

Cassirer, Panofsky, and Warburg

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Cassirer, Panofsky, and Warburg

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A N D H I S T O R Y

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Y A L E U N I V E R S I T Y P R E S S

N E W H A V E N A N D L O N D O N

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To Flavia and Gino

... io vedo il mondo da benigne stelle
adorno tutto in sua novella etade
monstrar di fuor le sue cose più belle.

— MATTEO MARIA BOIARDO

INTRODUCTION

Fritz Saxl, in a letter to Hans Meier dated July 15, 1928, concerning the difficulties presented by his astrological manuscript and his daily reports on the activities of the Warburg Institute, wrote that he spent his Sundays reading Kantorowicz's work on Frederick II with great pleasure.¹ Though he noted how the author insinuated personal, arbitrary elements into the portrait of his character, Saxl still appreciated Kantorowicz's attempt to offer a "universal representation," that is, a representation (as he immediately explained) of all material from a single point of view.

There are diverse reasons why one so admires and respects the capacity to trace out a unitary picture, a coherent overall view of a person or an epoch. One might say, along with Arthur Lovejoy, that this is a question of metaphysical pathos or "monistic pathos," an aestheticizing veneration of the number one.² Or one could agree with Ernst Gombrich and identify the vice in this taste for unity with the persistence of a Hegelian view of history whereby single facts are considered moments in the evolution of a universal spirit, which Gombrich interprets as a residue of theological tradition.³

In any case, whether this is a question of psychological motivation or of philosophical heritage, there is no doubt that what leads us to admire a work of historiography for its intrinsic unity is both the difficulty this task entails and the necessity of doing it.

The difficulty is twofold: it consists in the fact that the past, even the most recent past, presents itself in a fragmentary state, and it also lies in the changes we ourselves constantly undergo, so that without a rule of life—whether it be conventional or existential—our very physical survival would be jeopardized. The necessary nature of the task of historical synthesis stems from the ambition every historian

has to interpret the material known to him. This ambition was no less alien to Jacob Burckhardt, for example, than it is to Gombrich in tackling Renaissance documents, even though their two inquiries and systems result in clearly opposite conclusions. And since even the driest chronicle cannot help being animated by an interpretative design (if the compiler has any interest at all in his work), we should seek out the monistic basis for that design, because in order to interpret one has to connect and disconnect, two operations that must be formulated from a single, underlying viewpoint.

Hence, the interpreter must not only establish for the historical past those relations useful to his task of clarification and understanding, but he must also recognize in himself, in his own present and past experience, the regulative principles that lie behind the choices he makes, the direction his research takes—whether it aims at establishing unity for the historiographic model he is proposing, or at destroying all possible models in the name of the absolute indeterminateness of historical knowledge. And all directions, be they univocal or the result of various courses, are such only insofar as they have a stable reference point that at every step indicates their origin. Yet it is precisely the stable reference point (or better, the origin that accompanies movement and change as its own possibility) that is the most difficult to find because we are surrounded by the manifold and changeable, which we can interpret only on the basis of a unifying criterion but which continuously does violence to the limits we have set, until an extraordinary virtue resolutely opposes that manifold and changeable. And it is that virtue to which we render homage when reading the great historiographic works that, despite their interpretative arbitrariness, become models even for their detractors.

The tendency to cultivate the sense of unity does not have an aestheticizing nature; it is not the satisfaction of a taste or a pleasure of the soul but, on the contrary, is determined by the necessary effort to give meaning to what surrounds us. Plato did not shut himself up in his arduous speculation on the number one because it seemed more beautiful to him than the other numbers,⁴ but because he sought in it the criterion for the manifold so as to make it comprehensible.

With the profound self-directed irony and humor typical of the Hamburg scholar, Aby Warburg's famous and oft-repeated saying "The Good Lord hides in details" implies a serious awareness of the

situation in which the historian finds himself. He faces a world of details, of minutiae, in all of which something is concealed that is most certainly not the "Good Lord" but is the most obscure and obstinate of "evil spirits", the broadest meaning, the unitary sense without which what Panofsky calls the "sense of the document" is precluded and which the historian knows he can attain only by means of two faculties that are difficult to hold together and reconcile, temerity and prudence.

Warburg's oeuvre demonstrates this determination to find the unitary criterion for the knowledge and consciousness of an epoch, a determination that partly stemmed from the historians he had become acquainted with in his youth—above all Burckhardt, Justi, and Usener—and partly rested upon his idea of history as a tradition of images and words that imply and communicate vitality and energy. And Warburg's life itself was marked by a constant determination to pursue his goals and to put to use as intensely and profitably as possible the economic and cultural means destiny had bestowed upon him. He not only utilized his huge patrimony to found the splendid and unique library that bears his name and around which some of the greatest twentieth-century historians have gathered, but he also used the important position his family had occupied in Hamburg for centuries to help found there the university that attracted the talented persons on whom he counted to build his school.

It is, however, inexact to speak of a school without clarifying the meaning this word had for Warburg—or rather, the meaning it took on in light of his intentions and the nature of his personality. Usually "school" means a center where disciples gather around a scholar whose teachings set them on a certain path of study and research. In Warburg's case, though, the school was made up of already established scholars, each of whom came from a different area and had his own well-defined and singular intellectual force. Warburg himself always refused academic posts. In his scholarly solitude, he availed himself only of the collaboration and comfort of friends who, quite different from him and sometimes much younger and with other interests, shared his passion for iron discipline in scholarship and his acute sense of individuality and freedom of historical research, as well as the responsibility of imposing his own historiographic model.

It was this broader, higher concept of school that allowed great

scholars in Warburg's milieu to come to the fore. In his teaching, these scholars found not so much an example to be followed or criteria to be imitated as a nucleus of possible historiographic research to be carried out according to each historian's talent and inspiration and to be extended in many different theoretical or art-historical directions. In a certain sense then, we must imagine Warburg's character as being intolerant of the traditional concept of "school" and "disciples." He aimed only at sharing his own work with culturally independent persons who, like himself, had intellectual tenacity, so that their collective energy would multiply rather than be split up and thus dispersed.

Perhaps Warburg's concept of history and the individual is now too distant from us to be thoroughly understood. But his school and those who were part of it, or for whom it was a center of interest and study for a certain period, are indicative of a spirit based above all on the coexistence, in the mind of each scholar, of different disciplines that together take on the form of an organic whole. Since this was Warburg's idea of the totality of learning, every scholar who came into contact with the Warburg Library and Institute attempted to relate and react to these stimuli by delving into the various areas of research with his own resources and insight. Thus the unique personalities of these erudite philosophers and historians contributed to that wealth of production which is marked precisely by variety and distinctness.

This may help us to understand why the presence of a thinker like Ernst Cassirer was so dear to Warburg despite the fact that his philosophical experience was so different from Warburg's and that his conception of history developed, in that period, to a certain extent in opposition to Warburg's. What they had in common was the aptitude to investigate the most recondite testimonies of humanity's tendency to represent itself through culture. Another point in common was the need, at that crucial moment in history, to make every effort to inculcate younger generations with the values of civilization so as to thwart the nightmare that was in the making—a catastrophe which these scholars' restrained and reasonable example, of course, did not manage to avert. In 1928, when Warburg did his utmost to persuade Cassirer (who had had an enticing offer from the University of Frankfurt) to stay in Hamburg, it was no longer possible to conceal the urgency of this pedagogical mission; and it was this that convinced Cassirer to refuse the brilliant post he had been offered.⁵

The gloomy, weary letters that Cassirer, Saxl, and Panofsky wrote from abroad in the autumn of 1933 to resign officially from their posts at the University of Hamburg, and to take their leave of the outstanding burgomaster Von Melle,⁶ betray their shattered hopes in their studies of that period and a tragic feeling of futility. But these scholars continued to work in other countries, because each of them had maintained and developed his own intellectual solidity as well as what Thomas Mann would call his own moral-psychic world. They themselves were the center of the Warburg Institute experience.

The reason for limiting this book to an inquiry into only three personalities, among the many belonging to that school and to the period when they worked at the University of Hamburg and the Warburg Institute, then, lies in the nature of Warburg's teaching and personality. The analysis of his work, and of Cassirer's and Panofsky's writings in the 1920s and in the sphere of their common experience, does not aim at finding proof of an affinity or intrinsic unity on a theoretical or historiographic level (which for that matter does not exist), but sets out to demonstrate the differences and in part the obvious contradictions between them. The choice of these three scholars corresponds to the aim of finding out what premises lay behind Warburg's teachings, how they are to be grasped by following the course of his writings and historical thought, and what consequences this method of inquiry had for those colleagues who were on most intimate terms with one another and were the most gifted from a philosophical and theoretical point of view. One might say that the method Warburg employed in his research took on particular importance in the different philosophical approach given to it by Cassirer (who was immediately and instinctively won over by it), and that the method was expanded theoretically by the research with which Panofsky demonstrated his great intellectual gifts and which laid the foundation for his iconological method of dealing with art-historical problems.

The connection between symbol, image, and creative imagination, on the one hand, and historical time and the unfolding of meanings, on the other, has been viewed as the motif that draws these three scholars together, for each constructed his view of history and historiographic approach on this fundamental theme.

The writings of Cassirer and Panofsky, who belonged to the two

succeeding generations, have been limited to the production of the 1920s and early 1930s, not to contradict the principle of individuality that emerged from the institute, but because that period of collaboration and common aims had a meaning for those scholars without which one would not be able to understand Warburg's unique heritage.

Given the differences among these three intellectuals, it is natural that their approach to the question of the symbol and historical time should differ. Warburg's art-historical writings do not allow for a direct theoretical scrutiny. Despite the many cultural implications in them, those essays are almost exclusively concerned with the matter of the work of art. In order to track down their historiographic and philosophical meaning, it is necessary to analyze the persons and subjects interwoven in Warburg's experience. The figure of Warburg thus does not emerge prominently and immediately, but rather through the stage setting, so to speak, that partly describes the late nineteenth-century German scene through which he passed and which impressed certain lifelong models upon him.

In general, the thesis implicit in Warburg's oeuvre—precisely because it is never expressed in a wholly explicit manner and yet is fundamental for the purposes of this book—can be fully brought to light only through a complex account of its motivations.

Another kind of limit is necessary for the treatment of the same subject in Cassirer. Except for isolated cases, all references to his important philosophical works written before the 1920s, as well as the works written after the early 1930s, have been deliberately omitted. In Cassirer the theory of the symbol and its historical development presupposes the broader treatment of these concepts that he effected in his entire oeuvre as well as his relationship with the Neo-Kantian schools and with his own epistemological conception. Though bearing all this in mind, I have limited the critique of Cassirer here to his studies on symbolic forms in which, more than elsewhere, one notes the nearness of Warburg's teachings and that of his colleagues at the institute in that period.

I have attached particular importance to Cassirer's *Individual and Cosmos in Renaissance Philosophy*—really only one episode in his vast production—because it allows for a comparison with Warburg's view of that historical period and, above all, because through a critique of Cassirer's method of inquiry one can also shed light on his con-

ception of history and thus of the symbol as the expression of the relationship between knowledge and reality in time.

This book aims at verifying how different conceptions of that relationship could still converge and influence one another, giving rise to a common, conscious evolution of these ideas. Such differences and such approximation to the historiographic solution to the problem emerge with greater clarity from an analysis of Panofsky's writings, which are also limited to the same period. Panofsky explicitly brought to light the theoretical consequences of his teachers' oeuvre and tried to account for the difficult equilibrium between historicism and autonomy of interpretation in historiography.

In fact, every writing on history is an ideal course through a reality that is bequeathed fragmentarily, with oversights and omissions whose meaning in each case has its *raison d'être*. Human memory is powerful but unstable. In order to grasp it in its permanence and not in its precariousness, the historian must be as faithful as possible to the objective data and at the same time must comply with his own concepts and vast cultural experience.

Panofsky takes in the heritage of the philosophy of symbolic forms by interpreting it as a consequence of Kantian critical idealism, and hence within more rigorous limits than those used by Cassirer in his formulation. On the other hand, he endeavors to use it to account for those oversights and gaps, that mysterious instability that allowed tradition to settle in, and impress itself upon, collective memory, just as Warburg had done with such perceptive intuition.

The image of Warburg that emerges both from the premises of his historiographic reflection and from the results they produced in those who—each in his own way—understood him, is one of power and unity rarely granted to a person in this century. Thus the vague figure whom Ernst Gombrich depicts in his highly documented “intellectual biography”⁷ as irresolute and fragile, who emerges from the fragmentariness of his notes rather than from the completeness of his published works, is quite improbable. In his reconstruction of Warburg's thought, Gombrich cannot conceal his aversion for the foundations of that historical inquiry. Already in 1969 his *In Search of Cultural History* had questioned Warburg's cultural world by criticizing Burckhardt's oeuvre, which according to Gombrich is of Hegelian derivation. In this work, Gombrich confuses the history of culture constructed along the

lines of a unitary scheme with the history of the spirit conceived on the basis of the idea of progress—or at least, as he would have it, through the teleological evolution of the spirit that grows upon itself. This is not the place, however, for a point-by-point criticism of Gombrich's thesis of the Hegelian philosophy of history, a thesis which seems to ignore the meaning of Hegel's philosophical categories; nor is it the place for a discussion of Burckhardt's relationship with Hegel.

Rather, in this volume I attempt to clarify Warburg's relationship with Burckhardt. More generally, I focus on the difference between a concept of history understood as progress (which appears in Cassirer's view of the evolution of the spirit within the framework of its symbolic expression) and a concept of history understood as a totality of documents whose meaning is to be found only by tracking their basic unity, which in itself is of a nontemporal nature. Warburg's complex idea of an "age of transition"—that is, an epoch abstracted from the course of time—is taken up again by Panofsky on theoretical grounds. In these writings, Panofsky makes a subtle and profound assessment of the suppositions that underlie the enigmatic balance between historical relativism and the absoluteness of category with which the phenomenon is judged.

The world of history is a utopian domain from which nevertheless come documents that have the most intense vehemence and vitality. And with patience and courage the historian must attend to the task of giving a plausible reality to that world by means of the facts and what they conceal. What is concealed therein is also something that goes beyond the temporal limit, which we strive to establish in the very moment when, in interpreting it, we transcend it.

The writing of this book and the formulation of its basic thesis were made possible by attending the lessons and seminars of Professor Genaro Sasso and also by the original idea for a research project that he gave me years ago, for which I am very grateful.

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I would like to express a grateful thought in memory of Miss Frances Amelia Yates, with whom I had many an occasion to talk during my visits to the Warburg Institute.

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1

ABY WARBURG

Prologue

In October 1929 at Hamburg, Ernst Cassirer read the memorial address at Aby Warburg's burial service. It was the most inspiring speech given on that occasion by the late scholar's colleagues and students. The impression Warburg had made on the philosopher when they had met five years earlier, and from the time Cassirer began frequenting the Warburg Library, was so great, the understanding between the two so intense and immediate, that Cassirer's brief speech had a much stronger, more ardently sincere ring of affection and esteem than is usual in a commemoration.

In this particular moment of grief, with the straightforwardness of feeling that distinguished him, Cassirer fashioned an extraordinary parallel between his own suffering over the death of a dear friend and colleague and the suffering of Warburg's own life. Warburg had struggled against life's onslaughts, yet had used them as a way to investigate the meaning of the entire history of humanity. In this identification Cassirer abandoned his usual serenity of mind and optimism to put himself entirely in the person of his friend, who was so different from him in temperament, and he thereby evoked a truthful picture of him with great precision and heartfelt sympathy.

Warburg's presence in the culture of Hamburg had asserted itself with such force and determination that it would surely have left a lasting mark had not subsequent historical events obliterated even that manifestation of exceptional vigor. The University of Hamburg was founded in 1919, and Warburg was one of its most impassioned supporters. He also lent his support to research into the fields of the so-called sciences of the spirit, or cultural sciences, that were cultivated