Once again, then, we have a reminder of Warburg’s “magical” power, which takes on the formular gestures of evocation precisely where it intends to rearticulate the connections that underpin our modernity:

In his investigations, Warburg's understanding pivots upon the historical moment: the point at which particularities hold each other in balance, and the flux of time is momentarily halted (Forster [1999] 2022, 300).

This definition by Forster not only describes the way Warburg stands—critically however—within the Modern, but also alludes to its ordering force, insofar as it refers to the ordering character of the 'formula' (which is nothing more than a small 'form'). Another great scholar of aesthetics, Gianni Carchia, who sadly passed away at an early age, had also produced a theoretical reflection of great penetration, in 1984, year in which the Italian scientific magazine "aut aut" published an important issue entirely dedicated to Warburg (and which contains the essays by Agamben and Dal Lago reproduced here). In it, Carchia emphasised how Warburg managed to delineate "image proves to be laden with historical initiatives" (Carchia [1984] 2022, 159), as expressed through an "obsessive attention" to the Pathosformel, that is:

The energetic depth in images whose almost maniacal archetype is the reappearance of the figure of the nympha in the Quattrocento Florentine paintings (Carchia [1984] 2022, 160).

Nymph and river-god, gesture of restlessness fractured in multiple, nervous derivations, and melancholic pose of hieratic fluidity: again and again, Warburg's thought is organised by polarities that seemingly incompatible at first, always find some vertiginous unity, simultaneously patient and passionate.



*Bibliothek Warburg: Entrance and Lecture Room.*



Warburg's psycho-philosophical 'typology', however, is also a 'topology', a doctrine of space, and of the spaces, in both the art-historical and concrete sense. For this reason, the volume under discussion also includes an essay by Salvatore Settis from 1985, *Warburg continuatus. The Description of a Library* (Settis [1985] 1996, 2022), which looks at a precise reconstruction and description of how the *Bibliothek Warburg* developed; which is first and foremost Warburg's own library, the set of books that he had been frantically acquiring since his childhood and that accumulated to such a point that he had to turn himself into an 'institution' —which, however, always bears the marks of a personal, indeed intimate, psychological enterprise. Settis's essay—followed by a *Final Note* that expands and corrects many of the analytical perspectives presented twenty years earlier, thanks above all to the discovery of a Warburg note that traces the fundamental lines of the library —is to all intents and purposes the fundamental text for attempting to establish the librarianship lines (which are evidently first and foremost basic theoretical lines) that govern the library, articulated in four thematic topics that over time are variously articulated and reorganised in its physical and mental spaces. On the one hand, the library offers itself to the gaze of the visitor as a living organism, a prosthesis of Warburg's mind:

First, the Warburg Library essentially reflects the work of its founder, and was conceived as an *itinerarium mentis* leading the reader along certain paths (Warburg's concerns), although not to predetermined solutions; second, such an 'itinerary' was conceived so that the transition from one section to another was perceived as 'natural' (Settis [1985] 1996, 2022, 199).

On the other, the library presents the thematic quadripartition "action"—"orientation"—"word"—"image", which is certainly influenced, as Settis again remembers, by the gnoseological dimension inherent to the classical Mysteries, particularly the Eleusinian ones (in my opinion, it also resounds with Goethe, especially of his *Faust* of "im Anfang war die Tat", that is, the genealogy of the modern subjectivity). Beyond the different rearticulations of this conceptual framework, between Hamburg and London (where the library moved to after Warburg's death but above all after the arrival of the Nazis), it is evident how Warburg conceived it as a rhizomatic and always active, living device: "a machine for studying", as

Monica Centanni defines it, as is the *Mnemosyne Atlas* (Centanni 2022b, 367), in the sense that “It was necessary to create ‘active’ spaces for culture to come alive” (Centanni 2022b, 369).



Aby Warburg's *ex libris*.

So we are back to the beginning: in Warburg, thought is living because in him culture is always innervated with the flesh and blood of those who practise it. This is both his wealth and his curse. In fact, as Monica Centanni again emphasises:

The essays included in this volume reveal Warburg's character which emerges in a particular light that emphasises the aspect of his creative and organisational energy that can only be recharged through his investment of passion and rigour (Centanni 2022b, 343).

It is summarizing a very precious volume, this one; completed by a review that the medievalist Arsenio Frugoni wrote in 1967, for the Nuova Italia edition of Warburg's writings already mentioned (*The Renewal of Aby Warburg*, Frugoni [1967] 2022), and by a text (*The Final Warburg*, Ghelardi [2007] 2022), which accompanies the first edition of the writings, this time reorganised in a more extended critical sense, which Maurizio Ghelardi was waiting for at the Italian publisher Aragno in the early 2000s (and which have now passed to Einaudi, in the prestigious series “I Millenni”). *Aby Warburg and Living Thought*, however, is not only a precise chronological and conceptual record of the Italian reception of Warburg

over these almost one hundred years (Cf. Cieri Via, Forti 2009), but also an application of “living thought” to his case: both because it comes from the broad and extremely rich, in theoretical and hermeneutical terms, workshop of “La Rivista di Engramma” and of the “Centro Warburg Italia” (of which Monica Centanni is a tireless and punctual animator); and because —and above all— it itself shows the same vital currents, present since 1930 in the interpretative fabric that has appeared in Italian, which innervate a reception that is always active, productive, vital. In this way, even on the threshold of that “sweet autumnal euthanasia” represented by his “sudden death” (this is how the elegiac close of Centanni’s essay sounds, Centanni 2022b, 413), Warburg continues to move his dance steps, like a patient maenad, on the faults of the Modern.

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The first Italian edition of this review is published in “Antinomie”, 13 Settembre 2022. The translation is by Gabriele Guerra.

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## Abstract

In this contribution, firstly published in "Antinomie", on 13th September 2022, Gabriele Guerra brilliantly reviews *Aby Warburg and Living Thought*, edited by Monica Centanni and published by Ronzani editore. The eleven essays here collected for the first time, all stemming from the Italian cultural milieu, trace with clarity Warburg's "living thought". Giorgio Pasquali, Mario Praz, Gertrud Bing, Arsenio Frugoni, Giorgio Agamben, Guglielmo Bilancioni, Alessandro Dal Lago, Gianni Carchia, Salvatore Settis, Kurt W. Forster, Maurizio Ghelardi: the polyphonic

dialogue, whether from close up or at a distance, between scholars of diverse backgrounds casts a new beacon of light that illuminates with clarity and precision Warburg's personality and intellectual legacy.

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*keywords* | Aby Warburg; Giorgio Pasquali; Mario Praz; Gertrud Bing; Arsenio Frugoni; Giorgio Agamben; Guglielmo Bilancioni; Alessandro Dal Lago; Gianni Carchia; Salvatore Settis; Kurt W. Forster; Maurizio Ghelardi.



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