

THE WARBURGIAN NARRATIVE ON THE 'SURVIVAL OF THE CLASSICS' AS A JEWISH CONSTRUCT IN A CHRISTIAN WORLD

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ABSTRACT

The exclusion of German-Jewish scholars from the German scientific community already at the time of the Weimar Republic before the National Socialist persecution caused the art historian Aby Warburg and his circle to look for a new and positive positioning in German intellectual life. In my paper I want to show that Aby Warburg's Kulturwissenschaftliche Bibliothek with its interdisciplinary program of collection and research on the 'survival of the classics', including the fields of

art and culture, history of philosophy and religion, is constructed as a very original competing narrative in contrast to the predominant Christian „Heilsgeschichte“. Whereas Aby Warburg himself showed the 'survival of the classics' in the masterpieces of the Italian Renaissance, the philosopher Ernst Cassirer and the historian of philosophy Raymond Klibansky made apparent the continuity of the Platonic tradition from Late Antiquity to the Middle Ages and the Renaissance.

Keywords: Aby Warburg's Library. 'Survival of the Classics'. German-Jewish scholars. Platonic Tradition.

The French art historian Georges Didi-Huberman who with his 2002 book *L'image survivante. Histoire de l'art et de temps de fantomes selon Aby Warburg* has had a lasting influence on Warburg research in the direction of an "image science", understands Aby Warburg's central theme – the 'survival of the classics' in the Italian Renaissance – clearly *not* in the sense of an "inheritance of Antiquity" or a "reception history of Antiquity",¹ as Panofsky did in 1929 in his obituary of Aby Warburg. Didi-Huberman rejects a linear, teleological intellectual-historical understanding of the 'survival of the classics', in fact, he sees in Warburg's next successors, the art historians Erwin Panofsky and Fritz Saxl, "not only a continuation but already a turning away (departure) from Warburg's Project".² Saxl, for instance, would try "with all his mind to give the Warburgian terms a historical sense".³ In comparison Didi-Huberman interprets Warburg's concept of the 'survival of the classics' as a survival of pictures, as a "Nachleben der Bilder", to cite the German title of his book – recurrences, revivals of images from the treasury of the human memory, the *Mnemosyne*, which he arranges in a "time of phantoms". In the center of perception of the French art historian Warburg's mental struggle in the field of conflict between Dionysos and Apollo, magic and idea, irrationalism and rationalism is situated, – in the words of Aby Warburg himself: "Athens has to be conquered again and again from Alexandria".⁴

Didi-Huberman's references concern especially Warburg's late project of the *Mnemosyne-Atlas* or his Kreuzlingen-lecture on the serpents' ritual of the Hopi-Indians (1926). Surely he did contribute important points of view to the Warburgian research, showing how "Warburg practiced a comparative viewing that focused just as keenly on nuances, variations and also inversions of traditional pathos formulas as it did on the projection media making such comparisons possible".⁵

But concerning his firm refusal of a narrative understanding of Warburg's central theme of the 'survival of the classics' I want to contradict him now with my lecture *The Warburgian narrative on the 'survival of the classics' as a Jewish construct in a Christian World*.

My starting point will be the social aspect, the social situation of Jewish scholars at German and Austrian universities at the time of the German empire, towards the end of the 19th century. This was a time of increasing antisemitism in Germany and young

1 Erwin Panofsky: "Professor A. Warburg" [obituary]. In: *Das Johanneum* III, Nr.9, 1929, 248-251, 250. Translations from the original German are mine, unless otherwise specified.

2 Georges Didi-Huberman: *Das Nachleben der Bilder. Kunstgeschichte und Phantomzeit nach Aby Warburg*. Aus dem Französischen von Michael Bischoff. Suhrkamp Verlag, Berlin 2010, 110.

3 Didi-Huberman: *Das Nachleben der Bilder*, 108.

4 Aby Warburg: "Heidnisch-antike Weissagung in Wort und Bild zu Luthers Zeiten". In: *Aby Warburg. Werke in einem Band*. Edited by Martin Tremel, Sigrid Weigl und Perdita Ladwig. Berlin 2010, 424-491, 485.

5 Thomas Hensel: "The mediality of Art History. Aby Warburg and Photography". In: *Lieber Aby Warburg Was tun mit den Bildern? Vom Umgang mit fotografischem Material./ Dear Aby Warburg. What can be done with images? Dealing with photographic material*. Ausstellungskatalog des Museums für Gegenwartskunst Siegen (2.Dezember 2012 – 3. März 2013). Kehrer Verlag, Heidelberg 2012, 60.

Aby Warburg, rich son of a famous Hamburgian banker, found himself nevertheless as a student at the university of Strassburg on the side of an excluded and discriminated Jewish minority in a society of a Christian majority. His struggle for an individual positioning in the social field between the margins and the center of society – Jewish outsider-status and the dominant Christian society – is documented in the letters of the Straßburgian art student to his mother. In November 1889 he reports from Straßburg, that at the university “they regard every Jew at first as a strange intruder with doubtful manners” and he states in view of the barriers, which for example exclude Jewish men from the status of reservist officer in the German Reich, that „really the only way, to achieve a social integration, must be via appreciation of the individual”.⁶ “I am not at all ashamed to be a Jew”, he writes to his mother, “quite the reverse, I try to make clear to the others, that representatives of my species, according to their talents, are well prepared to insert themselves as useful links in the chain of the national and cultural development of today”.⁷ If we try now to analyze the strategies, which Aby Warburg used on his way to social acceptance and participation, we find Homi K. Bhabhas post-colonial theories a useful instrument.

Bhabha in his 1993 book *The location of culture*,⁸ unmasks in a first step of his post-colonial criticism the seemingly essential binary structure of the mighty colonial power and the inferior colonial object – colonial master and slave – as a construct of cultural differentiation which is not in the least divinely ordained or decreed by nature, but serves and stabilizes interests of power from a eurocentric perspective. This binary model directed by interests of retention of power and played out in the tensions between center and margins, seems to be transferable to German academic society already at the time of the Kaiserreich and the Jewish scholars, often discriminated against at German universities. The authoritarian manner of defining Jewish identities as not belonging to the German “Volk”, as “foreigners” and “strangers” in the German cultural scene, who – in the case of the philosopher Ernst Cassirer were not allowed to give to the Germans an edition of Kant or in the case of the historian of philosophy Raymond Klibansky an edition of the German mystic Meister Eckhart – is easy to be discovered as a racist construct within the strongly growing antisemitism at German universities at the end of the 19th century.

But while Homi Bhabha attacks the eurocentric point of view from the margins of colonial society, questioning the integral explanations of history like the great narrative of the British Empire and its colonies, Aby Warburg with his main emphasis on European cultural studies and his research project on the 'survival of the classics' rather tries to underpin the European project of Enlightenment hoping for a continued

6 Aby Warburg to his mother, 25 November 1889 (WIA). Quotation from Charlotte Schoell-Glass: *Aby Warburg und der Antisemitismus. Kulturwissenschaft als Geistespolitik*. Frankfurt a.M. 1998, 254-5.

7 Aby Warburg to his mother, 26 January 1887 (WIA). Quotation from Schoell-Glass: *Aby Warburg und der Antisemitismus*. 253-4.

8 Vgl. Homi K. Bhabha: *Die Verortung der Kultur*. Mit einem Vorwort von Elisabeth Bronfen. Deutsche Übersetzung von Michael Schiffmann und Jürgen Freudl. Tübingen 2000. (Homi K. Bhabha: *The location of culture*. London und New York 1993).

progress of civilization and humanism, although a progress always at risk. Warburg rather fights against another great narrative: the 2000 years' old history of Christianity mediated by the Church with its claim to be the only owner of eternal truth, and with its connection to Antijudaism. This hidden central idea is not announced openly as a program, but is more indirectly pursued.

If I try now to bring Aby Warburg's hidden central idea into the open, a comparison with Homi Bhabha's post-colonial strategies of resistance is useful. Bhabha doesn't strive for the inversion of the balance of power or an open political resistance, but he develops the idea of the "third space" – may be comparable to Aby Warburg's "Denkraum der Besonnenheit"⁹ (a kind of spiritual area for careful reflection) – where negotiations on identities and new positionings become possible and where new inventions of separated narratives within the area of the dominant narrative are allowed. Bhabha puts forward a claim for an alternative story, the right to narrate – "with the intention to initiate a progression, in the course of which objectivised others can change into subjects with their own stories and their own awareness of life".¹⁰

Entry into the respective great narrative just becomes possible through its "fragile spots", which offer the chance, that "discourses of minorities may prise open the crack not from the outside but from the inner center and then may disturb or destroy traditions, ideologies and constructions of history, based on essentialist ideas of identities of nations or peoples".¹¹

In the following passage I want to concentrate again on the social aspect of the foundation of Aby Warburg's Library – Gertrud Bing, looking back, spoke about the very "unusual story", how it came about, that from the thoughts of Aby Warburg emerged such a strong organism as the Institute¹² – and subsequently I'll focus more closely on my thesis on the Warburgian narrative on the 'survival of the classics' as a Jewish construct in a Christian world.

It was Aby Warburg's declared goal to see his K.B.W. firmly established within German academic society – a problem, he could not solve alone. The final success was really owed to favorable external circumstances: first of all to the funds of the Warburg Bank, then to the German-Jewish circle of collaborators, above all Fritz Saxl, who in 1929 after Warburg's death became his successor and made Warburg's ideas entirely his own. In the years of Warburg's absence due to illness, during his stay in Dr. Binswanger's psychiatric clinic at Kreuzlingen from 1919 until 1924, Saxl was also successful in opening the Warburg Library to a wider public and enlarging its sphere of activity by organizing lectures and publishing the series of "Warburg-Studien".

9 Aby Warburg: "Heidnisch-antike Weissagung in Wort und Bild zu Luthers Zeiten". In: *Aby Warburg. Werke in einem Band*, 424–491, 485.

10 Homi K. Bhabha: "Postkoloniale Kritik. Vom Überleben der Kultur". In: *Das Argument* 215/ 1996. *Zeitschrift für Philosophie und Sozialwissenschaften*. 39. Jahrgang, Heft 3. 1996, 345-359, 349.

11 Karen Struve: *Zur Aktualität von Homi K. Bhabha. Einleitung in sein Werk*. Wiesbaden 2013, 108.

12 Gertrud Bing to Toni Cassirer, 27 August 1948 (GC, WIA). Quotation from Dorothea McEwan: *Fritz Saxl - Eine Biografie. Aby Warburgs Bibliothekar und erster Direktor des Londoner Warburg Institutes*. Wien, Köln, Weimar 2012, 193.

For Aby Warburg himself it had been an arduous journey to the realization of his ideas. The opening of the new building of the K.B.W. in 1926 was preceded by years of struggle for the new Hamburg university. Already before the First World War Warburg had as his goal to turn his home town, the Hanseatic merchant's town, into a centre of learning, but this wasn't possible without the founding of a university. For with no university, in other words, without contact with university members, the Warburg Library would miss the necessary ambience to take effect. But the efforts went elsewhere: The gifts of money from the Warburg Bank and other rich Hamburgian families put at the town's disposal were used for the building of a colonial institute. Disappointed in his expectations, Aby Warburg wrote in November 1913 to his friend Franz Boll:

It won't be any use to them, but we who have to build the bridges will be ground down as the cement, used to build them while others walk over as a matter of course, the bridge no longer revealing anything of the unfortunate preparatory cement-mixer.¹³

When in 1919 Hamburg University was finally established, the K.B.W., at the express request of the Warburg family, was not intended to become a university institute but was to keep its independence as property of the family. On this Max Warburg wrote to his brother Aby Warburg already in 1924, when Aby came back to Hamburg after the "restoration" of his health: "For as long as I can possibly imagine, I don't want to see the Library passing into the hands of the State or the University."¹⁴

For the Warburg family the point of this decision was not – as Charlotte Schoell-Glass stated in her book *Aby Warburg und der Antisemitismus* – "to keep assets in the family, but it seemed important to them to protect an idea or an ideal against takeover by the State and also from the State's financial crisis".¹⁵ This forethought was to make it possible for the Warburgs in 1933 to transfer the Library together with its close circle of collaborators to England and to withdraw it from the national-socialist sphere of control.

By 1926 however Aby Warburg for the time being had reached his goal of establishing the Library as an institution of German-Jewish learning in the scholarly center of Hamburg. In his invitation to the opening ceremony of the new building of the K.B.W., adressed to the Rector of Hamburg University, he wrote: "The moment has come for handing over the Library to the public – to the University and the educated readership; the K.B.W. has now become a social institution".¹⁶ At the same time on the occasion of an affirmative review in the "reactionary" journal *Süddeutsche Monatshefte*, concerning the activities of the Warburg Library, Aby Warburg wrote to his brothers:

13 Warburg to Franz Boll, 13 November 1913 (GC; WIA). Quotation from Dorothea McEwan: *Fritz Saxl. Eine Biographie*. 24.

14 Max Warburg to Aby Warburg, 1924. (Family Corr. 1924; WIA). Quotation from Schoell-Glass: *Aby Warburg und der Antisemitismus*, 169.

15 Schoell-Glass: *Aby Warburg und der Antisemitismus*. 169.

16 Aby Warburg to the *Rektor* of the University Rudolf Laun, 9 June 1926 (Staatsarchiv Hamburg).

If the K.B.W. can be successful here where there is surely deep-seated resistance, that corresponds to the kind of struggle for the rights of German Jews, which I actually regard as reasonable: preparing education for the German of tomorrow, or, maybe, of the day after tomorrow, – no matter whether we hear about it in our lifetime or not – forcing him, the German of tomorrow, to appreciate, that his elder brother Shem sensibly and benevolently made provision for him. This is at least a more reasonable use of mental energies than the empty demand to resist Antisemitism.¹⁷

Aby Warburg needed German-Jewish combatants in his fight for social participation. Because of that May 1928 finds him in a state of alarm about the future prospects of the K.B.W., when the philosopher Ernst Cassirer, since 1924 in close contact with the Warburg Library as at the same teaching at the university of Hamburg, gets an offer of a chair at the university of Frankfurt. Now Warburg is not only worried about Cassirer, but also about his students Walter Solmitz and Raymond Klibansky. Warburg moves heaven and earth to keep Cassirer at Hamburg, and consequently in 1929 Cassirer becomes the first Jewish rector of Hamburg university. At the time of this difficult crisis Warburg wrote in the Diary of the K.B.W.: “Proof that Cassirer and the K.B.W. have to work together becomes obvious in a person like Walter Solmitz; Solmitz, as a representative of the next generation, would continue as torch-bearer of German-Jewish mentality and the flame would be kept alive by the idealistic mission of Cassirer *and the K.B.W.*”.¹⁸

There is nothing more or less at stake than the future and survival of the Warburgian project. “The torch of German-Jewish mentality”, the flame of the Enlightenment, must be passed on, like at a relay race, to the next generation, to keep alive the “idealistic mission of Cassirer *and the K.B.W.*”. In the same summer 1928, one year before he died, Warburg in a letter to his brothers refers once more to the educational aims of the Warburg Library: “In the not yet written handbook on the self-education of humanity the K.B.W. represents a chapter which might bear the title: From the mythical-fearful to the scientific-calculating orientation of man with regard to himself and to the cosmos”.¹⁹

The Warburgian narrative on the 'survival of the classics' however is to be found already *in nuce* in 1912, in Warburg's often cited final comment of his lecture on the Schifanoja frescos at Ferrara during the international congress of art historians in Rome.²⁰ After pleading for a widening of the limits of the discipline, in respect of content and breadth, Warburg continued:

17 Aby Warburg to Max und Fritz Warburg, 23 January 1926 (Family Corr., WIA). Quotation from Schoell-Glass, 131.

18 Aby Warburg: *Tagebuch der Kulturwissenschaftlichen Bibliothek Warburg*. Mit Eintragungen von Gertrud Bing und Fritz Saxl. Hg.: Karen Michels und Charlotte Schoell-Glass. Berlin 2001, 263. (*Aby Warburg: Gesammelte Schriften*, Bd.VII.)

19 Aby Warburg to his brothers, 25 August 1928 (GC., WIA). Quotation from Fritz Saxl: “Die Kulturwissenschaftliche Bibliothek Warburg in Hamburg”. In: *Forschungsinstitute, ihre Geschichte, Organisation und Ziele*. Ed.: Ludolph Brauer, A. Mendelssohn Bartholdy und Adolf Meyer. Hamburg 1930, Bd.II, 355-358, 358.

20 Aby Warburg: „*Italienische Kunst und internationale Astrologie im Palazzo Schifanoja zu Ferrara [1912/1920]*“. In: *Aby Warburg. Werke in einem Band*, 373-400.

The new great style which the artistic genius of Italy has brought us, had its roots in the effort of social will to free Greek humanity from Oriental-Latin 'practice'. With this desire for restitution of Antiquity 'the good European' – to cite Nietzsche herewith – began his fight for enlightenment in that epoch of international migration of pictorial images, which we call – somewhat too mystically – the epoch of the Renaissance.²¹

In these sentences of Aby Warburg's, presented to an international body of art historians, the whole coming Warburgian program on the 'survival of the classics', as his academic collaborators were to realize later, is already included and formulated in its essential points. The K.B.W. made such crossing of the borders, intended by Warburg himself – from national to international, from subject-specific to interdisciplinary perspectives – the basis of the organization of the Library. The 'survival of the classics' is the IDEA which underlies the building of the Library, and – as Warburg mentions in his Rome Lecture in 1912 – it's the classical RATIO which in Early Italian Renaissance appears with new clarity in the fields of art and culture. The ancient Ratio penetrates the Latin West, then dominated by the Roman Church. At that moment 'the good European' starts his fight for enlightenment, which – last but not least – tends to liberation from the chains of dogmatic religious practice, that claims to be the only way to salvation, rejected by Warburg as the "Oriental-Latin practice".

Warburg himself made the paths of tradition clear, when, searching for the origin of the 'mysterious pictures' in the Schifanoja frescos at Ferrara, he could trace them back to idols of Antiquity, which appear there in the disguise of astrological pictures of months. He could do this because he met them by chance in an Arabic astrological book of the 9th century.²² In his Rome speech, concerning the Schifanoja frescos, Warburg refers to the "iconologic method of interpretation, which isn't deterred by obstacles of border control from considering Antiquity, the Middle Ages and the Modern Age as linked together".²³

That's just the starting point for the linear teleological perspective on the 'survival of the classics', which would be worked out at first by Saxl and Panofsky und later on, under the direction of Saxl, by Raymond Klibansky and Lotte Labowsky, – the latter two are, by the way, not mentioned at all by Didi-Huberman in his book on Warburg. It's a narrative which is directed at the penetration – or in the words of Homi Bhabha – at the de-struction of the dominant clerical dogmatism with its claim to be the sole authority. Saxl explains in his 1930 essay *Die Kulturwissenschaftliche Bibliothek Warburg in Hamburg*: "The Warburg Library serves the handling of *one* problem [...]. This is the problem of the 'survival of the classics'. It's now our task to explore the historical facts of the tradition and to examine the 'Wanderstraßen' – the pathways of migration."²⁴

21 Ibid., 397.

22 See William S. Heckscher: "Die Genesis der Ikonologie" (1967). In: Ekkehard Kaemmerling (Hrsg.): *Ikonographie und Ikonologie. Theorien – Entwicklung – Probleme*. (Bildende Kunst als Zeichensystem Band 1). Dumont, Köln 1979, 112-164, 148, Anm.12.

23 Ibid., 185.

24 Fritz Saxl: "Die Kulturwissenschaftliche Bibliothek Warburg in Hamburg". In: *Forschungsinstitute, ihre Geschichte, Organisation und Ziele*. Hg.v. Ludolph Bauer, A. Mendelssohn Bartholdy und Adolf Meyer. Paul Hartung Verlag, Hamburg 1930. Band II, 355-358, 355.

And Saxl continues:

But not all the eras will prove to be productive in the same way on closer examination. [...] In preferring those epochs in which the 'survival of the classics' has a higher historico-cultural significance and in neglecting those in which it is less significant, we'll have to accept the limits caused by our choice of problem. The philosophy of the 'Hochscholastik' will clearly be less well represented than the Florentine platonism of the Early Renaissance, the history of the birth of Christian theology from Late Antiquity will get more attention than the age of Gregor the Great, and so on.²⁵

The "Wanderstraßen", the pathways of migration of the classical tradition are seen by Fritz Saxl from time to time in close contacts with the dominant Christian narrative. In this way, from the 1920^s, Saxl completed Aby Warburg's view on the history of art in the Italian Renaissance with his studies on Late Antique and Early Christian art, in which he could follow the historical research of the contemporary theology of the early twentieth century, which explored the origin of Christianity in the spiritual context of Late Antiquity. In his essay *Pagan and Jewish elements in early Christian sculpture* (1944) he was able to show the reception of Pagan and Jewish iconographic motifs in Christian sarcophagus-sculpture of the third and fourth century A.D. He ended with the words:

Early Christian Sculpture was the expression of a short-lived paganizing revolt which began about 250 A.D. and lasted only two hundred years. For the next six or seven hundred years the antisculptural feeling prevailed in most of Europe, as it had done in Judaism and during the first two centuries of the Christian era.²⁶

Also in another essay written in 1933 by Erwin Panofsky and Fritz Saxl on *Classical Mythology in Mediaeval Art*, the co-authors strive to refute the theory held by earlier art historians like Ghiberti and Giorgio Vasari, that there existed no connection of ideas, nor a direct tradition between Antiquity, Middle Ages and Renaissance. Early Italian writers about the history of art "thought that classical art was overthrown at the beginning of the Christian era and that it did not revive until, during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries in Italy, it served as the foundation of what is usually called the Renaissance".²⁷ But "they were wrong in so far as the Renaissance was connected with the Middle Ages by innumerable links [...]. Classical conceptions survived throughout the Middle Ages – literary, philosophical, scientific, and artistic [...]".²⁸ Nevertheless those earlier art historians "were right in so far as the artistic forms under which the classical conceptions persisted during the Middle Ages were utterly different from our present ideas of antiquity, which did not come into existence until the 'Renaissance' in its true sense of the 'rebirth' of antiquity as a well defined historical phenomenon".²⁹

25 Ibid., 355 -6.

26 Fritz Saxl: "Pagan and Jewish elements in early Christian Sculpture" (1944) . In: Fritz Saxl: *Lectures*. Ed. by Gertrud Bing. 2 Vls. Warburg Institute London, London 1957, 45-57, 57.

27 Erwin Panofsky and Fritz Saxl: "Classical Mythology in Mediaeval Art". In: *Metropolitan Museum Studies*, Vol. 4, No.2 (March 1933), 228-280, 228.

28 Erwin Panofsky and Fritz Saxl: "*Classical Mythology in Mediaeval Art*", 228.

29 Ibid., 228.

“Classical conceptions survived throughout the Middle Ages” – this thesis of the 'survival of the classics' needed to be proved as it did in the fields of philosophy and history of religion. Raymond Klibansky, supported by Fritz Saxl and the philosopher Ernst Cassirer, saw it his task to provide proof of the Platonic tradition, from the Age of Antiquity through the Middle Ages and the Renaissance up to the German idealism of the classics Goethe and Lessing. Klibansky did research going through old manuscripts and medeaval codices in all the great European libraries, accompanied and supported by Lotte Labowsky, his close friend and collaborator since their common student days at Heidelberg.

Already in his Heidelberg dissertation on the neoplatonic Proclus of the fifth century *Ein Proklos-Fund und seine Bedeutung*³⁰ Klibansky was able to present a sensational discovery: in a manuscript with the commentary on the *Parmenides* of Proclus, written in a Latin translation of the thirteenth century, he found the previously unknown end of the seventh book. Thus the end of the text, which was missing in the existing Greek versions, could for the first time be evaluated for its significance to the history of Platonism. Still in 1995 the German historian of philosophy Kurt Flasch honoured Klibansky's find as a unique scientific event: “This discovery provides us with a concrete link connecting the philosophy of late Antiquity with Cusanus and the dialectics of Hegel”.³¹

Klibansky's *Habilitationsschrift* on the medeaval platonism of the School of Chartres in the twelfth century, titled “Bernhard und Thierry von Chartres”,³² written while still at Heidelberg in 1932, offered an additional piece of evidence. Klibansky maintained – contrary to the popular assumption held at the time – that even before Greek scholars emigrated from the decaying Byzantine Empire to Italy in the fifteenth century, Platonic ideas had reached the Latin Western world during the Middle Ages at the Cathedral Schools at Chartres and Paris, where they dominated the Curriculum. Christian theology was infused with classical learning, based on the *Artes Liberales* and especially on the lecture on Platon's *Timäus*. In this way Klibansky states: “We can see now the continuity of the development of Occidental thought and the close affiliations of the period we call the Renaissance with the Christian Middle Ages”.³³

Then, in English exile, Fritz Saxl, now the director of the Warburg Institute London, succeeded in the midst of the 1930th in initiating a great editorial project with the financial support of the British Library and the Union Académique Internationale: the *Corpus Platonicum Medii Aevi*-series – a collection of mediaeval commentaries and translations of Plato-dialogues from Arabic, Jewish and Byzantine sources, published by the Warburg Institute under the editorship of Raymond Klibansky, in collaboration with Lotte Labowsky. In his introductory essay on the editorial program *The continuity of the Platonic tradition*

30 Raymond Klibansky: *Ein Proklos-Fund und seine Bedeutung*. C. Winter, Heidelberg 1929.

31 Kurt Flasch: “Der Hüter des Erbes. Zum 90. Geburtstag von Raymond Klibansky”. In: *FAZ*, 14 Oktober 1995.

32 Raymond Klibansky: “Die Schule von Chartres im 12. Jahrhundert. Bernhard und Thierry von Chartres” (*Habilitationsschrift* 1932). (Deutsches Literaturarchiv Marbach, A: Klibansky, Raymond, hereafter DLA, A: Klibansky). Klibansky's *Habilitationsschrift* was not published.

33 *Ibid.*, 100.

during the Middle Ages³⁴ Klibansky emphasizes once more the unbroken tradition of ancient thought, apparent in the mediaeval texts of the *Corpus Platonicum Medii Aevi*: "They reveal Platonism whatever its guise, as a force continuously stimulating scientific thought, aesthetic feeling and religious consciousness".³⁵

The antique RATIO as a powerful mental current finds again and again its way into the center of the Christian terrain; pagan antique motifs force their way into the Christian iconographic cosmos, which is to say: into the sovereign territory of the CHURCH. Such pagan undermining within the Christian terrain points to the "fragile points" of the dominant Christian narrative, being open to attack the authority of the Church to be the sole owner of the truth. Aby Warburg himself referred to the symptomatic figure of the pagan *Ninfa Fiorentina*,³⁶ the grateful handmaid in Ghirlandaio's *Birth of John the Baptist*, who, as Georges Didi-Huberman has noted (now confirming my assertion!), intrudes upon the territory of the Church – "the Church as a sacred area just as a community of believers with their values and taboos".³⁷ In the same way Raymond Klibansky in his *Habilitationsschrift* pointed to the sculptural decoration on the Western facade of the Cathedral of Chartres, showing for the first time the pagan philosophers, the representatives of the ancient sciences, next to the prophets of the Old Testament. "We have to accept the very new fact", states Klibansky, "that pagans are included in prominently visible places in the building of the Church: the representatives of the pagan RATIO, admitted as indispensable links within the system of the FIDES."³⁸ In Klibansky's opinion these are pieces of evidence for "the continuity of the occidental mind and the knotting together of the era, we call the Renaissance, with the Christian Middle Ages".³⁹

But let us listen once more to Aby Warburg himself. In the final comment of his 1912 Rome lecture he had explained:

The new great style which the artistic genius of Italy has brought us, had its roots in the effort of social will to free Greek humanity from Oriental-Latin 'practice'. With this desire for restitution of Antiquity 'the good European' began his fight for enlightenment in that epoch of international migration of pictorial images, which we call [...] the epoch of the Renaissance.⁴⁰

34 Raymond Klibansky: *The Continuity of the Platonic Tradition during the Middle Ages. Outlines of a Corpus Platonicum*. London: The Warburg Institute 1939.

35 Klibansky: *The Continuity of the Platonic Tradition during the Middle Ages*. Second edition 1950, 37.

36 Aby Warburg: "Ninfa Fiorentina. Fragmente zum Nymphenprojekt". In: *Aby Warburg. Werke in einem Band*, 198-210.

37 Georges Didi-Huberman: "Die leichtfüßige Dienerin (Wissen der Bilder, Wissen von außen)." In: Martin Treml, Sabine Flasch, Pablo Schneider (Ed.): *Warburgs Denkraum. Formen, Motive, Materialien*. Fink Verlag, München 2014, 259-272, 265.

38 Raymond Klibansky: "Die Schule von Chartres im 12 Jahrhundert" (DLA, A: Klibansky), 100.

39 Ibid., 100.

40 Aby Warburg: "Italienische Kunst und internationale Astrologie im Palazzo Schifanoja zu Ferrara [1912 – 1922]". In: *Aby Warburg: Werke in einem Band*, 397.

Subsequently, it was the philosopher Ernst Cassirer, who in his book of 1927 dedicated to Aby Warburg – *Individuum und Kosmos in der Philosophie der Renaissance*⁴¹ – would portray the Renaissance philosopher Nicolas of Cusa in the light of the Italian Quattrocento. Cassirer maintained that it was only in Italy that the German cleric took the decisive turn from entrenchment in German mediaeval dogmatism to the bright and lucid clarity of mind that in turn exercised its influence on the Italian humanists. Cassirer's portrayal of Cusa which up until the present has drawn repeated criticism from the scientific community – he really could not adequately substantiate his references⁴² – can only be understood by paying attention to Aby Warburg's interpretation of the Renaissance as the decisive turn to the consciousness of freedom of modern times. Cassirer completed the cultural-historical view of Warburg by trying to underpin it with observations drawn from the history of philosophy and the history of religion.

As late as 1945, in his essay on Marsilio Ficino,⁴³ Cassirer persisted in his interpretation of the philosophers of the Renaissance: “To them it was impossible to think or speak of philosophy as an *ancilla theologiae* [maidservant of theology]. An attitude of passive obedience, of complete submission to an external authority, was no longer intelligible to the religious thinkers of the Renaissance”.⁴⁴ Cassirer referred to Cusa as the first philosopher to anticipate Kant and Hegel. He looked upon Cusa as the founder and champion of modern philosophy who, as the Cusa specialist Hans Georg Senger stated, “marked the turn from mediaeval ontology to modern philosophy of mental consciousness which he considered the focus of Renaissance thought, from which the philosophy of the Renaissance has to be viewed”.⁴⁵

41 Ernst Cassirer: *Individuum und Kosmos in der Philosophie der Renaissance. Studien der Bibliothek Warburg 10*. Leipzig 1927, 397.

42 Cassirer's theory of Cusa's influence on the Italian Platonists, made in his *Individuum und Kosmos*, met again and again with partly stiff opposition. As John Herman Randall had already stated in 1949, Cassirer “undoubtedly overestimated that of his favorite Cusanus, as he came reluctantly to admit.” (Randall: “Cassirer's Theory of History as Illustrated in his Treatment of Renaissance Thought”. In: *The Philosophy of Ernst Cassirer*, edited by Paul Arthur Schilpp. Evanston/ Ill. (The Library of living philosophers, Vol. VI, 1949. S. 691-728, 714). Randall here cites the corresponding passage in Cassirer's essay of 1945 “Ficino's Place in Intellectual History”: “I avail myself of this opportunity to revise a former statement made in my *Individuum und Kosmos*. In the second chapter I tried to show that Nicholas of Cusa's philosophy exerted a strong influence on the general development of Italian thought in the Quattrocento. I still think this to be highly probable, but I should perhaps have spoken with more caution. I quite agree that, on the strength of new historical evidence, we cannot give a direct and definite proof of this thesis. It is possible that Ficino conceived his general theory independently of Nicholas of Cusa. In this case the close relationship between the two thinkers would be all the more important and interesting from the point of view of the general history of ideas. For it would show us the common background of the philosophy of the 15th century – the general intellectual and religious atmosphere of the Renaissance.” (Cassirer: “Ficino's Place in Intellectual History”, 492).

43 Ernst Cassirer: “Ficino's Place in Intellectual History”. In: *Review of the Philosophy of Marsilio Ficino* by Paul O. Kristeller, *Journal of the History of Ideas* 6, no.4 (October 1945), 483-501.

44 Cassirer: “Ficino's Place in Intellectual History”, 493.

45 Hans Georg Senger: “Zur Geschichte der Edition der *Opera Omnia* des Nicolaus Cusanus”. In: *Nicolai de Cusa Opera Omnia: Symposium zum Abschluss der Heidelberger Akademie-Ausgabe, Heidelberg, 11. und 12. Februar 2005*. Edited by Werner Beierwaltes und Hans Georg Senger. Heidelberg 2006, 37-77, 49.

In contrast to the more revealing Christian religion, with its pretension to absolutism, Warburgian research on the "survival of the classics" aimed to showcase the history of the development of human *Ratio*, the human Mind, by looking at the individual and the cosmos in a scientific way.

But looking at Cusanus as a higher clergyman, Cassirer recognizes in Cusa's reception of the Platonic tradition a rare openness of the Church. In his *Individuum und Kosmos* he stated, rather moved: "From the very center of religion Cusanus succeeded in exploring the individual and the cosmos and even in fixing and fastening his scientific knowledge in this area".⁴⁶ – The fact, however, that Cusanus "was allowed to do so within the Christian area and was not persecuted by the Church as an heretic like the later philosophers Giordano Bruno or Galileo Galilei, is what justifies his unique social status in the history of the Church and the wider history of Geistesgeschichte".⁴⁷

In 1927, the year of the publication of Cassirer's *Individuum und Kosmos*, the long-cherished plan of an edition of the *Opera Omnia* of Nikolaus Cusanus was realized, too. This great editorial project also goes back to the initiative of the German-Jewish scholars around Aby Warburg, even though the Warburg Library was not directly involved in it. In 1927, when Cassirer entered into negotiations with his Heidelberg friend and colleague, the philosopher Ernst Hofmann, and with the publisher Felix Meiner, the edition of the *Opera Omnia* was able to start up under the auspices of the Heidelberg Akademie der Wissenschaften. And from the beginning Raymond Klibansky's name was associated with the historico-critical edition of the Latin texts of Cusa, where the first publications still appeared in 1932: the *Apologia docta ignorantia* and his famous *De docta ignorantia* – the latter edited together with his Heidelberg doctoral supervisor Ernst Hofmann.

Klibansky made a great contribution to the structure and the outer arrangement of the *Opera Omnia*, he completed the Latin Cusanus texts with detailed Indices and critical apparatus. He added not only an index of sources (fontes), indicating passages cited by Cusanus from earlier authors, but also an index of references (testimonia) indicating passages in Cusanus' texts, that have been quoted by later authors. This apparatus enormously facilitates research on Cusanus and new and ongoing assessments of Cusa's position in the history of thought, documenting by the way once more the continuity of the Platonic tradition. Furthermore, Klibansky tried to make use of the indices of names to confirm Cassirer's concept of Cusa's influence on the Italian humanists. And he directly links his ability to do so to his experience at the KBW: "If the success of the proof, that the Italians of the XVth century [...] made use of the writings of Cusanus, should be endorsed, it is due to the very rich material of the KBW",⁴⁸ he wrote to Saxl.

In the 1930th, when the Warburg Library already had emigrated to England and the German-Jewish scholars were dispersed all over the world, The Cusanus writing *De*

46 Cassirer: *Individuum und Kosmos*, 37.

47 Cassirer: *Individuum und Kosmos*, 38.

48 Klibansky to Saxl., 11 April 1932 (WIA, GC).

pace fidei with its message of religious tolerance moved to the center of its philosophical interests. Cusanus had drawn up this philosophical document in the 15th century, under the influence of the Fall of Constantinople and the danger of war. In the preface of the Cassirer-Festschrift *Philosophy and history. Essays presented to Ernst Cassirer*, written by Klibansky in 1936 in his London exile, he cites Cusa's maxim from his writing *De pace fidei*: “*Una veritas in variis signis varie resplendet*”⁴⁹– The only truth, taking shape in diverse forms, does appear in different guises.

A few years later, in exile in New York, Cassirer himself in his essay on Ficino revisited once more Cusa's idea on tolerance, which he believed was transmitted to the philosophers of the Renaissance. Now making a clear break from Christian doctrine, Cassirer understands Cusa's *De pace fidei* as a visionary image of a new religion, which in the course of time would include the manifold monotheistic religious denominations of Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

Cassirer writes:

[Ficino] strove for a universal religion, not for a universal church. Everyone who worshipped and loved God was welcome. There were no heretics in this new religion. For what is essential in religious life is not any dogmatic formula. According to Ficino the difference between formulae, between external signs and symbols, does not endanger the unity of faith; on the contrary, it confirms this unity. This was the common conviction of the religious thinkers of the Renaissance. We find it – almost in the same terms – in Nicholas of Cusa's *De pace fidei*, in Ficino's *De christiana religione*, in Pico della Mirandola's defense of the *libertas credendi*. “*Una veritas in variis signis varie resplendet* [...] Thus the principle, *Extra ecclesiam nulla salus*, is abandoned.”⁵⁰

The Warburgian narrative on the 'survival of the classics' has to be understood as a Jewish historical construct, a story of its own, - a work in progress, formed on Aby Warburg's initiative, developed by a close community of German-Jewish scholars who made scientific contributions to this project. In the years after the First World War, Fritz Saxl explains in his obituary of Aby Warburg, “the nature and significance of Warburg's problem, his way of questioning and search for solutions, began to cause sympathy, and a number of scholars recognized Warburg's problem and dealt with it as their own”⁵¹.

In this way their contributions became modules of the narrative on the 'survival of the classics', though again and again criticised and questioned from the academic point of view by the scholarly community, mostly without realising what they strived for and what they had as their goal. We could already see an example of that in Cassirer's Cusa-publication *Individuum und Kosmos in der Philosophie der Renaissance*, where he tried to underpin Warburg's view on the Quattrocento philosophically. A more recent example is to be found in Carlo Ginzburg's 1983 essay *Kunst und soziales Gedächtnis*.

49 Raymond Klibansky und H.J. Paton (Ed.): *Philosophy and history. Essays presented to Ernst Cassirer*. Oxford, Clarendon Press 1936. Preface, VII.

50 Cassirer: “Ficino's place in intellectual history“, 490-1.

51 Fritz Saxl: “A. Warburg“ [obituary]. In: *Frankfurter Zeitung*, 9 November 1929.

*Die Warburg-Tradition*⁵², where the author criticizes Saxl's iconological method of interpretation. Ginzburg analyzes Saxl's essay *Holbein and the reformation*, where Saxl tries to show Holbein's closeness to the humanist Erasmus. "Holbein's attitude following Erasmus' example, well-known in literary sources, is presupposed in silence and consequently 'proved' by pictorial references",⁵³ that's what Carlo Ginzburg states. "The art historian then finds within the imagery just what he *already knows* or believes to know from other sources and wants to 'prove' now."⁵⁴ (109).

George L. Mosse, too, in his 1992 essay *Jüdische Intellektuelle in Deutschland*, understands Aby Warburg's iconological method for analyzing pictures as a kind of legal arguing. Warburg would "pursue a thorough examination of documents. Warburg's own writings are detailed investigations of pieces of evidence, careful research on antique influences".⁵⁵ And last but not least Bernd Roeck in his 1997 book *Der junge Aby Warburg* explains: "Warburg will understand works of art in the true sense of the word as documents of the 'history of education of mankind'".⁵⁶

Raymond Klibansky, having had the actual experience of Aby Warburg and the K.B.W. during his academic year at Hamburg university – "the magic of the place and of Aby Warburg himself was fantastic", – Klibansky regarded the K.B.W. as a visionary place, as a station on the way from Alexandria with the largest library of that time to "Athens", the shining spiritual destination of human pilgrimage. In his late essay "Regagner Athènes à partir d'Alexandrie"⁵⁷ he writes:

La bibliothèque lui apparait comme un point de départ. En ce sens Alexandrie est une condition nécessaire, mais jamais suffisante, pour regagner Athènes. Ne cessons jamais de veiller à ce que les bibliothèques de notre temps, les successeurs d'Alexandrie, se souviennent du rôle de serviteurs que est le leur et restent des oasis le long de la route du pèlerin vers Athènes.⁵⁸

52 Carlo Ginzburg: "Kunst und soziales Gedächtnis. Die Warburg – Tradition" (dt: 1983; 1995). In: Carlo Ginzburg: *Spurensicherung. Die Wissenschaft auf der Suche nach sich selbst*. Verlag Klaus Wagenbach. Berlin 2002, 83-173.

53 Ibid., 110.

54 Ibid., 109.

55 George L. Mosse: *Jüdische Intellektuelle in Deutschland. Zwischen Religion und Nationalismus*. Aus dem Englischen von Christiane Spelsberg. Mit einem Vorwort von Aleida Assmann. Frankfurt/Main, Campus Verlag 1992, 86.

56 Bernd Roeck: *Der junge Aby Warburg*. Beck-Verlag, München 1997, 42.

57 Raymond Klibansky: "Regagner Athènes à partir d'Alexandrie?". Entretien avec Ramond Klibansky". In: *Alexandrie IIIe siècle av. J.-C. Tous les savoirs du monde ou le rêve d'universalité des Ptolemées*. Dirigé par C. Jacob et F. de Polignac. Paris, Autrement, 1992, 231-245.

58 Ibid., 244.

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