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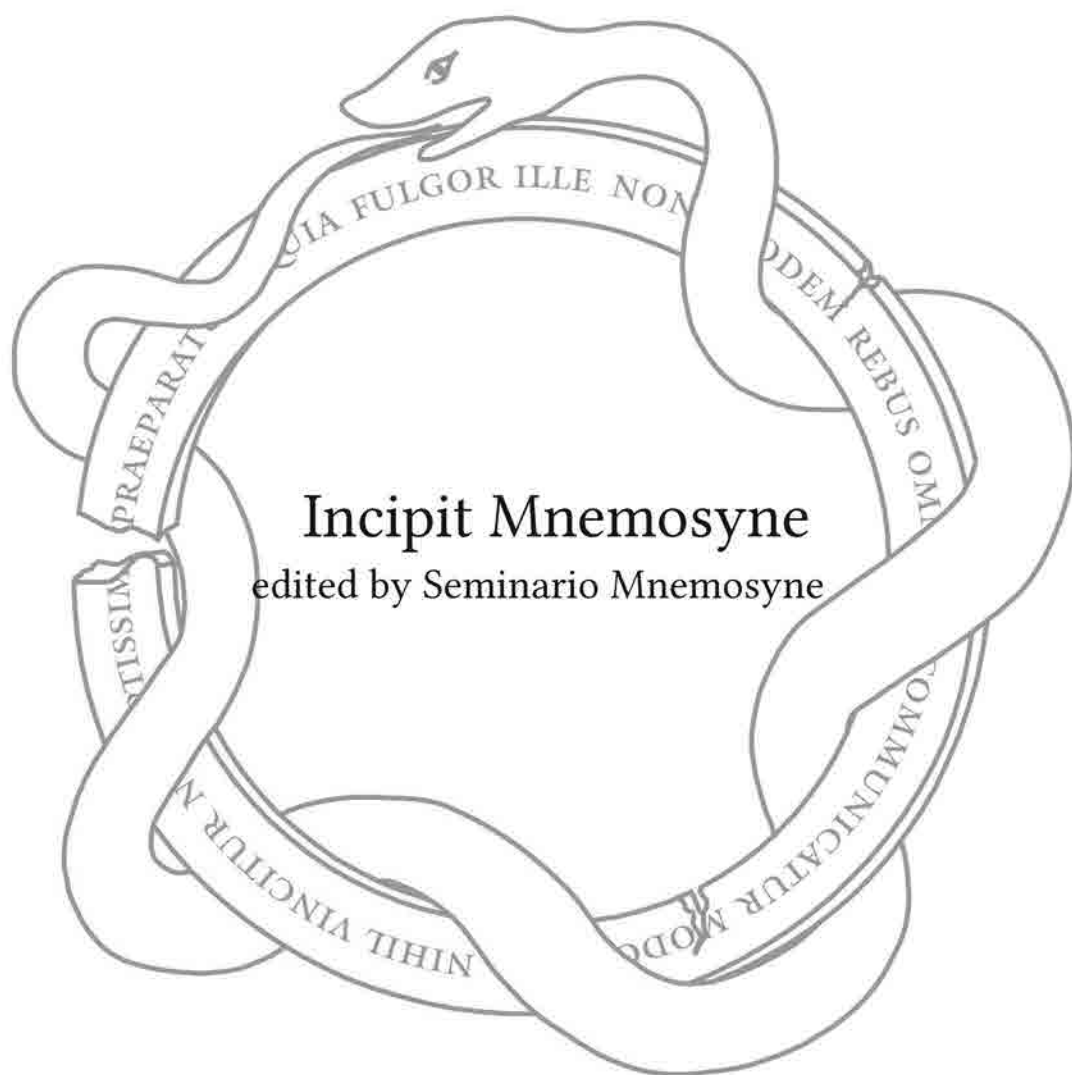
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Aby Warburg: symbol and tragedy

by Gianni Carchia, translated by Elizabeth Thomson

THE ORIGINS OF ABY WARBURG'S PERSPECTIVE: FRIEDRICH THEODOR VISCHER

As Johannes Volkelt — later one of the leading theorists of the aesthetics of *Einfühlung* — explicitly acknowledged in 1876, the main lines of development of post-Hegelian aesthetics included an interest in the revival of the notion of symbol that Hegel's philosophy of art had reconstructed as a phase of artistic evolution that had historically vanished forever¹. Not only had the space of symbol been torn away from the historically unilateral position conferred upon it by Hegel; it was also identified as the only locus where in modern times, dominated as they are by the intellect and its products, art is possible. All this obviously presupposes a radical change in the meaning of symbol in the context of the discourse of idealism and romanticism. In their most lucid form, these changes can be found in the explanation given to this concept by Friedrich Theodor Vischer in his famous essay of 1887², destined to become the original source of inspiration for all Warburg's thinking, and which summarizes the main theories expounded in *Kritik meiner Aesthetik* (1866 e 1873). Two theories allowed Vischer to rediscover the concept of symbol and a phenomenology able to carve into it, once again, a space for art. The first supposition, the fundamental one, is the critique of religion from which all his speculation begins³. The anthropological reduction of dogmatic consciousness that Vischer espoused in parallel with Strauss and, above all, with Feuerbach, undermines and empties the Hegelian dialectic which assigned to romantic art the primacy of historical reality: the principle that fails after the critique of religion is the one of the death of art in religion and finally in philosophy. Thus, the reassertion of the notion of symbol is, above all, the rediscovery of an autonomous characteristic of art. This is defined by the second of Vischer's theories — the idea that symbol not only precedes the classical space of myth — according to the notion among romantic mythographers, primarily Creuzer later revived by Hegel, whose rationalistic unmasking it is able to survive.

1 J. Volkelt, *Der Symbol-Begriff in der neuesten Aesthetik*, Jena 1876.

2 F. T. Vischer, *Das Symbol* (1887), in *Kritische Gänge*, edited by R. Vischer, vol. 4, Meyer & Jessen Verlag, München 1922 (2nd enhanced edition), pp. 420-456.

3 On this point, see the observations of Oelmüller in *Fr. Th. Vischer und das Problem der nachhegel-schen Aesthetik*, W. Kohlhammer, Stuttgart 1959, pp. 37-75.

The critique of rationalism that, through the principle of romanticism, presumes that the final consummation of art is in truth is bonded with the rediscovery that art is unable to eradicate a substrate of myth. Although Vischer, restating Hegelian dialectics, articulates a whole historical phenomenology of symbol, there is no doubt that this deployment of the analysis of historical evolution is after all an attempt to explain and, so to speak, resolve the drama that lies at the heart of what for him is *symbol par excellence*, namely symbol in art. Vischer identifies the aesthetic symbol, which analytically consists of a tension between magic and rationality, as the central point of an evolution that goes through three stages. The binding of sense and image is a principal of any symbol and is determined in the first stage, typical of religious consciousness, by a dark, controlled form. This is the *dunkel-verwechselnde* relationship of those states of consciousness characteristic of both natural religion and Christianity, in which image and meaning are exchanged and confused and the image itself assumes a magical significance. This first historico-evolutionary feature of the symbol, which is obviously the one that best reproduces the characteristics that Hegel had already outlined, is opposed at the opposite end of its development by a stage where the unit of thing and meaning is no longer indistinguishable, but the two aspects of the relationship are clearly identifiable and separate. This is the case where, according to Vischer, symbol turns into allegory, and becomes a mere sign of a concept⁴.

In fact, these extreme historical determinations are attempts to illustrate, by externalising it, the polar tension of what Vischer defines as symbol at the mid stage of its historical evolution, the *vorbehaltende* phase, in which it is true, the image no longer has magic powers, but is not rationalistically sacrificed, and continues to invite attachment. The space of aesthetic symbol establishes itself as the space of the non-rationalist critique of the salvific value of myth.

Symbols save myths from the demands of free and enlightened reason in the realms of appearance, illusion and dreams⁵. The profound difference that separates this rediscovery of the night and the unconscious from the romantic, needs to be acknowledged. According to Vischer, in fact, symbol comes from myth precisely because of the discrepancy between free critical consciousness in accepting an image whilst knowing it is unreal.

⁴ F. T. Vischer, *Das Symbol* cit., pp. 423-434.

⁵ *Der Traum* is the title of a well-known essay by Vischer dated 1875 (in *Kritische Gänge* cit., pp. 459-488).

The difference between Vischer and the Romantics is the distinction they make between the conception of art as reality that shifts its identity in relation to the truth, and a conception of art as appearance that has no referent beyond itself. Aesthetic space is clearly the critique of renewal, of “rescuing phenomena”.

Mythical content once believed, accepted and upheld — with no objective faith, but with nevertheless a vital abandon to this faith in that it is the free manifestation of the aesthetic image — is not devoid of meaning, but rather full of it — such a content must be defined as symbolic [...] For a culturally free consciousness, the mythical is symbolic [...] ⁶.

In this discourse of the critique and rescue of mythical heritage within the aesthetics of symbol, Vischer highlights the purely subjective dimension of expression, and configures the space of illusion as the product of a kind of willingness to yield. Becoming a symbol of myth within the boundaries of aesthetics is rather bravely attributed to art's desire for a modern subject that, while clarified by the critique of religion, is unable to relinquish the idea of representation. This is, of course, the deduction of symbolic aesthetics from psychology and, more specifically, the idea of *Einfühlung*, whose theoretical terms Friedrich Theodor Vischer derived from the research of his son Robert on the optical sense of form ⁷. This psychologistic deduction of the aesthetic symbol is also a question of necessity. “Attributing function to the soul is a feature of human nature, a natural need, even when mankind itself has long since left the era of myth” ⁸. And again:

Every living spirit still performs today and always will perform in the future the act to which the gods of religions owe their existence. The only difference is that the creations of our imagination are for us no longer real beings. Much less can we deny the true artist, poet or the engaged user the right to bring together again the figures of historical myth which are no longer believed in, to repeat once more the act of creating them ⁹.

In fact, *Einfühlung* repeats, on a psychological level, the same process of deduction in aesthetics as in history and philosophy. Just as transition to aesthetic symbol occurs only where magic has been penetrated by the

6 F. T. Vischer, *Das Symbol*, cit., p. 431. See also the double definition of the concept of Schein in *Kritik meiner Aesthetik*: “In the word appearance one should distinguish two meanings: the appearance that effectively deceives us, and the appearance that we surrender to, even though we know it is only an appearance”, in *Kritische Gänge* cit., p. 222 and foll.

7 R. Vischer, *Ueber das optische Formgefühl* (1873), later included in *Drei Schriften zum ästhetischen Formproblem*, Niemeyer, Halle 1927.

8 F. T. Vischer, *Das Symbol* cit., p. 435.

9 F. T. Vischer, *Kritik meiner Aesthetik* cit., p. 324.

rationality that saves its mimetic potential, so the objectivity of a work of art seems to be able to take shape only after a full subjectification of its conditions of existence. *Einfühlung* is exactly the *Mitte* between the magic soul and the national spirit if we take into account that, according to Vischer, different forms of spirituality differ at their extremes “as rational thinking mind or soul solely laden with omens”¹⁰.

To assess the full scope of the importance that Vischer’s research would have on Warburg’s work, one must not forget that it has its own privileged term of reference — not the experience of the verbal arts, in accordance with the typical model of the aesthetics of Idealism and Romanticism, but of the figurative arts. The privileged connection between aesthetic symbol and its figurative dimension is the greater tension that, with regard to its content or meaning, is typical of the visual image, which is better able to embody the polarity between enigma and meaning, which nurtures the aesthetic symbol. Vischer derives privilege for the figurative image from the distinction between symbol and metaphor:

Metaphor, however, is very different from symbol — it is a part of speech, and through speech it produces an image that represents something else, means something else, but it occurs in a context in which the subject of the image has already been introduced, is already known; we already know what has been changed and exchanged [...] To this is added the spiritual clarity of the word that in this case makes everything possible [...] Metaphor is a fine daring, and easily understood by those who have a soul. Symbol, on the other hand, is exposed to the eye, there is no speaker whose lively speech carries and uplifts me so that I alone can understand and recreate its daring linguistic transpositions; here, too, I am not previously given a context with which the subject is likened¹¹.

2. SYMBOL AND EMPATHY

In contemporary debates on aesthetics, especially within the critique of Idealism, *Einfühlung* has often been accused of wanting to assume a general abstract psychological foundation of aesthetics, reducing it to a kind of pre-philosophical Hedonism. Above all, it was considered a mere “aesthetics of affect”, unable to account for the specific objectivity of a work of art, and good for the practices of the “industrialists of poetry and art”¹².

¹⁰ F. T. Vischer, *Das Symbol* cit., p. 423.

¹¹ Ivi, p. 421 and foll. ¹² B. Croce, *L'estetica della "Einfühlung"* (1934), in *Storia dell'estetica per saggi*, Laterza, Bari, p. 205.

¹² B. Croce, *L'estetica della "Einfühlung"* (1934), in *Storia dell'estetica per saggi*, Laterza, Bari, p. 205.

Beyond this traditional polemical concept, however, rarely has it been noticed how much the theory of *Einfühlung* is on the one hand linked to contemporary art practice, and on the other, the extent to which, far from being abstract and generalising, it is linked with the discovery of a specific historical consciousness. What has thwarted this dual recognition of its true character is the tenacious prejudice that, in the considerations of most theorists with the sole exception of Friedrich Theodor Vischer, tends to reconnect it with romantic speculations on the subterranean, unconscious ties that seem to bind man to nature.

A masterly study by W. Perpeet has demonstrated that the concept of nature from which the concept of empathy is drawn is for Vischer not only different from but also opposed to the romantic concept into which it has been arbitrarily assimilated. This is not, in fact, about living nature, full of sensibility and able to meet the demands of man who dominates it in romantic speculation. It is about nature completely consumed by industry, in the words of Arnold Gehlen, a kind of “second-hand” nature, the model for which comes from technical and scientific experimentation, devoid of feeling and quality. “The aesthetics of empathy do not start with a sense of marvel for familiarity with nature...”¹³. According to Vischer, empathy, in psychological terms, can be the foundation of themes related to symbols, if it is not the result of a radical demythification of the aesthetic and metaphysical consciousness of idealism.

According to the idealist view, just as symbol in its middle state — aesthetic — is a salvific critique of myth, similarly empathy is a sort of demythification of the tangible reality of the work of art as a locus of the embodiment of truth. From this point of view, the theory of *Einfühlung* is simply indebted, so to speak, to idealism. In fact, while it accepts its relationship between spirit and nature, it ultimately reverses the meaning. The spiritualization of the world which in idealism is the enhancement of its meaning develops, in the view of theorists of empathy, into a sort of colonization of the Kantian notion of the thing-in-itself, as supported by the theories of Worringer, according to which abstraction has the function of recouping for itself the Kantian notion of the thing-in-itself¹⁴.

¹³ W. Perpeet, *Historisches und Systematisches zur Einfühlungsaesthetik*, “Zeitschrift für Aesthetik und allgemeine Kunstwissenschaft”, 11/2, 1966, p. 204.

¹⁴ See W. Worringer, *Abstraction and Empathy*, translated by M. Bullock, Elephant Paperback, Ivan R. Dee 1997, p. 18: “Only after the human spirit has passed, in thousands of years of its evolution, along the whole course of rationalistic cognition, does the feeling for the ‘thing in itself’ re-awaken in it as the final resignation of knowledge. That which was previously instinct is now the ultimate product of cognition”.

Wherever the product of the bourgeois-Christian spirit passes, nature is utterly obliterated. In contrast with the views of the Romantics, it is — from the perspective of *Einfühlung* — mute, not because it awaits a Prince Charming, but because all its possibilities of expression have been destroyed to the roots by tyrants of the spirit. Paraphrasing Worringer, it can be said — against his express will — that if there is empathy, it is because science and technology have made an abstraction of nature. The inanimate — the result of the abstracting activity of the spirit — is the starting point of empathy as an attribute of the soul. In this sense, empathy merely codifies into theory the anticipatory experience of the great metropolitan poets of the Nineteenth century, taking up Baudelaire's question asking how can it still be possible to sing by moonlight in the era of gas street-lamps¹⁵. The aesthetics of empathy is, in short, the aesthetics that come into being after the spirit triumphs over nature, a victory in which, according to the theories of idealism, art should play a part.

By reducing aesthetic consciousness to the act of empathy, theories of empathy aim to demystify the precision, the religiosity with which the work of art was cloaked by taking upon itself the demands of truth to spirit. The emergence of aesthetic symbology, as the demystification of religion, is also the demystification of all religions of art. In fact, according to Vischer, there is an immediate fall in the constraints on religion as soon as something perceived through empathy is exchanged for the reality of intuition, rather than being taken for what it really is, a straightforward act of consciousness. This applies to the autonomy of the work of art itself, which can never reify itself in the supposed reality of a self-targeted spiritual content. As a result, in a certain way, *Einfühlung* radicalizes psychologically what the theory of the aesthetic symbol had done in both a historical and philosophical sense. The dialectics of criticism and salvation, therefore, no longer apply to religious myth, but rather to the cult of the work of art itself, so that aesthetic consciousness does not relapse into a religion of art.

On the basis of these principles, the aesthetics of *Einfühlung* are therefore not an aesthetics of affect, but rather an aesthetics of immanence or an aesthetics of solipsism. Beauty becomes real to the extent that though being a dimension of consciousness, it is not an intermental act either, and it is not representation. "Beauty is not to be understood as something to attach to the "Ego", as a secondary component"¹⁶ of the act of consciousness from which it springs.

¹⁵ See the perceptive observations of Perpet in *Historisches*, cit., p. 193 and foll.

¹⁶ *Ivi*, p. 200.

“Beauty is a subjective predicate that our soul creates for itself, and attributes to something specific. Beauty is not a thing but an act”¹⁷. As the animation of the inanimate, beauty possesses a truthfulness towards the content of the aesthetics of empathy that in a discontinuous, alternating, form, consciousness attributes to a reality empty of meaning.

Knowing that spiritualized reality is meaningless and that therefore the embodiment of a work of art in that reality is nonsensical, is a prerequisite for determining what this immanence of aesthetic consciousness consists of. What meaning does it give to reality, what meanings does an empathic act have? To be more precise, one could say that they are the very meanings that have been subtracted from nature by a spirit that has deprived it of meaning: it is the *natural* history of nature returning to a specific historical consciousness, the reappearance of natural pagan symbolism and its daemonic spirit, within a world of nature that has been completely spiritualised and civilised. The immanentisation of aesthetic consciousness is not a subjective attribution of meaning put into effect in accordance with arbitrary canons of artistic spirituality modelled on a scheme outlined by an inspired, romantic creator. Attributions of meaning and empathic acts are not spontaneous and interchangeable; rather, they determine the individuation of a very specific historical content of aesthetic consciousness. In this case, too, therefore, the old stereotype of abstract and undifferentiated psychologism needs to be dropped. Empathy is a return to nature — pre-mythical and pre-spiritual — in accordance with forms of invested consciousness that can only be historical.

This concerns questions of historical consciousness that Warburg examined in full using his celebrated method in “the renewal of pagan antiquity”. Before becoming a research programme for a whole generation of scholars, and the icon of a specialist branch of history of art, the expression described the burning matter of the rediscovery of pagan classicism, the continuous transfiguration of classical myth into aesthetic symbol at the peak of late Seventeenth Century literature and representation. The course of the renewal of paganism in forms of disquiet that links Delacroix with Gustave Moreau, and then Böcklin with the artists of the *Sezession*, and de Chirico, right up to the extreme symbolic effects of Surrealism demonstrates this clearly. To a large extent, the same phenomenon of *revival* can arise from the solipsistic outcomes of empathy, like averting one’s gaze from a rationalised reality to allow the oneiric, pagan and dynamic substrate of forms to

¹⁷ *Ivi*, p. 198.

rise to the surface. Empathy is the act of returning to nature its most distant mythical content – the pagan – in the ineffectual, non-religious form of an artistic symbol. Art is merely the act of reactivating these symbols, buried in consciousness and re-introduced to reality with the awareness that they are irretrievably lost¹⁸. However, this does not signify that there is no persecutory and anguished aspect to the return of the daemonic, pagan symbol that the aesthetic consciousness is not always able to exorcise. Warburg's own example demonstrates the extent to which tragedy can be lived as the renewal of paganism at the heart of the lifeless spirituality of the modern era.

3. ABY WARBURG AND THE "TRAGEDY OF CULTURE"

Rarely, especially recently, have Aby Warburg's studies and contributions to aesthetic theory been given their full due. Despite the caution and tact of his successors who continued with the Warburg Institute's studies¹⁹, most interpretations have perpetuated the notion that Warburg's only innovation was to reinstate the significance of establishing the cultural and historical context of a work of art, compared with the formalistic approach adopted at the turn of the century by the theorists of "pure seeing" (Wölfflin and Riegl *in primis*). This would lead Warburg to transform art criticism into a more generalised "science of culture", inspired by Burckhardt in which the aesthetic specificity of the work of art itself would no longer be significant. In reality, this is a serious misreading of Warburg's viewpoint, as has been well illustrated by critics who have highlighted how absurd it would be to link Warburg with iconography²⁰, or with any branch of the science of culture that addresses allegories and complicated emblems subsidiary to aesthetics as such.

In 1931, in his first exposition of Warburg's method, Edgar Wind demonstrated that determining historical and cultural connections within which alone the authentic meanings of a work of art can be found was not in Warburg's view simply a form of historical and sociological reductionism according to a formula applied instantly to any study rooted in positivist culture²¹.

18 See the observation by F. T. Vischer, cited by Perpeet, *Historisches* cit., p. 209. "The perception of myth and that of the landscape cannot in themselves be reconciled [...] Why ever should we, who have a landscape precisely because nature has been de-divinised, slip back into idolatry?"

19 The reference in the first instance, is from the magnificent biography of Warburg published in 1970, written by E. H. Gombrich (*Aby Warburg: An intellectual biography*, The Warburg Institute, London 1970). We will use it repeatedly hereinafter.

20 E. H. Gombrich, *Aby Warburg*, op. cit., p. 312. Along the same lines, see G. Agamben, *Aby Warburg e la scienza senza nome*, "Aut Aut" 199/200, 1984.

21 E. Wind, *Warburgs Begriff der Kulturwissenschaft und seine Bedeutung für Aesthetik*, "Zeitschrift für Aesthetik und allgemeine Kunstwissenschaft", 25. Beiheft 1931, pp. 163-179.

Deciphering the multiple semantic stratifications of an image, or tracing an image back to constantly changing historical contexts that frequently charge it with meaning, or de-signify it, is not intended to cast doubt on the autonomy of the image. If the simple tools of a theory purified of all historical references are not appropriate, it is not in order to make the work of art a mere receptacle of meanings conferred upon it from time to time from the outside in accordance with a crude overturning of formalistic perspectives. On the contrary, it serves to delineate the image's historical and cultural *capacity for initiative*. As Wind has observed, according to Warburg, an image is no longer only that which gives form to states of mind, it is also that which gives rise to them²². Deciphering the historical and cultural depths of every characteristic of style aims at releasing the wealth of its semantic possibilities, and not at reducing them to a single definition.

This is only possible, of course, if one grasps that the history of culture liberated by Warburg's studies is not the idealistic and cumulative history of *Geistesgeschichte*, inspired by Hegel. Fully understood, image proves to be laden with historical initiatives only in the eyes of those who are not content to catalogue it in an unchangeable and pre-established paradigm of forms, and accept it as memory or condensed historical time. The essence of Warburgian method lies in trying to free energies seemingly frozen in the formal invariance of the image. It is this intense historicity, concentrated under the surface of the work of art that aesthetic criticism, avoiding all traditions of contemplation, should finally reveal.

However, history, interpreted in this sense as *Mnemosyne*, the title of the atlas of memory using photographic images that was Warburg's final great work and left unfinished at his death, is the exact opposite of history interpreted as the custodian and watchdog of meaning which lies at the roots of *Geistesgeschichte*. The polyvalence of meaning that comes to light by a no longer formalistic approach to a work of art proves in the locus of memory to occupy a veritable chasm, equivalent to the locus of its own absence. Only by understanding this can the question of Warburg's life, illness and recovery be clearly understood. It can hardly be considered accidental that Warburg's mental illness came to light during his early studies, when he inferred from a stylistic cipher the emergence of a repressed past, and had come to consider it, from a purely Burckhardtian perspective, as the expression of the unrepresentable.

²² *Ivi*, p. 168.

Until that time, Warburg's historico-cultural method had functioned at one level, that of memory, which was seen as anything but the peaceful guardian of human achievements and the vehicle by which meanings are handed down to posterity. The reverse is true. History is the vehicle by which memory drives itself deep into the troubling roots of human beings. All Warburg's studies to the time his illness erupted are marked by his obsession for figures representing movement, formulas of pathos²³, and the mass of energy contained in images whose archetype is the reappearance of the figure of the *nymph* in the paintings produced in Florentine art during the Quattrocento²⁴. However, behind these seemingly erudite studies lies the notion that history, as a matter of unravelling memory, is merely a footmark to retrace the mimetic sources of what it is to be human. The "science of culture" as Warburg originally conceived and elaborated it, is antithetical to the progressive unravelling of the "history of ideas", within which historicism endeavoured to interpret the meaning of works of art. Fully understood, history as memory is in Warburg's thinking the paradox of the original confusion of mimesis, and reveals the mythical legacy from which forms of art originate.

Starting with different interests, and inspired by other objectives, Warburg extraordinarily ended by following, during the period before his illness, the same route undertaken by Nietzsche in his attempt to venture beyond Burckhardt. The conclusion of his studies on "antiquicising ideal style", the magnificent text in which in 1914, on the eve of both the First World War and his nervous breakdown, Warburg summarises all his earlier works, is entirely Nietzschean. To us, his words appear to signal his glimpse of an abyss:

If I have had to speak all too frequently of "patos formulae", you might cordially take into account that until now these have neither been collected individually, nor seen in context. [...] If it had not discovered it, the Renaissance would have invented the Laocoon, just because of its moving and eloquent pathos. We are now resolved to regard this classical disquiet as an essential characteristic of ancient art and culture. [...] Apollinian ethos together with Dionysian pathos grow like a double branch from one trunk, as it were, rooted in the mysterious depths of the Greek maternal earth²⁵.

23 See the observations of Warnke in Hofmann, Syamken e Warnke, *Die Menschenrechte des Auges. Über Aby Warburg*, Frankfurt a. M., Europäische Verlagsanstalt, 1980, pp. 61-68.

24 See chapter VI of Gombrich's biography.

25 A. Warburg, *The Emergence of the Antique as Stylistic Ideal in Early Renaissance Painting* (1914), in *Art History as cultural History. Warburg's Projects*, edited by R. Woodfield, Amsterdam 2001, pp. 27-28.

It is the rediscovery of the tragic foundation of culture that Warburg, like Nietzsche before him, found irresistible. As Warburg himself would acknowledge in the notes he wrote for the conference for the sick in Kreuzlingen in 1923, after his journey to hell, their setback, like Burckhardt's before them, was their inability to leave the veil of the unrepresentable untouched in pursuit of "the destruction of distance"²⁶. Warburg's reflections on the different positions taken by Burckhardt and Nietzsche with regard to culture and civilisation being rooted in myth in his so-called *Burckhardt-Uebungen*, notes written for the seminars he held at Hamburg University between 1927-1929, are essential for understanding the route he was finally able to take in order to survive his own personal tragedy and the tragedy of civilisation and culture.

We must learn to see Burckhardt and Nietzsche as the receivers of mnemonic waves [...] Both of them are very sensitive seismographs whose foundations tremble when they must receive and transmit the waves. But there is one important difference: Burckhardt received the waves from the regions of the past, he sensed the dangerous tremors and he saw to it that the foundations of his seismograph were strengthened. Though he experienced the extremes of oscillation he never surrendered to them completely and unreservedly. He felt how dangerous his profession was, and that he really should simply break down, but he did not succumb to romanticism [...] Burckhardt was a necromancer, with his eyes open. Thus he conjured up spectres which quite seriously threatened him. He evaded them by erecting his observation tower. He is a seer as Lynkeus (in Goethe's *Faust*); he sits in his tower and speaks... he was and remained a champion of enlightenment²⁷.

With hindsight, Warburg has here reconstructed the conditions for his recovery by his will to battle, obstinately and without allowing himself to be lured by the magical roots of human beings, from within the crisis. The significance of Burckhardt lies in his exposing the transformation of the Christian history of modern decline into a new myth as a romantic delusion. Burckhardt "sought for what was very opposite of Nietzsche, he looked for restraint or for exalted form... for a form which was life and restraint at the same time". On the other hand "Nietzsche perished because in his loneliness he had exposed himself to the most violent shocks, believing as he did in a superior logic of fate. He had reacted against the complacent pathos formula he found in Wagner"²⁸.

²⁶ E. H. Gombrich, *Aby Warburg* cit., p. 224.

²⁷ *Ivi*, pp. 254-255.

²⁸ *Ivi*, pp. 257-258.

The final resolution of Warburg's philosophy of art is the notion of its history as the memory of what cannot be represented, but that artistic expression can restore, always and only as a likeness, or a veil beyond which we cannot see. Once again, in Warburg's final analysis, historical methodology recognises the total instability that lies at the roots of the autonomous image. The discourse of the work of art, revealed by ancient memory, is the relentless but essential tension between the original magico-mimetic impulse and a logical and discursive polarity appropriate to the spiritual era of man. At the height of his theorizing, Warburg reclaims the classicism of Burckhardt. He sees in works of art and their apparent remoteness from the world, the only locus where the polarity of myth and history, and magic and reason that his historical method had been able to grasp from behind the abstract invariance of forms, a point of equilibrium, something like a "breathing space"²⁹. At the same time however, Warburg was never able to forget the forces that constitute the precariousness of the image, forces whose very fission and polarity lie at the origins of the successful autonomous aesthetic image.

If one ignores this last fact, there is a risk of misconstruing the significance of the historicity that Warburg aimed to associate with his method. One could consider Ernst Cassirer's use of Warburg's knowledge in his own studies on symbols an example of this approach. This emerges chiefly from the arguments that Cassirer used against all tragic and agonistic notions of culture, especially those of Georg Simmel³⁰. For Cassirer, the essential antinomy of the aesthetic appearance is indeed completely voided: the mythico-pagan pole, and the magic restlessness of existence revealed by history as memory, which generate the tragedy of culture and beginnings of art, are purely and simply removed. The contrast at work within an image — its principal characteristic — transfers to the exterior, advancing a discourse on the dynamism and conflict of its reception beyond the work of art's intrinsic polarities. In Cassirer's view, the gaze diverts from the inherent tragedy of the work of art:

For the *work*, in whose enduring existence the creative process congeals, does not stand at the end of this path, but rather the "you", the other subject who receives this work in order to incorporate it into his own life and thus transform it back into the medium from which it originates [...].

²⁹ *Ivi*, p. 224.

³⁰ E. Cassirer, "*The Tragedy of Culture*" in *The Logic of Cultural Sciences*, translated by S. G. Lofts, Yale University Press 2000.

For however significant, however rich, however fixed in itself and in its own center a work may be: it nevertheless is and remains only a point of passage. It is no "absolute" into which the I bumps, but the bridge that leads from one I-pole to another.

This explains the ambivalent and mystifying reference to Warburg's understanding inspired as it was by quite different assumptions, rather than the anodyne theory of history as tranquil and spiritual:

The nature of this process is perhaps most clearly evident where the two subjects that participate in it are not individuals but whole epochs. Every "renaissance" of a past culture furnishes us an example of this [...]. However, we must not only study the fact of opposition, but we must also consider its cure, its genuine "catharsis", which realizes itself again and again here³¹.

This view of calm and tranquillity made it possible to impose a reductive reading on Warburg's theories. By interpreting them as iconography, they are sanctioned as merely a supplementary tool in a history of art casually understood as *Geistesgeschichte*. It is certainly true that Warburg himself, immediately after his recovery, increasingly emphasised the need for the sublimation or catharsis of mimetic impulses, and the need to spiritualise them. This was the reverse of the insidious restlessness of the formulas of pathos revealed in his earlier studies³².

While in Warburg's early writings the accent is mainly on the liberation of the energies of pagan expressive gestures, the *Mnemosyne* shifts the emphasis to the spiritualizing influences through which these original primitive impulses undergo a process of sublimation, a process of 'inversion' by which motifs and symbols of pagan savagery are assimilated to the Christian tradition³³.

At times, therefore, it seems that the same complex legend of Warburg's journey can be summed up as the contrast between the pagan primitivism that would draw him into a hell of his own inborn demons, and an ultimate Christian outcome, in which the tragic extreme of all cultural expression is abandoned, favouring the supremacy of its purely spiritual component. In fact, it should be said that what finally attracted Warburg to spiritual transfiguration is the same impulse to freedom that from the start had led him to discover, through history as memory, the archaic roots of images.

31 *Ivi*, pp. 110-111 and 113.

32 See. E. H. Gombrich, *Aby Warburg cit.*, pp. 269-271 and 275-278.

33 *Ivi*, p. 296.

Gombrich noted “that rejection of sacrifice” of its roots in myth was “what Warburg valued in Christianity above all”³⁴. Therefore, to avoid incoherence, interpreting, as did Cassirer, pure spirituality as a new sacrifice, this time the sacrifice of its natural element, is not possible. In opposition to all conciliatory and optimistic notions, Warburg remained to the last loyal to a firmly dramatic interpretation of symbols. He continued to maintain that an artistic image is where the symbol of all human activity in its most manifest form expresses its most tragic and vital point of divergence. The state of suspension that constitutes the symbolic uniqueness of the image is rooted in the unresolvable drama of its being a worldly work of art.

4. THE DISSOLUTION OF WARBURG’S LEGACY

The most obvious change that the notion of symbol undergoes with the theorists of the school that declares itself to follow Warburg’s teachings lies in the diminishing tension and final dissolution between the opposing polarities that Warburg, following Vischer’s reasoning, defines as the explicitly aesthetic space of symbol. The discourse between image and meaning that for Warburg and Vischer defines the aesthetic quality of symbol is increasingly sacrificed in favour of greater significance, together with more than a passing affinity with Vischer’s third dimension of symbol — allegory. All post-Warburgian theorists and their most emblematic representatives — Cassirer and Panofsky — engage with a kind of desemanticisation of the image, which increasingly is reduced to a hieroglyph or a cryptogram that seeks from the outside, from expressions of culture and language, an opportunity to give itself meaning. This is all implicit from the start in Ernst Cassirer’s limitless extension of the concept of symbol, an extension in which symbol coincides simply with all forms of human experience giving concrete form to reality, ordering it with full awareness of varying historical and cultural environments. Cassirer engages with a levelling out of the notion of symbol with the more general notion of culture, creating a crisis in aesthetic form. It is true that Cassirer does not explicitly sacrifice the magico-mimetic extreme, since magic is acknowledged as a legitimately autonomous form, able to establish its own specific historical and earthly boundaries³⁵. In fact, the dark, natural depths of existence are acknowledged in order to be excluded.

³⁴ *Ivi*, pp. 278-279.

³⁵ See vol. 2 of *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* Volume 2, translated by R. Manheim, Yale University Press 1955.

In other words, the mimetic and natural dimension of existence is always and only considered when it poses as a manifestation of what it is to be human, a perspective that has always been in some way transcendental, caught in the mesh of cultural knowledge. The space of symbolic discourse is solely historical and human; the suggestion that there is an autonomous language of nature is, in this sense, simply purposeless. Retrieving a space specifically for aesthetics is essentially impossible at the heart of such culturalized Neo-Kantism. At one and the same time, Cassirer holds two views: the first, that art to a certain extent seems to interpret more adequately, is that symbols embody their absorption of what is natural in culture and civilisation; the other, decidedly more successful, holds that, if symbol is meaning freed of all residual sensibilities and perceptions, art is always a vicarious form³⁶. Indeed, there is no doubt that Cassirer tends to retain the notion of symbol in the strictest sense as meaning deprived of all residues, mimetic and analogical on the one hand, and expressive and representational on the other³⁷. Ultimately, the model for symbol is found in science where it is purified to such a degree that it becomes a pure sign, effecting the radical rupture between image and meaning. This leads to reducing art to a theoreticism that ends up abandoning the vital core of Vischer's legacy: the powerfully dramatic characteristic of aesthetic symbol, and the prevailing part played by the implicit semanticity of images, as Warburg also upheld.

The full extent of the effect of all this theorising on general aesthetics and the question of the relationship between art and history is apparent in Panofsky's later scientific theories. Panofsky's studies in iconology – principally, his theoretical writings between 1915 and 1932³⁸ – initiate the process of a definitive departure from Warburg. He sacrifices image for meaning, and more generally, he sacrifices the very notion of symbol and its complex boundaries to a more generalised notion of culture, which, in the end, engages with history too.

36 On this point, see comments of L. Dittmann, in *Stil Symbol Struktur*, Wilhelm Fink, München 1967, p. 106.

37 See this observation on physics in vol. III, chapter 2, E. Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms, The Phenomenon of Expression as the Basic Factor in Perceptive Consciousness*, translated by R. Manheim, Yale University Press 1955.

38 See *Das Problem des Stils in der bildenden Kunst* (1915); *Der Begriff des Kunstwollens* (1920); *Über das Verhältnis der Kunstgeschichte zur Kunsttheorie* (1925); *Zum Problem der Beschreibung und Inhaltsdeutung von Werken der bildenden Kunst* (1932). Essays translated by C. S. Wood in E. Panofsky, *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, Uzone Inc. 1991.

Panofsky also outlines the route to a return to the principles of idealist aesthetics, which in the Nineteenth century had painstakingly swung towards the visible. The lack of accord between image and meaning, the essential tension of the aesthetic symbol, rather than being understood as a matter peculiar to artistic emotion, and rather than being interpreted as a fertile enigma related to a polytheistic wealth of meanings, is treated as a residue of nature to be eliminated. Iconography and iconology are respectively two stages in the integration of image with meaning — via typology — and nature with history understood as *Geistesgeschichte*. From the first viewpoint, meaning is no longer induced by the innermost history of the image. Rather, the image is perceived as an expressionless sign, a grapheme devoid of sense until the history of culture comes to its aid to guide it into the kingdom of meaning — no longer visual, but historical and literary — alone, it has no meaning. Iconography is also, and principally, a continuous reconversion of the visual into the verbal, a constant use of art in the service of culture. It is this intended general cultural recomposition of spaces distributed with images, and the prospect of their typological categorization that highlight the uncertainty that underlies will to memory. When the form of memory that Warburg interpreted as the return of the image is replaced by a mnemonic scheme, a proactive tool of memory, symbols gradually become empty signs needing integration. The rhetoric of memory, and the organization of cultural *topoi* that need to reject all possibility of the image being assimilated, guaranteeing its reconciliation with culturally certain meaning, testify in truth to the end of its tradition rather than continuity with its past. Meanings that are forcefully insufflated into mute images no longer able to open their eyes to the gaze of those contemplating them, are certainly evidence of the intellect's ability to organise culture, but they also denounce the loss of the historicity inherent in the image. Panofsky replaces the loss of the innermost force of the image, and the semanticity that is peculiar to it, which could have survived in empathy as the projection of an ancient re-emergent memory, by purposefully reducing history to categories of science. The categories are substitutes for life.

Panofsky was aware of the arbitrariness implicit in his system and attempt to determine a locus for the human symbol in which to re-absorb the artifice of the rhetoric of memory. He tried to evade the innate abstraction of his methodology by evoking iconology as an area of spiritual history in which the partiality of historical and cultural material is sublimated into an ultimate meaning that transcends the lack of organisation.

What can be more desperate than an undertaking that proposes to capture the innermost meaning, the essential sense, of a work of art, not by starting with the image itself, but by going in a vague and general direction of the whole of spiritual history?³⁹ Nor is it an accident that, in later developments, Panofsky's iconological programme proved increasingly to be exactly what it is: a simple notion, fit for purging the outward appearance and the mechanicalness of typological history. Spiritual history in which Panofsky's iconological programme resolved the sense of a work of art, proved in the end to be simply the ideology of iconography.

39 For the conceptually indeterminate nature of Panofsky's "iconology", see the comments of Dittmann, in *Stil cit.*, p. 13; Carlo Ginsburg in *From Warburg to E. H. Gombrich: A Problem of Method*, in *Clues, Myths and the Historical Method* translated by J. Tedeschi and A. C. Tedeschi, Baltimore, John Hopkins University Press 1989, also makes significant observations.

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