§ 6 Aby Warburg and the Nameless Science

I

This essay seeks to situate a discipline that, in contrast to many others, exists but has no name. Since Aby Warburg was its creator,¹ only an attentive analysis of his thought can furnish the point of view from which a critical assessment of it will be possible. And only on the basis of such an assessment will we be able to ask if this “unnamed discipline” can be given a name, and if the names that have until now been given to it are legitimate.

The essence of Warburg’s teaching and method—an essence embodied in the Library for the Science of Culture, which later became the Warburg Institute²—is usually presented as a rejection of the stylistico-formal method dominant in art history at the end of the nineteenth century. On the basis of a study of literary sources and an examination of cultural tradition, Warburg is understood to have displaced the focal point of research from the study of styles and aesthetic judgment to the programmatic and iconographic aspects of the artwork. The breath of fresh air that Warburg’s approach to the work of art brought to the stagnant waters of aesthetic formalism is shown by the growing success of the studies inspired by his method. These studies have acquired such a vast public, outside as well as within academic circles, that it has been possible to speak of a “popular” image of the Warburg Institute. Yet this growth in the fame of the institute has been accompanied by an increasing obliteration of the figure of the institute’s founder and his original project. The edition of Warburg’s writings and unpublished fragments that was proposed long ago, for example, still remains to be published.³

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The conception of Warburg’s method summarized above reflects an attitude toward the artwork that undoubtedly belonged to Aby Warburg. In 1889, while he was at the University of Strasbourg preparing his thesis on Botticelli’s Birth of Venus and Spring, he realized that any attempt to comprehend the mind of a Renaissance painter was futile as long as the problem was confronted from a purely formal point of view. For his whole life he kept his “honest repugnance” for “aestheticizing art history” and merely formal considerations of the image. But, for Warburg, this attitude originated neither from a purely erudite and antiquarian approach to the problem of the artwork nor from indifference to the artwork’s formal qualities. Warburg’s obsessive, almost pious attention to the force of images proves, if proof is necessary, that he was all too sensitive to “formal values.” A concept such as Pathosformel, which designates an indissoluble intertwining of an emotional charge and an iconographic formula in which it is impossible to distinguish between form and content, suffices to demonstrate that Warburg’s thought cannot in any sense be interpreted in terms of such inauthentic oppositions as those between form and content and between the history of styles and the history of culture. What is unique and significant about Warburg’s method as a scholar is not so much that he adopts a new way of writing art history as that he always directs his research toward the overcoming of the borders of art history. It is as if Warburg were interested in this discipline solely to place within it the seed that would cause it to explode. The “good God” who, according to the famous phrase, “hides in the details” was for Warburg not the guardian spirit of art history but the dark demon of an unnamed science whose contours we are only today beginning to glimpse.

II

In 1923, while he was in Ludwig Binswanger’s mental hospital in Kreuzlingen during the period of mental illness that kept him far from his library for six years, Warburg asked his physicians if they would discharge him if he cured himself by delivering a lecture to the clinic’s patients. Unexpectedly, he drew the subject for his lecture, the serpent rituals of the North American native peoples, from an experience that he had had thirty years before and that must therefore have left a deep impression in his memory. In 1895, during a trip to North America taken when he was almost thirty years old, Warburg had spent several months among the
Pueblo and Navaho peoples of New Mexico. His encounter with Native American culture (to which he was introduced by Cyrus Adler, Frank Hamilton Cushing, James Mooney, and Franz Boas) definitively distanced him from the idea of art history as a specialized discipline, thereby confirming his views on a subject he had considered for a long time while studying in Bonn with Hermann Usener and Karl Lamprecht.

Usener (whom Pasquali once defined as “the philologist who was the richest in ideas among the great Germans of the second half of the nineteenth century”) had drawn Warburg’s attention to an Italian scholar, Tito Vignoli. In his Myth and Science, Vignoli had argued for an approach to the study of the problems of man that combined anthropology, ethnology, mythology, psychology, and biology. Warburg heavily underlined the passages in Vignoli’s book that contain statements on this subject. During his stay in America, Warburg’s youthful interest in Vignoli’s position became a resolute decision. Indeed, one can say that the entire work of Warburg the “art historian,” including the famous library that he began to put together in 1886, is meaningful only if understood as a unified effort, across and beyond art history, directed toward a broader science for which he could not find a definite name but on whose configuration he tenaciously labored until his death. In the notes for the Kreuzlingen lecture on serpent rituals, Warburg thus defines the goal of his library as a “collection of documents referring to the psychology of human expression.”

In the same notes, he reaffirms his aversion to a formal approach to the image, which Warburg writes, cannot grasp the image’s biological necessity as a product “between religion and artistic production.” This position of the image between religion and art is important for the delimitation of the horizon of Warburg’s research. The object of that research is more the image than the artwork, and this is what sets Warburg’s work resolutely outside the borders of aesthetics. In the conclusion to his lecture of 1912, “Italian Art and International Astrology in Palazzo Schifanoia in Ferrara,” Warburg had already called for a “methodological amplification of the thematic and geographical borders” of art history:

Overly limiting developmental categories have until now hindered art history from making its material available to the “historical psychology of human expression” that has yet to be written. Because of its excessively materialistic or excessively mystical tenor, our young discipline denies itself the panoramic view of world history. Groping, it seeks to find its own theory of evolution
between the schematism of political history and the doctrines of genius. By the method of my interpretation of the frescoes in the Palazzo Schifanoia in Ferrara, I hope to have shown that an iconological analysis, which, in refusing to submit to petty territorial restrictions, shies away neither from recognizing that antiquity, the Middle Ages, and the modern age are in fact one interrelated epoch, nor from examining the works of the freest as well as the most applied art as equally valid documents of expression—that this method, by applying itself to the illumination of a single darkness, sheds light on the great universal evolutionary processes in their context. I was less interested in neat solutions than in formulating a new problem. I would like to put it to you in the following terms: “To what extent are we to view the onset of a stylistic shift in the representation of the human figure in Italian art as an internationally conditioned process of disengagement from the surviving pictorial conceptions of the pagan culture of the eastern Mediterranean peoples?” Our enthusiastic wonderment at the inconceivable achievement of artistic genius can only be strengthened by the recognition that genius is both a blessing and conscious transformative energy. The great new style that the artistic genius of Italy bequeathed to us was rooted in the social will to recover Greek humanism from the shell of medieval, Oriental-Latin “practice.” With this will toward the restitution of antiquity, the “good European” began his struggle for enlightenment in the age of the international migration of images that we refer to—a little too mystically—as the age of the Renaissance.  

It is important to note that these observations are contained in the lecture in which Warburg presents one of his most famous iconographic discoveries, that is, his identification of the subject of the middle strip of frescos in the Palazzo Schifanoia on the basis of the figures described in Abu Ma’shar’s Introductorium maius. In Warburg’s hands, iconography is never an end in itself (one can also say of him what Karl Kraus said of the artist, namely, that he was able to transform a solution into an enigma). Warburg’s use of iconography always transcends the mere identification of a subject and its sources; from the perspective of what he once defined as “a diagnosis of Western man,” he aims to configure a problem that is both historical and ethical. The transfiguration of iconographic method in Warburg’s hands thus closely recalls Leo Spitzer’s transformation of lexicographic method into “historical semantics,” in which the history of a word becomes both the history of a culture and the configuration of its specific vital problem. To understand how Warburg understood the study of the tradition of images, one may also think of the revolution in paleography brought about by Ludwig Traube, whom Warburg called “the
Great Master of our Order” and who always knew how to draw decisive discoveries for the history of culture from errors of copyists and influences in calligraphy.\textsuperscript{13}

The theme of the “posthumous life”\textsuperscript{14} of pagan culture that defines a main line of Warburg’s thought makes sense only within this broader horizon, in which the stylistic and formal solutions at times adopted by artists appear as ethical decisions of individuals and epochs regarding the inheritance of the past. Only from this perspective does the interpretation of a historical problem also show itself as a “diagnosis of Western man” in his battle to overcome his own contradictions and to find his vital dwelling place between the old and the new.

If Warburg could present the problem of the Nachleben des Heidentums, the “posthumous life of paganism,” as the supreme subject of his scholarly research,\textsuperscript{15} this is because he had already understood, with a surprising anthropological intuition, that “transmission and survival” is the central problem of a “warm” society such as the West, insofar as it is so obsessed with history as to want to make it into the driving force of its own development.\textsuperscript{16} Once again, Warburg’s method and concepts are clarified if one compares them to the ideas that led Spitzer, in his research into semantic history, to accentuate the simultaneously “conservative” and “progressive” character of our cultural tradition, in which apparently great changes are always in some way connected to the legacy of the past (as is shown by the striking continuity of the semantic patrimony of modern European languages, which is essentially Graeco-Roman-Judaico-Christian).

From this perspective, from which culture is always seen as a process of Nachleben, that is, transmission, reception, and polarization, it also becomes comprehensible why Warburg ultimately concentrated all his attention on the problem of symbols and their life in social memory.

Ernst Gombrich has shown the influence exerted on Warburg by the theories of Hering’s student Richard Semon, whose book Mneme Warburg bought in 1908. According to Gombrich, Semon holds that memory is not a property of consciousness but the one quality that distinguishes living from dead matter. It is the capacity to react to an event over a period of time; that is, a form of preserving and transmitting energy not known to the physical world. Any event affecting living matter leaves a trace which Semon calls an “engram.” The potential energy conserved in this “engram” may, under suitable conditions, be reactivated and discharged—we
then say the organism acts in a specific way because it \textit{remembers} the previous event.\textsuperscript{17}

The symbol and the image play the same role for Warburg as the “engram” plays in Semon’s conception of the individual’s nervous system; they are the crystallization of an energetic charge and an emotional experience that survive as an inheritance transmitted by social memory and that, like electricity condensed in a Leyden jar, become effective only through contact with the “selective will” of a particular period. This is why Warburg often speaks of symbols as “dynamograms” that are transmitted to artists in a state of great tension, but that are not polarized in their active or passive, positive or negative energetic charge; their polarization, which occurs through an encounter with a new epoch and its vital needs, can then bring about a complete transformation of meaning.\textsuperscript{18} For Warburg, the attitude of artists toward images inherited from tradition was therefore conceivable in terms neither of aesthetic choice nor of neural reception; rather, for him it is a matter of a confrontation—which is lethal or vitalizing, depending on the situation—with the tremendous energies stored in images, which in themselves had the potential either to make man regress into sterile subjection or to direct him on his path toward salvation and knowledge. For Warburg, this was true not only for artists who, like Dürer, polarized and humanized the superstitious fear of Saturn in the emblem of intellectual contemplation,\textsuperscript{19} but also for historians and scholars, whom Warburg conceives of as extremely sensitive seismographs responding to distant earthquakes, or as “necromancers” who consciously evoke the specters threatening them.\textsuperscript{20}

For Warburg, the symbol thus belongs to an intermediary domain between consciousness and primitive reactions, and it bears in itself the possibilities of both regression and higher knowledge. It is a \textit{Zwischenraum}, an “interval,” a kind of no-man’s-land at the center of the human. And just as the creation and enjoyment of art require the fusion of two psychic attitudes that exclude each other (“a passionate surrender of the self leading to a complete identification with the present—and a cool and detached serenity which belongs to the categorizing contemplation of things”), so the “nameless science” sought by Warburg is, as one reads in a note of 1929, an “iconology of the interval,” or a “psychology of the oscillation between the positing of causes as images and as signs.”\textsuperscript{21} Warburg clearly presents this “intermediary” status of the symbol (and its ca-
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pacity, if mastered, to "heal" and direct the human mind) in a note that
dates from the period of the Kreuzlingen lecture, during which he was
undergoing and telling others about his recovery:

All mankind is eternally and at all times schizophrenic. Ontogenetically, however, we may perhaps describe one type of response to memory images as prior and primitive, though it continues on the sidelines. At the later stage the memory no longer arouses an immediate, purposeful reflex movement—be it one of a combative or a religious character—but the memory images are now consciously stored in pictures and signs. Between these two stages we find a treatment of the impression that may be described as the symbolic mode of thought. 22

Only from this perspective is it possible to appreciate the sense and importance of the project to which Warburg devoted the last years of his life, and for which he chose the name that he also wanted as the motto for his library (which can still be read today upon entering the library of the Warburg Institute): Mnemosyne. Gertrud Bing once described this project as a figurative atlas depicting the history of visual expression in the Mediterranean area. Warburg was probably guided in his choice of this striking model by his own difficulty with writing; but he was probably led above all by his determination to find a form that, beyond the traditional types and modes of art criticism and history, would finally be adequate to the "nameless science" he had in mind.

When he died, in October 1929, Warburg had not completed his "Mnemosyne" project. There remain some forty black canvases to which Warburg attached approximately one thousand photographs in which it is possible to recognize his favorite iconographic themes, but whose material expands almost infinitely, to the point of including an advertisement for a steamship company and photographs of a golf player as well as of the meeting of Mussolini and the Pope. But "Mnemosyne" is something more than an organic orchestration of the motifs that guided Warburg's research over the years. Warburg once enigmatically defined "Mnemosyne" as "a ghost story for truly adult people." If one considers the function that he assigned to the image as the organ of social memory and the "engram" of a culture's spiritual tensions, one can understand what he meant: his "atlas" was a kind of gigantic condenser that gathered together all the energetic currents that had animated and continued to animate Europe's memory, taking form in its "ghosts." The name "Mnemosyne"
finds its true justification here. The atlas that bears this title recalls the
mnemotechnical theater built in the sixteenth century by Giulio Camillo,
which so stunned his contemporaries as an absolutely novel wonder. Its
creator sought to enclose in it “the nature of all things that can be ex-
pressed in speech,” such that whoever entered into the wondrous building
would immediately grasp the knowledge contained in it. Warburg’s
“Mnemosyne” is such a mnemotechnical and initiatory atlas of Western
culture. Gazing upon it, the “good European” (as he liked to call himself,
using Nietzsche’s expression) would become conscious of the problematic
nature of his own cultural tradition, perhaps succeeding thereby in “ed-
ucating himself” and in healing his own schizophrenia.

“Mnemosyne,” like many other of Warburg’s works, including his li-
brary, may certainly appear to some as a mnemotechnic system for pri-
vate use, by which Aby Warburg, scholar and psychopath, sought to re-
solve his personal psychological conflicts. And this is without a doubt the
case. But it is a sign of Warburg’s greatness as an individual that not only
his idiosyncrasies but even the remedies he found to master them corre-
respond to the secret needs of the spirit of the age.

III

Today, philological and historical disciplines consider it a method-
ological given that the epistemological process that is proper to them is
necessarily caught in a circle. The discovery of this circle as the founda-
tion of all hermeneutics goes back to Schleiermacher and his intuition
that in philology “the part can be understood only by means of the whole
and every explanation of the part presupposes the understanding of the
whole.” But this circle is in no sense a vicious one. On the contrary, it is
itself the foundation of the rigor and rationality of the social sciences and
humanities. For a science that wants to remain faithful to its own law,
what is essential is not to leave this “circle of understanding,” which
would be impossible, but to “stay within it in the right way.” By virtue
of the knowledge acquired at every step, the passage from the part to the
whole and back again never returns to the same point; at every step, it
necessarily broadens its radius, discovering a higher perspective that opens
a new circle. The curve representing the hermeneutic circle is not a cir-
cumference, as has often been repeated, but a spiral that continually
broadens its turns.
The science that recommended looking for "the good God" in the details perfectly illustrates the fecundity of a correct position in one's own hermeneutic circle. The spiraling movement toward an ever greater broadening of horizons can be followed in an exemplary fashion in the two central themes of Warburg's research: that of the "nymph" and that of the Renaissance revival of astrology.

In his dissertation on Botticelli's Spring and Birth of Venus, Warburg used literary sources to identify Botticelli's moving female figure as a "nymph." Warburg argued that this figure constituted a new iconographic type, one that makes it possible both to clarify the subject of Botticelli's paintings and to demonstrate "how Botticelli was settling accounts with the ideas that his epoch had of the ancients." But in showing that the artists of the fifteenth century relied on a classical Pathosformel every time they sought to portray an intensified external movement, Warburg simultaneously revealed the Dionysian polarity of classical art. In the wake of Nietzsche, Warburg was the first to affirm this polarity in the domain of art history, which in his time was still dominated by Johann Joachim Winckelmann's model. In a still broader circle, the appearance of the nymph thus becomes the sign of a profound spiritual conflict in Renaissance culture, in which the rediscovery of the orgiastic charge of classical Pathosformeln had to be skillfully reconciled with Christianity in a delicate balance that is perfectly exemplified in the personality of the Florentine Francesco Sassetti, whom Warburg analyzes in a famous essay. And in the greatest circle of the hermeneutic spiral, the "nymph" becomes the cipher of a perennial polarity in Western culture, insofar as Warburg likens her to the dark, resting figure that Renaissance artists took from Greek representations of a river god. In one of his densest diary entries, Warburg considers this polarity, which afflicts the West with a kind of tragic schizophrenia: "Sometimes it looks to me as if, in my role as a psycho-historian, I tried to diagnose the schizophrenia of Western civilization from its images in an autobiographical reflex. The ecstatic 'Nympha' (manic) on the one side and the mourning river-god (depressive) on the other."

An analogous progressive broadening of the hermeneutic spiral can also be observed in Warburg's treatment of the theme of astrological images. The narrower, properly iconographic circle coincides with the analysis of the subject of the frescos in the Palazzo Schifanoia in Ferrara, which Warburg, as we have noted, recognized as figures from Abu Ma'shar's Intro-
ductorium maius. In the history of culture, however, this becomes the discovery of the rebirth of astrology in humanistic culture from the fourteenth century onwards and therefore of the ambiguity of Renaissance culture, which Warburg was the first to perceive in an epoch in which the Renaissance still appeared as an age of enlightenment in contrast to the darkness of the Middle Ages. In the final lines traced by the spiral, the appearance of the images and rivers of demonic antiquity at the very start of modernity becomes the symptom of a conflict at the origin of our civilization, which cannot master its own bipolar tension. As Warburg explained, introducing an exhibit of astrological images to the German Oriental Studies Conference in 1926, those images show “beyond all doubt that European culture is the result of conflicting tendencies, of a process in which—as far as these astrological attempts at orientation are concerned—we must seek neither friends nor enemies, but rather symptoms of a movement of pendular oscillation between the two distinct poles of magico-religious practice and mathematical contemplation.”

Warburg’s hermeneutic circle can thus be figured as a spiral that moves across three main levels: the first is that of iconography and the history of art; the second is that of the history of culture; and the third and broadest level is that of the “nameless science” to which Warburg dedicated his life and that aims to diagnose Western man through a consideration of his phantasms. The circle that revealed the good God hidden in the details was not a vicious circle, even in the Nierzschean sense of a circlus vitiosus deus.

IV

If we now wish to ask ourselves, following our initial project, if the “unnamed science” whose lineaments we have examined in Warburg’s thought can indeed receive a name, we must first of all observe that none of the terms that he used over the course of his life (“history of culture,” “psychology of human expression,” “history of the psyche,” “iconology of the interval”) seems to have fully satisfied him. The most authoritative post-Warburgian attempt to name this science is certainly that of Erwin Panofsky, who in his own research gives the name “iconology” (as opposed to “iconography”) to the deepest possible approach to images. The fortune of this term (which, as we have seen, was already used by Warburg) has been so vast that today it is used to refer not only to Panofsky’s
works but to all research that presents itself in the tradition of Warburg's
work. But even a summary analysis suffices to show how distant the goals
Panofsky assigns to iconology are from what Warburg had in mind for his
science of the "interval."

It is well known that Panofsky distinguishes three moments in the in-
terpretation of a work, moments that, so to speak, correspond to three
strata of meaning. The first stratum, which is that of the "natural or pri-
mary subject," corresponds to pre-iconographic description; the second,
which is that of the "secondary or conventional subject, constitutive of
the world of images, of stories, and of allegories," corresponds to icono-
graphic analysis. The third stratum, the deepest, is that of the "intrinsic
meaning or content, constitutive of symbolic values." "The discovery and
interpretation of these 'symbolical' values . . . is the object of what we
may call 'iconology' as opposed to 'iconography.'"29 But if we try to spe-
cify the nature of these "symbolic values," we see that Panofsky oscillates
between considering them as "documents of the unitary sense of the con-
ception of the world" and considering their interpretation as "symptoms"
of an artistic personality. In his essay "The Neo-Platonic Movement and
Michelangelo," he thus seems to understand artistic symbols as "sympto-
matic of the very essence of Michelangelo's personality."30 The notion of
symbol, which Warburg took from Renaissance emblems and reli-
gious psychology, thus risks being led back to the domain of traditional
aesthetics, which essentially considered the work of art as the expression
of the creative personality of the artist. The absence of a broader theore-
tical perspective in which to situate "symbolic values" thus makes it ex-
tremely difficult to widen the hermeneutic circle beyond art history and
aesthetics (which is not to say that Panofsky did not often succeed bril-
liantly within their borders).31

As to Warburg, he would never have considered the essence of an
artist's personality as the deepest content of an image. As the intermediary
zone between consciousness and primitive identification, symbols did not
appear to him as significant insofar (or only insofar) as they made possi-
ble the reconstruction of a personality or a vision of the world. For War-
b urg, the significance of images instead lay in the fact that, being strictly
speaking neither conscious nor unconscious, they constituted the ideal
terrain for a unitary approach to culture, one capable of overcoming the
opposition between history, as the study of "conscious expressions," and
anthropology, as the study of "unconscious conditions," which Lévi-
Strauss identified twenty years later as the central problem in the relations between these two disciplines.\textsuperscript{32}

I could have mentioned anthropology more often in the course of this essay. And it is certainly true that the point of view from which Warburg examined phenomena coincides strikingly with that of anthropological sciences. The least unfaithful way to characterize Warburg’s “nameless science” may well be to insert it into the project of a future “anthropology of Western culture” in which philology, ethnology, and history would converge with an “iconology of the interval,” a study of the \textit{Zwischenraum} in which the incessant symbolic work of social memory is carried out. There is no need to underline the urgency of such a science for an epoch that, sooner or later, will have to become fully conscious of what Valéry noted thirty years ago when he wrote, “the age of the finite world has begun.”\textsuperscript{33} Only this science would allow Western man, once he has moved beyond the limits of his own ethnocentrism, to arrive at the liberating knowledge of a “diagnosis of humanity” that would heal it of its tragic schizophrenia.

It was in the service of this science, which after almost a century of anthropological studies is unfortunately still at its beginnings, that Warburg, “in his erudite, somewhat complicated way,”\textsuperscript{34} carried out his research, which must not in any sense be neglected. His works allow his name to be inscribed alongside those of Mauss, Sapir, Spitzer, Kerényi, Usener, Dumézil, Benveniste, and many—but not very many—others. And it is likely that such a science will have to remain nameless as long as its activity has not penetrated so deeply into our culture as to overcome the fatal divisions and false hierarchies separating not only the human sciences from one another but also artworks from the \textit{studia humaniora} and literary creation from science.

Perhaps the fracture that in our culture divides poetry and philosophy, art and science, the word that “sings” and the word that “remembers,” is nothing other than one aspect of the very schizophrenia of Western culture that Warburg recognized in the polarity of the ecstatic nymph and the melancholic river god. We will be truly faithful to Warburg’s teaching if we learn to see the contemplative gaze of the god in the nymph’s dancing gesture and if we succeed in understanding that the word that sings also remembers and the one that remembers also sings. The science that will then take hold of the liberating knowledge of the human will truly deserve to be called by the Greek name of \textit{Mnemosyne}. 
Postilla (1983)

This essay was written in 1975, after a year of lively work in the Warburg Institute Library. It was conceived as the first of a series of portraits dedicated to exemplary personalities, each of which was to represent a human science. Other than the essay on Warburg, only the one on Émile Benveniste and linguistics was begun, although it was never finished.

With seven years of distance, the project of a general science of the human that is formulated in this essay strikes the author as one that is still valid, but that certainly cannot be pursued in the same terms. By the end of the 1970s, moreover, anthropology and the human sciences had already entered into a period of disenchantment that in itself probably rendered this project obsolete. (The fact that this project was, at times, proposed again in various ways as a generic scientific ideal only testifies to the superficiality with which historical and political problems are often resolved in academic circles.)

The itinerary of linguistics that in Benveniste’s generation had already exhausted the grand nineteenth-century project of comparative grammar can serve as an example here. While Benveniste’s Indo-European Language and Society brought comparative grammar to a limit point at which the very epistemological categories of the historical disciplines seemed to waver, Benveniste’s theory of enunciation carried the science of language into the traditional territory of philosophy. In both cases, this coincided with a movement by which science (which includes linguistics, the so-called “pilot science” of the human sciences) was forced to confront a limit, which, in being recognized, seemed to allow for the delimitation of a field on which it would be possible to construct a general science of the human freed from the vagueness of interdisciplinarity. This is not the place to investigate the reasons why this did not happen. It remains the case that what took place instead was, in the rear guard, an academic enlargement of the field of semiology (to pre-Benvenistian and even pre-Saussurian perspectives) and, in the avant-garde, a massive turn toward Chomskian formalized linguistics, which is still proving fruitful today, although its epistemological horizon hardly seems to admit of something like a general science of the human.

To return to Warburg, whom I had, perhaps antiphrastically, invoked to represent art history, what continues to appear as relevant in his work
is the decisive gesture with which he withdraws the artwork (and also the image) from the study of the artist’s consciousness and unconscious structures. Here, once again, it is possible to draw analogies with Benveniste. While phonology (and, in its wake, Lévi-Straussian anthropology) turned to the study of unconscious structures, Benveniste’s theory of enunciation, treating the problem of the subject and the passage from language (lingua) to speech (parola), opened linguistics to a field that could not be properly defined through the conscious/unconscious opposition. At the same time, Benveniste’s research in comparative linguistics, which culminates in his Indo-European Language and Society, presented a number of findings that could not be easily understood through oppositions such as diachrony/synchrony and history/structure. In Warburg, precisely what might have appeared as an unconscious structure par excellence—the image—instead showed itself to be a decisively historical element, the very place of human cognitive activity in its vital confrontation with the past. What thus came to light, however, was neither a kind of diachrony nor a kind of synchrony but, rather, the point at which a human subject was produced in the rupture of this opposition.

In this context, the problem that must be immediately posed to Warburg’s thought is a genuinely philosophical one: the status of the image and, in particular, the relation between image and speech, imagination and rule, which in Kant had already produced the aporetic situation of the transcendental imagination. The greatest lesson of Warburg’s teaching may well be that the image is the place in which the subject strips itself of the mythical, psychosomatic character given to it, in the presence of an equally mythical object, by a theory of knowledge that is in truth simply disguised metaphysics. Only then does the subject rediscover its original and—in the etymological sense of the word—speculative purity. In this sense, Warburg’s “nymph” is neither an external object nor an intrapsychical entity but instead the most limpid figure of the historical subject itself. In the same way, for Warburg the “Mnemosyne” atlas (which struck Warburg’s successors as banal and full of capricious idios- cies) was not an iconographical repertory but something like a mirror of Narcissus. For those who do not perceive it as such, it seems useless or, what is worse, an embarrassing private concern of the master, like his all-too-commonly discussed mental illness. How can one not see, instead, that what attracted Warburg in this conscious and dangerous play of mental alienation was precisely the possibility of grasping something like
pure historical matter, something perfectly analogous to what Indo-European phonology offered Saussure’s secret illness?

It is superfluous to recall that neither iconology nor the psychology of art has always been faithful to these demands. If we are to look for the most fruitful outcome of Warburg’s legacy, perhaps, as W. Kemp has suggested, we should look to heterodox research, such as Benjamin’s studies of the dialectical image. It continues to be imperative, in the meantime, that Warburg’s unpublished papers in the London Institute appear in print.