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**Aby Warburg:
His Aims
and Methods**

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Aby Warburg: His Aims and Methods

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Gertrud Bing's Scientific Beginnings*

The 1921 doctoral thesis: The Concept of the Necessary in Lessing

Dorothee Gelhard

Gertrud Bing defended her thesis on 4 June 1921, and the title of her dissertation was: *Der Begriff des Notwendigen bei Lessing. Ein Beitrag zum geistesgeschichtlichen Problem Leibniz-Lessing* (The Concept of the Necessary in Lessing. A Contribution to the Intellectual-Historical Problem of the Relationship between Leibniz and Lessing). She was one of the first doctoral candidates to be awarded a doctorate at the University of Hamburg, which was founded in 1919. The minutes of the doctoral examination document that Bing took the doctorate in the major subject "German Literary History" with Robert Petsch and in the minor subjects psychology with Wilhelm Stern and philosophy with Ernst Cassirer, who had also been the second examiner of her thesis. She was thus also the first student to have her disputation with Ernst Cassirer. Gertrud Bing's doctoral file, which was found by Rainer Nicolaysen in the 1990s and handed over to the Hamburg State Archives for safekeeping, has been preserved in its entirety. In addition to the minutes of the oral examinations by the examiners Stern, Petsch and Cassirer, the file also contains the two expert opinions on her dissertation thesis, her handwritten and typewritten curriculum vitae, the application for admission to the doctoral examination dated 3 May 1921, an abstract of the thesis for the disputation and the doctoral certificate dated 18 October 1922, which proves that she passed the doctoral examination with "very good". Also a receipt from the university treasury dated 20 April 1922 for the first instalment of 20 marks of the doctoral fees due at the time, totalling 400 marks. On 17 June 1921, Bing confirmed to the University of Hamburg that she had received the thesis and her degree certificates back. Finally, a communication from the Faculty of Philosophy dated 18 October 1922 contains a request to Lütcke and Wulff to print seven copies of the doctoral thesis. Bing's work itself remained unpublished and until now was

only available as a typescript on thin carbon paper with handwritten additions and deletions. The original hand copy from Gertrud Bing's estate is now in the Warburg Institute in London. The existing carbon copies of the work differ in that they contain handwritten corrections.

Despite its precarious condition, the Hamburg copy is available for borrowing and still contains the original borrowing card, which lists Erwin Panofsky as reader of Bing's thesis in 1926. Panofsky, together with Aby Warburg and Fritz Saxl, championed a new science of art at the Kulturwissenschaftliche Bibliothek Warburg (KBW). Bing's thesis, which was consulted sporadically during the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, was last borrowed in 2003. Evidently, it has not garnered much attention thus far. This comes as something of a surprise, seeing as Gertrud Bing, whose dissertation received the distinction "highly commendable" from Ernst Cassirer and the German philologist Robert Petsch, was immediately thereafter recommended by Cassirer to join the staff at the Warburg Library.

Bing's scientific achievement is still underestimated today. The sheer number of works, of which there are not many in Bing's case, cannot be a measure in this regard. Her thesis already and clearly shows that not only could she think independently and philosophically, to which supervisors Petsch and Cassirer attested without reserve, but that her work also amounts to much more, certainly, than a schoolgirl's attempt. August Ferdinand Robert Petsch (1875-1945) was a German philologist and folklorist. He studied, amongst others, under Erich Schmidt at Würzburg, joining the school that formed around Wilhelm Scherer. On 16 July 1919, shortly after Cassirer, Petsch was appointed to the University of Hamburg, where he took over the professorship of Modern German Literary History, which was transformed into a tenured professorship on 1 July 1923. His main research areas were Lessing and Goethe. Together with another student of Cassirer's, Paul Böckmann, Petsch signed the *Vow of allegiance of the Professors of the German Universities and High-Schools to Adolf Hitler and the National Socialistic State*. This document, or rather the disloyalty of colleagues with whom Cassirer had worked for years in a spirit of trust, induced Cassirer to resign his professorship. In doing so, he forestalled by only a few days the dismissal of Jewish university professors by the National Socialists. Petsch did not stand up for Cassirer. Cassirer's

chair of philosophy was redesignated for racial biology (See Nicolaysen 2011, 24).

(Benutzung seit 1905:)

Benutzer (Name, Stand, Wohnort)	Ort der Benutzung	Datum der Entleihung und Rückgabe	Bemerkungen <div style="display: flex; align-items: center;"> { <div style="font-size: 0.8em;"> ob nur eingesehen, „ ganz od. teilw. verglichen, „ „ „ „ abgeschrieben. </div> </div>
H. Grien Philosoph Hamburg	L. I.	27.8.1923 - 29.8.23	Eingesehen.
Panofsky, Prof. Alg. Univ.	Hamburg St.-u. B. H. B. Z.	25.6.26	Eingesehen. P.
67 Jöpper Hist. philo.	Univ. Halle Leipzig	3. VII 27	Eingesehen.
95 Friezel Land-Phil.	U. B. Dillingen	21.7.30 15.9. -	Eingesehen
W. Fritzsche Stud. phil.	Hall.	15.12.	

1 | Loan list of the Hamburg copy of Bing's dissertation, with Panofsky's entry.

Bing submitted her dissertation to two supervisors who could not have been more different. Petsch, only a few years later (1928), presented his version of a programme to establish "General Literary Studies" (Petsch 1928 615-622). It can be construed as a German variation of Russian Formalism, which was prominent during the 1910s and would come to lay the foundation for the methodology of literary theory prevalent in the various disciplines of philology after 1945, these ideas were first outlined in his 1906 text on Lessing (See Petsch 1906, 206-228). Following the "Congress for Aesthetics and General Art Studies" in Berlin (1913) — Aby Warburg, Erwin Panofsky and Ernst Cassirer were in attendance then — formalistic ideas became a topic of discussion in art, literary and music studies: contributors from the field of literary studies include Oskar Walzel with his lecture *Tragical Form* (Walzel 1914) and Gustav von Allesch with *On the Nature of Drama* (von Allesch 1914). They were increasingly being pitted against so-called 'intellectual history' (*Geistesgeschichte*). Petsch, accordingly, insisted on a "theoretical justification for scientific form analysis" (Petsch 1928, 619) which was opposed to "historical philology" (Petsch 1928, 621). In terms of language, he appears to have borrowed a thing or two from Heidegger's preference for neologism — it should be remembered in this context that the famous Davos controversy between

Heidegger and Cassirer would take place only one year later, in 1929. Petsch speaks, amongst others, of the “wortende[r] Mensch” (“wording man”) and of “wording” (“Wortung”, see Petsch 1928, 617 and 618). In general, the latter of which, when translated into English, can be confused with a common term referring to grammatical and stylistic properties, but it ought to be taken in the same metaphysical sense as its adjectival use in the first example suggests; Petsch, moreover, repeatedly refers to an “essence of poetry” (“Wesen der Dichtung”) whose “hidden meaning must be revealed” (Petsch 1928, 618 and 621). In 1930, he succeeded in officially separating the two German Studies’ seminars at the Hamburg University:

Next to the one seminar which, due to the expansion of the Nordic department, was renamed in 1923 from ‘German’ to ‘Germanic’, there appeared now the ‘Seminar for German Literary History and General Literary Studies’, which, at the request of Petsch, was shortened to ‘Seminar for Literary Studies’ (Müller 2011, 122).

Cassirer, on the other hand, represented the very opposite side, committed to what Petsch derided as “old poetics” (Petsch 1928, 616). In 1921, Cassirer published *Idee und Gestalt (Idea and Form)*, demonstrating in five essays on Goethe, Schiller, Hölderlin and Kleist the indissoluble link joining these poets to intellectual history. Whereas Petsch worked towards a professional and institutional separation within the Humanities, Cassirer cooperated with the Warburg Circle not only to integrate the individual disciplines of the Humanities but also to consolidate them with the natural sciences. Petsch was later in occasional contact with the KBW. During Warburg’s stay in Kreuzlingen, Petsch would send him a few postcards. In 1924 Mary Warburg reported to her husband that Bing advised against inviting Petsch to give a lecture on Goethe at the KBW, for Warburg would certainly not enjoy his contribution (14.3.1924, WIA GC/37356). In 1927 Petsch was nevertheless scheduled for the KBW’s lecture series on drama and accepted the invitation according to the KBW’s diary (9.12.1927, WIA GC/37356, 160). Whether or not Petsch actually gave the lecture could not be determined. At any rate, the respective volume of the “Vorträge der Bibliothek Warburg” from 1927/28, *Zur Geschichte des Dramas (On the History of Drama)*, does not contain it. From 1921 onwards, Cassirer would formulate these ideas for a *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen*

(*Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*) ever more clearly, with them culminating in the 1942 collection of essays *Zur Logik der Kulturwissenschaften* (*On the Logic of Cultural Studies*). Considering Petsch's attitude towards literary studies, Cassirer's introductory remark to his Goethe lectures, which he gave during his exile in Sweden, is understandable:

That now [...] once again I ascend to the lectern to treat a topic of German intellectual history before a larger audience. Gratefully and joyfully, I have at once accepted this suggestion; for it afforded me the opportunity to fulfil a long-cherished wish of my own. One day to deliver a cycle of lectures on Goethe — that has always been one of my favourite academic plans. [...] I have [...] given individual lectures on Goethe but never a proper course of Goethe lectures. Standing in the way of this were established academic customs with which I did not wish to break — I was bound to my field of expertise, to philosophy, and was not at liberty to trespass on foreign territory. Only now that my academic career has been concluded may I dare commit such an incursion, without it being perceived as a breach of academic custom (Cassirer [1940-1941] 2003, 5).

Bing, it is evident, did not follow in the footsteps of Petsch. However, the same, it would seem, cannot be said for Petsch. In 1922 — one year after Bing's dissertation defence — Petsch published at Filser (an Augsburg publishing house) a small volume on Lessing as part of a series intended to provide introductory reading for interested theatregoers. These volumes were, therefore, limited to essentials on the respective author and included suggestions for further reading. From the extensive oeuvre of Lessing, Petsch, too, selects *Emilia Galotti* and *Nathan*, with his bibliographical references matching almost completely the literature of which Bing availed herself. Missing, though, is a reference to Bing's work. In the chapter on *Emilia Galotti*, Petsch states explicitly:

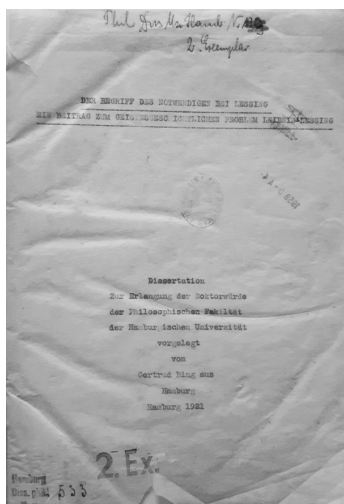
Itself reminiscent of Leibnizian thoughts is his [Lessing's] portrayal of Emilia, who cannot escape the onslaught of her feelings because reason has not yet gained the upper hand over passion in this young creature (Petsch 1922, 13).

And the paragraph on *Nathan* concludes:

Thus, Lessing, both as dramatist and thinker, has spoken his last, highest word to us with the 'Education of the Human Race', at the same time directing dramatic development towards an infinite goal of which all earthly appearance is only a parable (Petsch 1922, 15).

Bing's analysis appears to have convinced Petsch, who, in 1906, still expressly criticised making a "mutual influence between philosophy and literature" the basis for interpretation (Petsch 1906, 206). Accordingly, in her curriculum vitae, Bing thanks Petsch for "his friendly willingness" (Bing Diss., 87) and Cassirer, by contrast, for the "manifold stimulation, support and encouragement" (Bing Diss., 87) he provided. Indicating no trace of Petsch's formalistic method, Bing's text is in fact remarkably close to Cassirer's thought. The assumption by Laura Tack that Bing would follow in the footsteps of Petsch's *Freedom and Necessity in Schiller's dramatic plays* (*Freiheit und Notwendigkeit in Schillers Dramen*) is a grave misjudgement. Bing's dissertation yields not one piece of evidence to support it, other than a verbal coincidence ("necessary") featuring in the titles of both studies (see Tack 2020, 54). This is hardly surprising when considering the course of Bing's studies: from 1916 to 1918, she studied philosophy, literary history and psychology in Munich. There, according to her own statement, she studied primarily under phenomenologists Moritz Geiger — who was Edmund Husserl's assistant in Göttingen. Amongst his students were Hans-Georg Gadamer and Walter Benjamin — and Alexander Pfänder, who were both students of Theodor Lipps. Whilst Geiger was particularly interested in the philosophy of mathematics, drawing also on Wilhelm Wundt's psychology in his courses, Pfänder dealt with the "consciousness of willing" ("Bewußtsein des Wollens") in both his dissertation and habilitation. Both men introduced Bing to the "Fundamentals of Psychology". She studied "Logic and Epistemology" with Pfänder, attending Geiger's tutorials on Descartes (Winter 1916-1917), Schiller's aesthetic writings (Winter 1917-1918), and Leibniz's *Nouveaux Essais* (Summer 1918). In 1918, she interrupted her studies for a time to occupy a teaching position at the Oberrealschule in Eimsbüttel in Hamburg which had become vacant due to the war (Bing most likely refers to the Kaiser-Friedrich-Ufer secondary school). Bing resumed her studies at the newly founded University of Hamburg in winter 1919. The topics Geiger and Pfänder addressed in their courses might just as well have been covered by Cassirer. However, Bing must have immediately noticed the

great difference separating the Munich phenomenologists from Cassirer, the eminent scholar of cultural and intellectual history. Cassirer began his teaching career in Hamburg in winter 1919-1920 with a lecture on the *History of Modern Philosophy (from the Renaissance to Kant)*, another one on *Kant and German Intellectual Life*, and a tutorial on the *History of Modern Philosophy (Descartes and Leibniz)*. During the following Summer term, Cassirer gave a lecture on *Logic and Critique of Knowledge* and conducted a tutorial on the *Principal Directions of the Modern Critique of Knowledge*. In winter 1920-1921, he gave lectures on the *Philosophical Problems of the Theory of Relativity*, *Kant and the Post-Kantian Systems of Philosophy*, and *Schiller's Philosophical World View*. Petsch, during the same time (Summer 1920 and Summer 1921), lectured twice on *Lessing and his Time*, as well as on *Goethe's Faust*.



2 | Gertrud Bing, August 1933, WIA, The Warburg Institute.

Bing received the idea for the topic of her thesis as early as during her Munich years, namely from Christian Janetzky, a German philologist conducting, as private lecturer, a seminar on *Literature and Philosophy in the eighteenth Century* at the LMU during the Winter term 1917-1918. Janetzky became a full professor of modern German literary history in Dresden in 1922. Like Petsch, he signed the Vow of allegiance of the Professors of the German Universities and High-Schools to Adolf Hitler and the National Socialistic State in 1933. One year later, he was dismissed because of his advocacy for professors Paul Luchtenberg and Rainer Fetscher, who were persecuted by the National Socialists. However, his

retirement was revoked shortly afterwards because German was being considered too important a subject after all. Viewed in this context, Bing's decision for a first reviewer of her dissertation from the German Studies department makes sense. However, instead of following Petsch, as her topic would have suggested, Bing explicitly criticises Petsch's teacher, Erich Schmidt—and, implicitly, also the student—when she begins her thesis in medias res, stating that:

Die Geburtsstunde der modernen Philosophie ist der Augenblick (gleichviel wo er historisch liegt und ob er überhaupt eindeutig aufzuweisen ist), und wo man anfängt, die Sinneseindrücke unter die Sonde des Denkens zu nehmen, und wo man erkennt, dass sie nicht standhalten, dass die Welt, die sich dem Erleben durchaus als real und einheitlich darstellt, vor dem prüfenden Verstande in eine Vielheit unzuverlässiger Daten zerflattert. Von da an ruht der Gedanke nicht mehr, dass die sinnliche Wahrnehmung wandelbar in Raum und Zeit und als Erkenntnis trügerisch ist.

The birth of modern philosophy is the moment (regardless of where it may lie in historical terms and whether it can be pinpointed at all) when sensual perceptions are being put under the scrutiny of thought, and when it becomes evident that they do not stand their ground, that the world which to experience presents itself as thoroughly real and unified disintegrates before scrutinising mind into a multiplicity of unreliable data. From then on, the thought would no longer come to rest that sensual perception is subject to change in space and time, being epistemologically deceptive (Bing Diss., 1. Author's translation).

Pointing out Leibniz's influence on Lessing's poetics is neither original nor new. Scholarship on Lessing around 1900 had long before Bing taken notice of it, dealing with it more extensively as well. Bing, however, contradicts the relevant biographies on Lessing, elaborating instead on Gustav Kettner's study (Kettner 1904). Kettner had already researched Lessing's "relationship with Leibnizian psychology" (Kettner 1904, 220 ff.) by drawing on Lessing's own sources. Not only did Lessing study Leibniz's *Nouveaux essais sur l'entendement humain* thoroughly, but he also translated several passages from them. As Kettner recalls:

Here Leibniz was first to disclose the unconscious life of the soul to psychology. He showed how our whole process of thinking and willing is rooted in small and obscure perceptions (perceptions petites et insensibles). Gradually developing from them were the confused perceptions of sensation and, finally, clear cognition (Kettner 1904, 221).

Kettner recognised this Leibnizian gradual process distinctly in *Emilia Galotti*, and Bing would follow his interpretation.

What is innovative about Bing's work is that, by conjoining the Leibnizian principle of continuity—it is expressed, amongst others, by means of the infinitesimal calculus as well as by the 'necessary' in the Theodicy—with the tragical concept in *Emilia Galotti* and *Nathan*, Bing shows that the cultural science of Warburg and Cassirer does not "miss the core issue [...] of grasping the world and its inner and outer [...] formation" (Petsch 1928, 616) —as Petsch would later put it with respect to literary studies—but, on the contrary, that it leads towards an understanding of culture. The direction Petsch came to pursue with his conception of literary studies in the following years was increasingly *völkisch*. Accordingly, in *Deutsche Literaturwissenschaft* he wrote:

But our approach to research may be called German in yet another sense. What we practice here steers clear [...] of any former, legislative or descriptive, statically recording or psychologically-explanatory 'poetics', without dismissing their methods as meaningless. [...] By contrast, we, by our means, seek to penetrate to the essence of poetry in such a manner as clearly only the German man can conceive and as our German poets have, at least since Lessing, conceived of it time and again (Petsch 1940, 9).

Contrary to an opinion gaining favour at the time, neither phenomenology nor formalism can provide a panacea for analysing the 'essence' of culture. Bing clearly took up a position in a debate which was ever intensifying in philosophy as well as in art and literary studies. Two years after Bing's disputation, German philologist Oskar Walzel, publishing *Content and Form in the Poet's Work of Art* (*Inhalt und Form im Kunstwerk des Dichters*), would peremptorily usher in a new epoch in literary studies. Walzel paved the way for a history of poetry without poets, which would eventually lead to a disembodied formalism attaching paramount importance to surface structures. This is entirely in line with the Russian formalist Osip Brik, who once declared that Evgenij Onegin could have been written without Puškin. In opposition to Cassirer, for Walzel — and Petsch, accordingly — what mattered was not the development of a poetic work of art but rather the "being of the poetic work, which is to be illuminated" (Walzel 1923).

It becomes evident that Cassirer's strong recommendation of Bing for the Warburg Library was primarily due to scholarly reasons. By the time Bing

submitted her thesis, Lessing scholarship had already experienced a golden age, as it were. Following the July Revolution of 1830, two important attempts were made to establish a scientific foundation for research on Lessing: the first scholarly edition of Lessing's works and the first biography of Lessing based on precise documentary research. Karl Lachmann's *Neue rechtmäßige Ausgabe* of Lessing's writings, which Bing used, appeared in thirteen volumes from 1838 to 1840 (Lachmann's edition of Lessing's works has remained a model to this day. Franz Muncker expanded it to twenty-one volumes between 1886 and 1908. Two supplementary volumes and an index volume completed the edition). One could see in this an affront to Petsch, who had published Lessing's Complete Works in six volumes in 1907. Ten years later (1850), Theodor Wilhelm Danzel's carefully researched Lessing biography was published from his estate. Following in 1919 was a biography by Waldemar Oehlke, also used by Bing. However, the greatest influence on Lessing scholarship was exerted by Erich Schmidt and his two-volume study, which first appeared in 1884 to be reprinted and corrected time and again. It had remained the standard reference on the life and work of the early Enlightenment philosopher — the last edition, revised by Erich Schmidt, appeared in 1909, he died in 1913 — until Hugh Barr Nisbet's 1000-page monograph on Lessing appeared in 2008. Setting the tone around 1900 were also Kuno Fischer's interpretations of Lessing (Fischer 1881) and his treatise on Leibniz (Fischer 1855), both of which should be taken into account when reading Bing.

Even though Bing did not produce a biography of Lessing, she intensively dealt with Erich Schmidt's view of Lessing. In fact, Bing's thesis can be read, in a way, as a critical commentary on Schmidt's analysis of the significance Leibniz had for Lessing. The teacher of Petsch, Schmidt was himself a disciple of Wilhelm Scherer, whom he succeeded as chair of German Language and Literature at Berlin in 1887. Before the University of Hamburg was founded and as part of the Litterarische Gesellschaft (Literary Society), Schmidt had given public lectures in Hamburg that were so well attended that tickets had to be issued for them, eventually (Richter 2011, 47).

It is not a coincidence that Leibniz and Lessing had always played an important role in the Warburg-Cassirer circle. Warburg, for example,

repeatedly expressed that Lessing had been his “ideal” (Warburg [1927] 2010, 683f.) since school days and that only gradually had he come to realise that he had to “apply a correction”(Warburg [1927] 2010, 685) to Lessing. Warburg’s project of correcting Lessing is due to the “Laocoon essay”, in which word and image are differentiated on account of the different possibilities of expression afforded by poetry and painting, respectively. Whereas depiction can, as Lessing argues, show Laocoon’s sighs but not his cries, narration can convey emotionality much more inclusively and precisely (see Laocoon, chapter XVIII). Warburg presents a different analysis, declaring that his entire scientific work is dedicated to the proof that passionate experience can in fact be depicted by means of images (see Warburg [1927] 2010, 685). The KBW’s diary contains repeated references suggesting that Warburg intended to communicate his “correction to Lessing” to the public at the Lessing Congress in Hamburg in 1929. He had plans for a lecture by the title of *The Transitory as influenced by Antiquity since the Renaissance period* (*Das Transitorische unter dem Einfluß der Antike seit der Renaissance*), this is accompanied by the remark:

Bis zum Congress muß unser Bilderatlas, der doch eigentlich nichts anderes ist als ein Supplement zu Lessing.

By the time of the Congress, our picture Atlas, which really is nothing more than a supplement to Lessing (TKBW, 11 December 1927).

On January 4th 1928 he changes the title of the lecture to: *The Influence of Antiquity on the Representation of the Transitory in Renaissance Artistic Culture* (*Der Einfluß der Antike auf die Darstellung des Transitorischen in der künstlerischen Kultur der Renaissance*, TKBW, 191). Unfortunately, Warburg’s death prevented any further elaboration of his correction of Lessing. Cassirer, for his part, not only wrote a comprehensive study of Leibniz (Cassirer 1902), but his philosophy of culture is also clearly influenced by Leibnizian thought (Gelhard 2018). However, Bing’s connection to Warburg and Cassirer goes beyond a shared interest in the poet and the philosopher. Instead of anticipating, as was recently suggested (Tack 2020, 55) the Warburg circle’s preoccupation with Fortuna, Bing, in fact, shares the Warburg-Cassirer Circle’s interest in the formation of ‘modern consciousness’. By means of Lessing’s aesthetics or,

more precisely, of Lessing's concept of the tragic, Bing demonstrates how Lessing engenders in his dramatic plays a realm of individual freedom within the Leibnizian system of lawful necessity. Bing takes Kettner's interpretation of Lessing a step further. Curiously, Kettner establishes no connection between his interpretation of drama and the significance of Leibniz for Lessing's understanding of the tragic, which he had previously demonstrated. Only hinted at in *Emilia Galotti*, this notion is fully developed in *Nathan*. Tack's interpretation, linking Bing's interpretation of *Nathan* to Nietzsche's *Ecce homo* and ultimately even to Warburg's attitude towards his own Jewishness, thoroughly misses the point:

In any case, it is striking that Bing's description of Nathan's mystico-religious life stance is strongly reminiscent of the description given by Friedrich Nietzsche (Tack 2020, 54).

Neither can there be a line drawn between Bing (*Nathan*) and Nietzsche, nor is Bing's account reflective of Warburg's Jewishness, except for the fact that Nathan and Warburg are both of Jewish faith:

Accepting one's fate on religious grounds, as expressed in Lessing's Nathan, becomes amor fati for Nietzsche; the loving acceptance of one's fate. Bing uses this terminology - amor fati - when, at the end of her life, she looks back on Warburg's fate and specifically his relationship to his Jewish identity (Tack 2020, 54).

Through Lessing, Bing argues —and Warburg, ever since beginning to study the afterlife of oriental antiquity, had applied himself to the very same topic— that reflection (Warburg refers to it as *Besonnenheit*) effects distance from the mere reactions aroused by affect. Accordingly, Bing concludes her chapter on *Emilia Galotti* thus:

Es gibt aber neben dem unbewußten Befolgen des Gesetzes, wie es in jedem Baum und jedem Tier vor sich geht, eine bewußte Einsicht und freiwillige Unterordnung darunter, wie sie nur dem Menschen oder Wesen von noch höherer Bewußtheit zukommt. Darin liegt eine Freiheit, die wieder Notwendigkeit garantiert.

There is, however, apart from an unconscious obedience to laws, which occurs with every tree and every animal, a conscious understanding of, and a voluntary subordination under, such laws, which is peculiar to man or beings of even higher consciousness. In it lies a freedom that, in turn, guarantees necessity (Bing, Diss., 72. Author's translation).

This is what constitutes the remarkable agreement between the thought of Bing, Warburg and Cassirer. Even though Bing, in her thesis, demonstrates a deep familiarity with, and a considerable command of, Lessing's oeuvre — a fact that, due to her habit of not always bothering with providing a source for citations, or, for that matter, with highlighting citations, posed a few editorial challenges — he serves more so as an example to characterise the beginning of Enlightenment thought as the process of liberation from an otherwise immutable determinism. On this point, she criticises Erich Schmidt, who fails to detect any semblance of free will in Lessing. In fact, Schmidt announces rather harshly:

How still today, of all times, anyone can view Lessing as a proponent of free will seems more than paradoxical in light of documentary evidence (Schmidt 1923, 430).

For Schmidt, Lessing's adherence to the notion of absolute 'determinism' is irrefutable and cannot be denied even on account of "motives of reason" (Schmidt 1923, 431). As Schmidt puts it:

But is necessity pouring from the insight of reason therefore less than necessity? Does the necessity of the good and the right by virtue of cognition cease to be a necessity? Not why I must, but whether or not I must, that is the question (Schmidt 1923, 431).

Bing does not object to this. In her commentary on Schmidt's treatment of Lessing's determinism, she does, however, introduce a psychological component to Schmidt's concept of cognition. Whilst for Schmidt there is a distinction to be drawn only between knowing and not knowing, Bing broadens this polarity by differentiating between two modes of cognition (presented in detail in chapters two and three of her thesis): conscious cognition and what is known to religion as 'revelation', which is a kind of cognition that does not come about through comprehending causation but

flashes up like lightning instead. Within the Leibnizian causal chain, such a disturbance would have to appear as an accident. Devoting an entire chapter to the “game of chance”, Kettner does not, however, establish a connection with his previous analysis of Leibniz (Kettner 1904, 230ff.).

Bearing this in mind, it is clear why Bing’s interpretative approach to chance in *Emilia Galotti* differs so completely from that of contemporary German studies. Of particular interest in this context is Waldemar Oehlke’s interpretation. Even though, like Bing, he acknowledges that Lessing is concerned with the problem of individual freedom in *Emilia Galotti*, Oehlke’s reading links the drama exclusively to a critique of absolutism (Oehlke 1919, 152). Moreover, he immediately discounts Leibniz’s influence as irrelevant:

As for the thoughts about the contradictions between a gentility revered with awe and an infamous procuration that have gradually and shyly taken root in the soul of the people, Leibniz and his posthumous ‘Nouveaux essais sur l’entendement humain’ need not be called upon, which gave Lessing occasion in 1765 to study the dissection of the mental substratum of acts of will, the interrelationship between character disposition and dark instincts (Oehlke 1919, 145).

Contradictions and ambiguities in *Emilia Galotti*, which allot great importance to chance in the plot, have always posed a considerable challenge for interpreters, who tended to be concerned with resolving them. Bing, on the other hand, makes no attempt to unify them; in fact, they serve her as means to support her initial proposition about the beginning of modern consciousness in that they show that determinism and chance are not mutually exclusive but instead lay the foundations for Lessing’s tragical concept.

In his correspondence with Mendelssohn and Nicolai, Lessing explained that the aim of tragedy was to evoke compassion in the audience (Petsch [1910] 1967, 54ff.). To achieve this, according to Lessing, psychological motivation, or the causal chain of the characters’ actions, needs to be comprehensible. Bing argues that Leibniz’s concept of the necessary serves as a prerequisite for Lessing’s concept of the tragic; in other words, a character suffers whenever he or she is subject to a constraint or

compulsion that, in turn, determines his or her actions. According to Bing, Lessing addresses this impotence in the face of limitation on several levels: politically, psychologically and religiously. The dramatic struggle, in Bing's view, is not waged by the characters against an evil outside world, but it takes place within themselves once they experience their subjection to regulations against which they are powerless. Bing interprets Emilia's self-enforced suicide — her killing by her father's hand — which for Oehlke guarantees the reinstatement of moral law (Oehlke 1919, 164), as one of the ways whereby Lessing defies the 'spell of necessity' (in this, Bing deviates from Schmidt's interpretation as well): voluntary death as salvation from the despair of the immutable that cannot be swayed; in other words, the consciously chosen act of freeing oneself from this necessity: "The death of the heroine [is] the only action in this tragedy" ("Der Tod der Heldin [ist] die einzige Tat in dieser Tragödie", Bing Diss., 71. Author's translation):

Das Weltgeschehen setzt sich zusammen aus den Einzeltätigkeiten der Monaden, von denen jede das eigne Selbst verwirklicht, die aber zu einem gemeinsamen Plan zusammenarbeiten. Das Ineinanderweben des Ganzen ist ein Bild nur für den unendlichen Geist. Ihm ist dieser ganze ungeheure Stufenplan mit der Unendlichkeit seiner Individuen, die sich in allen Stadien der Bewußtheit befinden, ein einziger Syllogismus, d.h. logisch verständlich und notwendig. Er sieht den Ursprung und Verlauf jedes Fadens, wo ein endlicher Verstand nur ein verwirrtes Stückchen des Gewebes wahrnimmt.

In *Nathan*, Lessing transforms this grim tragical insight into a rationale of the Enlightenment, leaving the immutable 'syllogism' of the Leibnizian system unchanged. But Lessing now focusses in on the moment of cognition itself:

World events are composed of the individual activities of monads, each of which realises its own self whilst cooperating towards a common goal. The interweaving of the whole presents an image only to the infinite spirit. To him, this whole enormous graduated scheme comprising the infinity of its individual beings, which are in various stages of consciousness, is a single syllogism, i.e. it is logically comprehensible and necessary. He sees the origin and the course of every thread, whereas a finite mind perceives only a tangled bit of fabric (Bing, Diss., 69. Author's translation).

Thus, the second solution for resisting determinism, which Lessing proposes with *Nathan*, is conscious understanding of its immutability and voluntary submission to the law of necessity (Bing Diss., 72). Bing's conclusion that Lessing "completed" (Bing Diss., 77) Leibniz's concept of the necessary with *Emilia Galotti* and *Nathan* hinges on the moment of conscious liberation: psychologically, man is unfree regarding his passions, desires and longings; politically, he is at the mercy of rulers and of society in the absolutist eighteenth century; however, in the domain of religion, surely, he faces his hardest battle because he is powerless against his fate and against providence. Modern man cannot extricate himself from these circumstances either, but, according to Bing, he is no longer subject to them because he can reflect upon them (Bing Diss., 77). Pointing out the coexistence of reason and religion, which is expressed in two modes of cognition, Bing moreover rejects Schmidt's interpretation of Lessing as a Spinozist (Schmidt, 1923, 432).

Thus, Bing not only shares Warburg's and Cassirer's interest in the emergence of modern consciousness but also their focus on the simultaneity of conscious cognition and affective reaction pertaining to the individual consciousness. This theme is prevalent in Warburg's works. Particularly in his last years, he would turn his attention to Giordano Bruno. On his last trip to Italy, on which Bing accompanied him, the two made special arrangements to visit Bruno's birthplace in Nola near Naples. If one compares Warburg's notes on Bruno with Bing's thesis, striking parallels become apparent. This is not surprising, considering that Lessing, too, occupied himself with Bruno's writings early on (see here, amongst others, Lessing, *Rettung des Cardanus*) thus, the circle is complete: Warburg's early engagement with Lessing leads him quite logically to Bruno. Erich Schmidt noticed the importance of Bruno for Lessing as well and kept emphasising it more and more throughout subsequent revisions of his biography. Whereas Bruno is mentioned only in passing in the 1899 edition of Schmidt's book (Schmidt 1923, 512), the last revised edition elaborates on the connection between the two, stating explicitly:

If one compares his [Lessing's] teachings with those of the most famous of all the Italians of the Renaissance and Reformation period, with Giordano Bruno's, the first impression the roundup affords is striking. According to

Bruno, the substance of all things rests in the act of divine thinking; in the Nolan, we thus find the fundamental idea of pantheism. (the fundamental idea of pantheism can thus be traced to the Nolan.) [...] These strong correspondences are hardly coincidental but lend themselves to the assumption that an early influence by Bruno [on Lessing], which had not been obscured since, manifested itself all the more resolutely, as Lessing cast off old-fashioned and antagonistic views; and following this trail, an even richer prize may be won than is afforded by the attempts made to establish an immediate influence of Aristotle's 'Metaphysics' on Lessing or to reap benefit from the profound speculations of Tertullian for the modern Enlightenment philosopher's worldview (Schmidt 1923, 475).

During his stay in Rome, Warburg wrote to his friend Cassirer that he was occupied with reading up on High Renaissance philosophy, focussing above all on Giordano Bruno:

His [Bruno's] critique of knowledge, symbolically disguised as a campaign of the gods against celestial demons, is in truth a critique of pure unreason, for which I can provide a direct historical context with my psychologically significant pictorial material [harmony of the spheres 1589] (Aby Warburg to Ernst Cassirer, 3 December 1928, in Cassirer [1995] 2009, 112).

Cassirer replies thus:

I was particularly pleased to hear that you are now applying yourself to Giordano Bruno. If anyone should succeed in showing us the way to understanding this peculiar man, it must be you. The discipline of the history of philosophy has still to this day been quite puzzled by this man, alternating between uncritical veneration and dismissive hypercriticism, which applies wholly wrong standards to Bruno. That the lever must be positioned elsewhere, that Bruno cannot be understood and interpreted based solely on philosophical problems — this I have already tried to show in my account of the philosophy of the Renaissance. But whilst I have detected the knot, you shall undo it for us. *The Spaccio della bestia trionfante* demands a commentary the philosophical history of problems cannot produce on its own but that only a history of images and a history of astrology can provide (Ernst Cassirer to Aby Warburg, 29 December 1928, in Cassirer [1995] 2009, 114).

With the help of Giordano Bruno, Warburg recognises a cultural-scientific continuity in terms of the Enlightenment ideal: it leads from Michelangelo's *Fall of Phaeton* to Dürer's *Melencolia I* and, finally, to Manet's *Déjeuner sur l'herbe*:

Arguably the most scientifically significant event in recent times is the path leading to Michelangelo. It was clear that, without a comment on him, every attempt at establishing a comparative series of observations in typological terms would have been a wild-goose chase. However, it turned out that, whilst investigating the ancient-style affectations of cosmic ascent in Rimini, the arduous journey towards Mithras was completed. As a consequence, I was led to the Dieburg Mithraeum showing the close connection between the cult of Mithras and the legend of Phaeton, that is, the ascent to the sun [which is] most intimately linked to the fall. From another wholly different direction, I was also led to the sarcophagus sculpture representing another ascent not properly understood in its accentuation: Venus' return to Olympus following the judgement of Paris. Forming now the tertium comparationis between the judgement of Paris and the legend of Phaeton are the earthbound genii, who, as frightening-mourning or astonished-worshipping participants, symbolise the terrestrial region, the nymphs of springs [i.e. Naiades] on the Phaeton sarcophagus and on the judgement of Paris (Aby Warburg [1929] 2019, 404-433).

If the age of modernity began for the natural sciences with Kepler's discovery of Mars' planetary orbit forming an ellipsis, Giordano Bruno's pantheism and his abstracting from images ensured the discovery of inwardness, which is expressed in the image of man absorbed in his thought (*Dürer's Melencolia I*). Both events, Warburg construed, take place simultaneously during the age of the Renaissance. Giordano Bruno, self-engrossed and meditating, is nevertheless a continuation of the Jew Melchisedech from Boccaccio's *Decamerone*, who tells Saladin the Parable of the Ring (Boccaccio, *Decamerone*, Day 1, Story 3) which would be resurrected in Lessing's *Nathan*.

The thinking of the Warburgians, it can be said, seeks to encompass the experience of being dominated by passions, on the one hand, and the attempt of distancing oneself from them, on the other — it thus spans, as was Bing's aim to show, the range between *Emilia Galotti* and

Nathan. Cassirer at once realised that Bing, too, was receptive in her scientific thinking for the forms of the transition between conscious and unconscious cognition, and that she was prepared and able to stand up to contemporary tendencies in the process of parting from antiquity studies and history. Because of it, Cassirer was so keen on securing Bing as a member of staff for the KBW. Bing's promotion to the library's board of directors only a few years later, where she would follow in the footsteps of Saxl and Warburg, is due ultimately to these scholarly and personal merits, and not to a skill in sorting books.

* The following is an excerpt from the introduction to the author's doctoral thesis, which is presented here slightly modified and in translation. The book will be published in Fall 2022 (Gertrud Bing, *Gertrud Bing im Warburg-Cassirer-Kreis*. Mit dem Text ihrer Dissertation von 1921, hrsg. von Dorothee Gelhard und Thomas Roider, Wissenschaftler in Hamburg, bd. 6, edited by Ekkehard Nümann, Wallstein Verlag).

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English abstract

The article traces the intellectual history of Gertrud Bing's doctoral thesis, highlighting the first phase of her scientific life, which is still underestimated today. The thesis, whose title is *The Concept of the Necessary in Lessing. A contribution to the historical-intellectual problem of the relationship between Leibniz and Lessing*, links German Literature, Psychology and Philosophy and, among its merits, establishes an important dialogue with a great German intellectual, of fundamental importance for Bing's and Warburg's thinking: Ernst Cassirer. The author traces the history of the dissertation, passing through Cassirer's recommendation for Bing to join the K&W to the profound influence Lessing and Leibniz had in the Warburg circle.

Keywords | Gertrud Bing; Ernst Cassirer; Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz; Gotthold Ephraim Lessing.



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