

119

settembre **2014**

ENGRAMMA • 119 • SETTEMBRE 2014
LA RIVISTA DI ENGRAMMA • ISBN 978-88-98260-64-5

Aby Warburg e le origini di Mnemosyne

a cura di Monica Centanni, Daniela Sacco

ENGRAMMA. LA TRADIZIONE CLASSICA NELLA MEMORIA OCCIDENTALE
LA RIVISTA DI ENGRAMMA • ISBN 978-88-98260-64-5

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Mario Praz (1896–1982), Italian art and literary critic, and scholar of English literature – his significant contribution to the memory of Aby Warburg and his concern for the relocation of the Warburg Institute from Hamburg to London.

Aby Warburg's *Gesammelte Schriften* was published in Germany by Teubner (Aby Warburg, *Gesammelte Schriften*, herausgegeben von der Bibliothek Warburg, unter Mitarbeit von Fritz Rougemont, herausgegeben von Gertrud Bing, Teubner, Leipzig-Berlin 1932). Shortly afterwards, following the advent to power of the National Socialist Party, "under the pressure of political events" (as Gertrud Bing wrote), the Warburg Institute was transferred to London.

In 1934, Mario Praz reviewed Aby Warburg's *Gesammelte Schriften*. He was highly critical of the Warburg Library, already an important cultural institution, being exiled, complete with books and scholars, to London. He compared it with the exile of the Byzantines who, during the Renaissance, fleeing from Constantinople sought refuge in Italy taking with them the riches of their books and their knowledge.

Aby Warburg, *Gesammelte Schriften* (Teubner, Leipzig-Berlin, 1932) reviewed by Mario Praz

English edition by Elizabeth Thomson (first edition "Pan" II, 1934, pp. 624–626)

Giorgio Pasquali mentions Aby Warburg in "Pegasus" (April 1930; see in *Engramma* the new edition of the original version and the English translation) in such a way that even readers who beforehand had no idea who this Jewish humanist was, will not forget "the tiny little man, with his pepper and salt coloured moustache and incredibly sorrowful eyes", who was a great and greatly entertaining teacher. Humanist is a loose-fitting but capacious label, and I think it suits Warburg better than the title "learned", a term most people would associate with someone who is cold and unfeeling. His passion for research, and his thoughtfulness were, on the other hand, such prominent traits of Warburg's that for him it was more important to share his works with his followers than that his works should be successful. Only the outlines of some of his wide-ranging ideas are preserved today in his essays; and it is clear that his works need to be understood in light of the man, in order not to confuse him with a patient co-ordinator of curious facts, or with a gleaner from the margins of the living fields of history. When researching minutiae his aims were lofty, and he seemed to lose himself in infinitesimals.

To study the nuances of the transitions from one period to another in the history of culture – that was his passion – this was his task; and the trans-

mission of the classical tradition was the linchpin of his research. A detail of a costume observed in a drawing, the recurrence of a decorative detail, a fluttering garment, wind-blown tresses, an oval pleat, a votive offering made of wax, the lid of a box depicting a pledge of love – all these things that men of high stature and grand gestures cared nothing for, the tiny man would caress with his loving hands of a collector. However, his eyes could see far off and deep down, and not necessarily was the obsession that ruled him for many years – his obsession for the occult powers operating behind things great and small – exclusively madness. Perhaps the “impatient ambition for a wider point of view” which he protested against (in his essay *Imprese amorose nelle più antiche incisioni fiorentine*), as well as the desire to hurriedly gloss over important details, leads to superficiality not only of the history of culture: in order not to accept a safe and eager ambition, his eyes became “incredibly sorrowful.”

These two beautiful books published by Teubner are now making available to all libraries the contents of tracts that are out of print and hard to find but which his friends and followers had the good fortune to receive as gifts from Warburg. Of the many observations he makes, Pasquali lucidly summarises for the readers of “Pegasus” the ones that govern Warburg’s fame: the arsenal in which all students of the history of culture will find something to profit from, even if Warburg’s ideas do not directly touch upon their own special periods. That the Florentines of the Quattrocento, for example, sought in the ancients mainly models of dynamism (the so-called Dionysian factor) explains not only the art of the Renaissance; it also explains the reason for the contrast between Renaissance art and the Neoclassicism so extolled by Winckelmann that triumphed during the Empire Style, and drew inspiration from an ideal of solemn calm; and a chapter in the history of taste that Warburg would have been able to write as Winckelmann’s equal could demonstrate the different treatment, in the two periods, of the decorative motifs drawn from the ancients, together with the curious deformation or neoclassical crystallisation of Renaissance motifs. From an identical Classical starting point, he arrives at two extremes – the agitation in the works of Botticelli and Filippo Lippi, and the static coldness of many neoclassical works.

The impressive collection of material that goes by the name of the Warburg Library that was intended to serve the history of culture, is now no longer something that Hamburg can be proud of. The men of great stature and grand gestures, fixed in their eager desire for a wider point of view, did not notice, or, if they did, did not care, that the beautiful collection had crossed

to other side of the North Sea.

A question of race, based on metaphysical categories and culminating in dramatic expressions of syntheticism, resulted in another one of those small individual tragedies the accumulation of which affects the course of history no less successfully than grand gestures. When the German Jews began to seek refuge in England, the British – the only people in the world who still retain an ancient notion of aristocracy – decided to host them. They knew that those Jews brought with them into exile, as baggage, not filthy rags and voracious coffers, or the legendary human sacrifices of the ghettos, but the most fruitful scientific ideas and the vastest cultural treasures of the Germanic world. Even then, there was talk of the Greeks who migrated from Byzantium during the Renaissance, and opened new horizons to the West. Now the Warburg Library resides on the ground floor of a modern building in Westminster, Thames House, a few minutes away from Parliament. Perhaps the banks of the Thames are not so different from the banks of the Elbe; here too, the river traffic takes place under grey skies, and the German Jewish scholars hosted by Thames House will feel less nostalgic for the country that has repudiated them.