

A workshop of the mind

Review of Aby Warburg, *Fragmente zur Ausdruckskunde*, edited by Ulrich Pfisterer and Christian Hönes. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2015). Volume 4 of *Aby Warburg: Gesammelte Schriften*.

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When Ernst Gombrich published his intellectual biography of Aby Warburg it became immediately clear that there was a vast archive of material that revealed not only biographical details but also a range of intellectual preoccupations of which Warburg's published writings offer only a glimpse.¹ While Warburg was highly regarded in his own lifetime, there is little in the books and articles to suggest that he was wrestling with the deeper philosophical and moral concerns Gombrich explored. Only the lecture on the serpent ritual, published in the later 1930s, gives a hint of the fact that the cultural historian apparently dealing with the arcana of Renaissance culture in fact had much wider interests.²

Gombrich's biography thus pointed towards a corpus of writings that remained hidden away, even though they contained some of the most intriguing ideas of all. The one that drew the most attention was the unfinished picture atlas *Mnemosyne* and, slowly, parts of this project entered the public domain, until a comprehensive edition was published in 2003.³ The other work in the Warburg archive that attracted considerable interest was the theoretical text titled either 'Basic Fragments Towards a Psychological Philosophy of Art' or 'Basic Fragments Towards a Monistic Psychology of Art' or 'Fragments towards a Pragmatic Theory of Expression' (Warburg could never settle on a final version). Gombrich recognised its importance, for it was here that Warburg's ruminations on the various theoretical preoccupations of his work were most visible.

A valuable Italian translation of this work was published with parallel German text in 2011.⁴ The volume under review can be regarded as a definitive edition, the latest volume in the impressive collected works of Warburg. As with the other books in this series, this is distinguished by the peerless quality of the editorial work, including a thorough and highly informative critical apparatus. A central point of difference with the Italian-German edition is also spelled out by the editors: the 2011 translation (and the edition of the original that it relied on) sought to present a uniform text based on an amalgam of the various redactions available in the Warburg Archive. As the editors Ulrich Pfisterer and Christian Hönes argue, however, this gives a false impression, for Warburg worked and reworked the text several times. This edition makes those revisions clearly visible, with the numerous

¹ Ernst Gombrich, *Aby Warburg: An Intellectual Biography*. Oxford: Phaidon, 1970.

² Aby Warburg, 'A Lecture on Serpent Ritual.' *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 2 (1938-9), 277-92.

³ Aby Warburg, *Gesammelte Schriften 2.1: Der Bilderatlas Mnemosyne*, edited by Martin Warnke and Claudie Brink, Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2003.

⁴ Aby Warburg, *Frammenti sull'espressione*, edited and translated by Maurizio Ghelardi and Giovanna Targia, Pisa: Scuola Normale Superiore, 2011.

deletions and additions clear for the reader to see. The edition is also accompanied by an excellent commentary on the composition of the text, its place in Warburg's intellectual development, and an interpretation of its significance. The editors should be praised for their diligence and for the uniformly high quality of their input.

The book contains four separate 'works.' The first and most substantial by far is the two-part 'Basic Fragments.' The others include 'Remarks on Heinrich Wölfflin, Renaissance and Baroque 1888,' 'Four Theses' and 'Symbolism as the Drawing of Horizons.' None of them are coherent texts; one might be tempted to compare them with the aphoristic format of the works of Warburg's older contemporary Friedrich Nietzsche, except that they lack the polish of the latter. It is for good reasons that Warburg never sought to publish any of these, for they are working notes, and they were compiled over a period of many years. The most compact are the notes on Wölfflin, written between 1889 and 1891 when Warburg was still a student, and just after Wölfflin's book *Renaissance and Baroque* was published. The other three texts were composed over a much more extended period of time. Warburg started writing 'Symbolism as the Drawing of Horizons' in 1896 on his trip to America, and he continued adding to it until 1901. The 'Four Theses' (the title is reminiscent of Walter Benjamin's 'Four Theses on the Philosophy of History' and the text is equally brief) were first drafted in 1892, and Warburg continued to revisit them and make tiny adjustments and comments until 1906.

The 'Basic Fragments' consists of 439 notes of varying length in two notebooks written between February 1888 and January 1903. They were then subject to revision and commentary until 1912. The notes take on various forms: diagrams, brief quotations from secondary authors, longer comments and observations (few are more than seven to eight lines in this edition, although they occupy an entire page in the original notebook), lists of concepts, exchanges between Warburg and his wife Mary Hertz. Warburg's *Mnemosyne Atlas* has often been compared with Benjamin's *Arcades Project* but in many respects it is the 'Fragments' that is closer in form, including the interleaved quotations from other authors, although not on the scale of Benjamin's work.⁵

What do we learn, therefore, from reading the 'Fragments'? Perhaps the most striking feature is that the basic themes associated with Warburg's thought are there from the very start, including the date of the first entry: 'Rosenmontag.' Rose Monday is the high point of the German carnival, and the choice of this date reminds us of the central role of the carnevalesque for Warburg. The entry as a whole reads:

Draft for some theses on the psychology of art.

Motto: 'You are alive and have no effect on me!'

I: An artwork that attempts to depict an object or process taken from human life is always the product of a compromise between the inability of the artist to lend real life to an artistic form on the one hand and, on the other, his ability to imitate nature faithfully.

⁵ Walter Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, translated by Howard Eiland, Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2002.

II: This duality is uppermost in the demands made of such a work by the spectator: on the one hand, the wish to gain a sense of the unstated presupposition that the work of art is not alive, on the other, the desire to experience the full semblance of life.⁶

Commenting on the original five years later in 1896, Warburg adds: 'Already there is a sense here of "distancing" as a basic principle.'⁷ Certain fundamental themes were introduced: art and its relation to the dynamism of life, the spectator's experience of the work of art, which would never change. They would be elaborated on and worked out in more detail, but the basic framework would persist for over 40 years. In a note written three years later Warburg formulates a more coherent theoretical position that reiterates the same basic points and would be echoed in the Introduction to the *Mnemosyne* Atlas:

Thinking and Distance

The act of judging is the product of the fact of the distance [Distanz] between subject and object as soon as the latter gains validity as the feeling of being at a remove [Entfernung] within the subject.

The power of judgment is all the more, the greater the feeling of distance from the object. The capacities of judgement consist in its dynamic binding of objects.

We have to distinguish between judgements that possess something and judgements that indicate something. The former kinds of judgement reveal the beginnings of a forgetting of being at a remove. Artistic production stands between these two.⁸

Warburg provides numerous variations on this duality of proximity and distance. In a note from 1901, for instance, he distinguishes between deposition ('Ablagerung') and appropriation ('Aneignung').⁹ It is difficult to convey in English the spatial resonance of these two terms, but their prefixes 'ab-' and 'an-' connote movement away from or towards the subject.

Yet even if Warburg pursued this theme in an almost monomaniacal fashion, it would do him a grave disservice to thereby suggest that his thinking was static. The 'Fragments' reveals a restless searching for the right formulation; one of the most striking aspects of this is the constant attempt to devise conceptual schemata that might help visualise his preoccupations. In this sense, too, the 'Fragments' anticipates the *Mnemosyne* Atlas, except that it is concepts and terms that are spread out rather than reproductions of artworks on a photographic plate. There are some

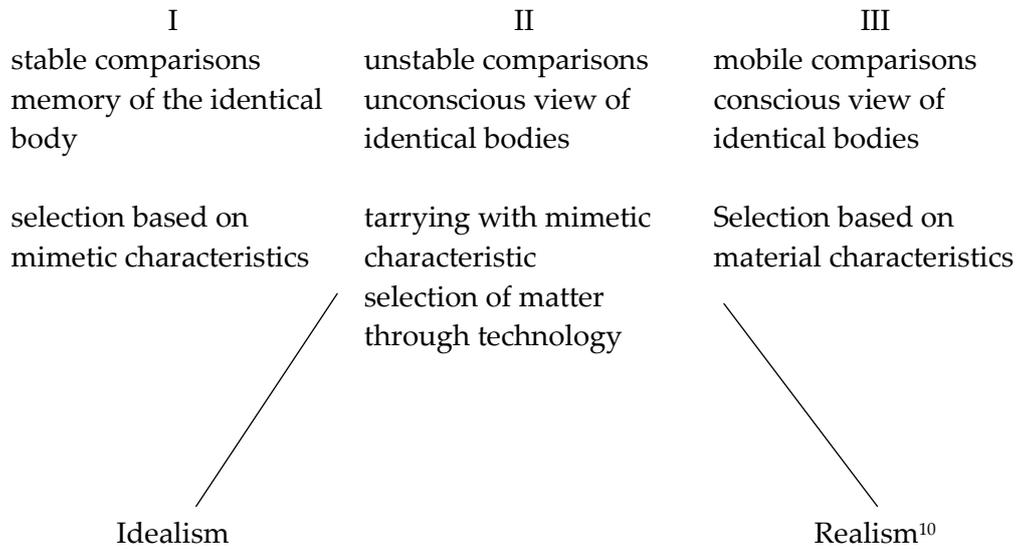
⁶ Aby Warburg, *Fragmente zur Ausdruckskunde*, edited by Ulrich Pfisterer and Christian Hönes. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2015, 5-6.

⁷ Ibid, 5.

⁸ Ibid, 90. In a note from August 1896 Warburg makes the claim that would be the first line of the *Mnemosyne* Atlas: 'The Acquisition of the feeling of distance between subj. and obj. the task of so-called *Bildung* and the criterion of progress of the human species.' *Fragmente zur Ausdruckskunde*, § 328, 162.

⁹ Ibid, § 414, 212.

notable examples that indicate his search for conceptual and terminological taxonomies. In the following note from January 1892 he constructs a visual schema of the relation between idealism and realism:



In the following he attempted to place various cultural practices within the larger map of cognitive evolution:¹¹

Appropriation (‘Aneignung’)	Expropriation (‘Enteignung’)	Dedication (‘Zueignung’)
Magic Dancing	Sacrifice Prayer	Myth
Contemplation	Turned forwards or upwards	Turned backwards
Metamorphosis	Desire and relinquishment Gift [donation] Request and Elevation	Instigator and consequence

Appropriation	Expropriation	Dedication	
S gr[eater] than O	O gr[eater] then O meaningful connection for religious purposes	S = O	
Amulet Fetish	Fest[ivities] Self-mutilation sacrifice	Cult of ancestors totemism	Religious action
Bearing	Property	Origin	Static experience

¹⁰ Ibid, § 229, 109.

¹¹ Ibid §§ 344 and 345, 173-74.

The triad of terms: Aneignung – Enteignung – Zueignung is typical of Warburg's concern to create conceptual structures, in which he traces logical progressions, assisted, it should be added, by the peculiarities of the German language that permits the creation of compound terms that subtly vary the meaning of the basic root. The reference to S[ubject] and O[bject] gives away his debt to German Idealist philosophy although, aside from the occasional mention of Kant and Hegel, there is little overt discussion of the tradition. It is clear, too, however, that he was struggling to devise his own framework, which, in contrast to the abstractions of Kantian and post-Kantian thought, drew on metaphors with powerful concrete associations. A note from 1901 describes the three-fold evolution of thought in terms of the shift from 'grasping-acquiring' to 'repelling-forming' to 'speaking-writing'.¹² This repeats a well-known conception in his work, but the various ways Warburg articulates it are in keeping with his wider critique of the path to modern abstraction, which he argued had become disconnected from the dynamism of human activity. This is evident from the lexicon of terms that are central to his analysis: 'Handlung' (activity), 'greifen' (to seize), 'Willensrichtung' (direction of volition), 'Aneignung' (appropriation) and its cognates, 'Träger (vehicle), 'Entfernung' (distance). I have mostly rendered these concepts in English with Latin terms, and while Warburg uses ideas from the Classical philosophical tradition (e.g. symbol, identity) his terminology gives preference to items that convey something of the concrete involvement of humans with the world. His rhetoric is thus an attempt to avoid that same abstract quality that he feared so much in modernity.

The 'Fragments' presents us with the variations on this theme. Exploiting the linguistic character of German, Warburg constructs concatenations of adjectives, as in his reference to the 'representation of mobile impersonal depicted things (changing places) (individuated by art) ...' that replaces generalising abstract concepts with increasingly particularised descriptive terms.¹³ At times he lands on powerful and striking expressions that convey vividly the sense of what he is exploring, but on many other occasions he becomes entangled in tortuous prose. One example suffices to illustrate this problem:

If the forms (of, for example, clothing, habitation, the body) are taken by the artist from the fleeting world around him with the maximum fidelity, then contact with life (which occurs in us when we cease coming into conflict with the shell that preserves something real for us) takes place all the sooner because the form that we ourselves show (precisely in the moment of action) cannot be the object of our critical attention, therefore cannot be thought of differently from the way it is.¹⁴

This is a single sentence with numerous sub-clauses and by the end we have lost sight of the original main idea. The point here is not, of course, to criticise

¹² Ibid § 422, 216.

¹³ '... Darstellung von bewegt (platzwechselnd) (durch die Kunst vereinzelt) dargestellten unpersönlichen Dingen ...' Ibid § 147, 75.

¹⁴ Ibid, § 9, 9

Warburg's poor prose style, especially given that this particular passage was written when he was only 22, but rather, to understand it as symptomatic of a basic issue, namely, that Warburg was working in the dark, groping towards a mode of expression that might be able to render satisfactorily the ideas that were slowly evolving, even when that led to lengthy and convoluted constructions. Shorter descriptions may have sufficed. But they would not have conveyed as powerfully the intellectual labour that drove Warburg's writing. Where he may perhaps be criticised, however, is in the fact that he seldom sought out any kind of methodological or intellectual renewal that might have helped him achieve his aims. He was writing in a time of intellectual revolution but with one or two exceptions (his reading of Richard Semon, for example) Warburg paid little attention to the wide-ranging philosophical and methodological innovations that were taking place around him.

Despite the tantalising views offered by Gombrich, some readers may be disappointed. The 'Fragments' does not provide a treasury of developed methodological and theoretical positions. Instead, it is a workshop, populated with discarded scraps of ideas that do not always make for easy reading. It does not contain, either, sustained coherent worked out arguments, and this is perhaps the most frustrating aspect of the material. But then, that was not its purpose; it was a work in progress in which Warburg jotted down ideas as they occurred to him. As such, it provides a vital document of how his thought evolved at a crucial stage as well as illustrating how in many respects it hardly evolved at all. The publication of *Fragmente zur Ausdruckskunde* is an important milestone in the continuing project of making Warburg's Nachlaß accessible, and it maintains the excellent editorial and production standards of that project. At some point it may get the translation into English it deserves, although the challenge for whoever takes on the task will be considerable.

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