LELAND DE LA DURANTAYE

GHOST STORIES FOR THE VERY ADULT

THE SOMETIMES MAD GERMAN ART HISTORIAN ABY WARBURG WOULD NEVER HAVE BEEN CAPABLE OF HIS INSIGHTS INTO THE REFINEMENTS OF RENAISSANCE ART HAD HE NOT TRAVELED IN 1895 TO THE WILD WEST TO ATTEND A HOPI INDIAN SNAKE DANCE.

DISCUSSED: *Imagined Cannibalism, Primal Roars, The Bellevue Clinic, Butterflies And Moths, Library of the Good Neighbor, Writhing Snakes, Dionysian Energies, Image as the Imprint of Emotion, Mnemosyne, Movements of Cultural Memory, Pagan Antiquity, Dynamograms*

Aby Warburg wearing a Hopi mask

In 1895 the German Jewish art historian and banking heir Aby Warburg started World War I. It wasn't until an October evening twenty-three years later that he revealed this to his family. At gunpoint.

Later that same evening in 1918, Warburg was taken away by men in white coats. After brief stays in sanatoriums in his native Hamburg and in Jena, he took up residence at an exclusive clinic outside Kreuzlingen named Bellevue. He was not the clinic's first or only celebrated visitor. The deeply strange French writer Raymond Roussel, beloved of the surrealists, sojourned there, as would Vaslav Nijinsky, the German Expressionist painter Ludwig Kirchner, and pioneer feminist Bertha Pappenheim (better known today as Freud's "Anna O.").

Unlike some of Bellevue's patients, Warburg was not *un malade imaginaire*. He was totally mad. Convinced that the cooking staff was serving him the flesh of his own family, he became a vegetarian. His schizophrenia was reflected not only in the fears that plagued his mealtimes but also in the rhythm of his daily life. Though lucid and sociable in the afternoon and evening, he began each day in a wildly primal state. As a rule, his mornings were filled with bouts of energetic roaring. Warburg's doctor encouraged visitors to come see him, though he carefully specified that afternoons were best. A colleague of Warburg's arrived one day shortly before noon. Entering the ele-

gantly appointed Bellevue, he heard the distant echoes of a wild kingdom. Half an hour later, Warburg greeted him, impeccably attired and as refined and cordial as ever. After a few minutes he took his guest aside and with an air of great amusement confided, "My dear friend, did you hear all that roaring? Well, you would never guess. But *that was me*!" Warburg then smiled brightly and the two men embarked on a lively discussion of fifteenth-century Florentine art.

Shortly after the celebrated art historian's admittance to Bellevue, Sigmund Freud wrote to the clinic's director to ask after Warburg's future. Ludwig Binswanger, whose uncle had treated Nietzsche and who was not unfamiliar with the difficulties of creative genius, replied that Warburg was severely manic-depressive and likely to remain that way. (In the published correspondence between Freud and Binswanger, "Prof. V from I" is an alphabetical encrypting of "Prof. W[arburg] from H[amburg].") Binswanger noted with chagrin that although Warburg had come to Bellevue to undergo "the talking cure," he remained singularly uncommunicative—with people. He did, however, speak with what he called his *Seelentierchen,* his "tiny soulful animals": the butterflies and moths that were the frequent companions of his lonely hours. Binswanger first had a real glimpse of what, in fact, was secretly troubling Warburg one evening almost three years after his patient's arrival. Walking by an open window, Binswanger happened to overhear Warburg telling one of his flitting friends of the terror that gripped him during the then-raging First World War. He had been convinced that frenzied hordes were making their way to his home, coming to tear his family apart limb from limb. It was his attempt to spare his loved ones this grisly fate that led to the arrival of men in white coats.

Through the ministering efforts of his kind doctor, Warburg's fears, and his roaring, slowly subsided. In 1923, five years after Warburg's breakdown, Binswanger judged him ready to return at last to his scholarly life—on a single condition. He asked his patient to demonstrate the return of his faculties by giving a lecture to a select audience on a subject of his choice. Curiously, what Warburg chose had nothing to do with his area of expertise, the Italian Renaissance, but instead with a trip he took to the American West many years before—a journey that led him to start the Great War.

Back in the summer of 1895, the then-twenty-nine-year-old Warburg traveled to New York to attend the wedding of one of his younger brothers to the daughter of the American banker Solomon Loeb. It was a gala affair, and Warburg was bored to tears. At the time, he was much too occupied with books and libraries—and, more particularly, with his own growing library—to have much interest in high society.

As the eldest of five sons, Warburg had been expected to take over direction of his family's venerable and very prosperous bank. By age thirteen, however, it was all too clear to him that he wasn't cut out for it. Wasting no time, he made an arrangement with his equally decisive brother Max, one year his junior, whereby he would cede all rights of primogeniture in return for Max's agreement to buy him any book he wanted for the entirety of his life. Surprisingly enough, the adolescent agreement proved binding.

While Max was hard at work at the family bank, Aby was equally occupied amassing one of the strangest libraries in the world. Dedicated to the broad field of what the German call *Kulturwissenschaft,* the humanities and social sciences, the library's most striking feature was its principle of organization. Works were not classified by subject, author, title, or even date of acquisition, but instead by what Warburg called "the law of the good neighbor." Though grouped under such general rubrics as Anthropology or Art History, both the various sections and the books within them were arranged as a function of their ability to engage with the books on either side of them. A line of speculation opened in one volume was attested to or attacked, continued or contradicted, refined or refuted in its neighbor. The constantly changing collection became a labyrinth where Warburg was Daedalus, Ariadne, and Minotaur all at once. Upon first visiting the library in the 1920s, the German philosopher Ernst Cassirer, one of the most erudite men of the day, declared that he saw only two options: to leave immediately or stay for ten years. A systematic man, Cas-

sirer did the one, and then returned to do the other.

Back to 1895. When the family arrived in New York for the wedding, Aby's library was still in its early stages. With a literal carte blanche from his brother, he was eager to acquire materials. As soon as politely possible, he left the wedding party and headed first north to Cambridge and then south to Washington. In the course of amassing an impressive number of ethnographical treatises, experts at Harvard and the Smithsonian told Warburg stories about Native American culture. Fired by these accounts, and despite warnings that winter was no time for such travel, he struck out in late fall for the still wild West.

As Warburg sat down to tell the tale of his trip west that could bring his confinement in Bellevue to an end, he found himself at a loss for words. He scrawled in large letters at the top of his first page of notes a single word: *Help!* It soon came—in the form of an image. One of a mass of intertwined snakes.

The goal of Warburg's westward journey in the winter of 1895 to 1896 was to study the art and rituals of the Hopi Indians. One ritual captivated him more than the rest: the snake dance. It began with an elaborate sand painting, carefully constructed at the center of the mesa and depicting lightning-like snakes flashing down from the sky. Once the picture was completed, dancers began to circle hypnotically around it. Eventually, some of them left, returning moments later with dozens of poisonous snakes. (Charles Fletcher Lummis, a newspaper editor who moved to New Mexico in 1888, observed and photographed the ritual a few years later. He estimated that of the more than one hundred snakes used, upward of sixty were poisonous rattlesnakes.) They were brought coiling and hissing to the center of the dancing area and then thrown down onto the sand painting. Their angry writhing merged with their depictions until the two were indistinguishable. The serpents were then removed one by one and carried in the mouths of the dancers to the edge of the mesa. From here, they were ushered out into the desert as special envoys to bid their relatives, the Gods of Rain, to end the drought.

In Bellevue's refined setting, Warburg explained the order and import of this ritual to his select audience. Friends, family, and colleagues were surprised to hear of the singular ritual, and still more surprised to hear Warburg speak not of Italian art, as they had expected, but of experiences with the Hopis, about which he had hitherto neither publicly spoken nor written. They were even more surprised to hear him explain how he would never have been capable of his insights into the refinements of Renaissance art had it not been for his stay with the Hopis.

From his first writings in the 1880s, Warburg's work revolved around a central theme, one to which the institute that bears his name remains dedicated: the return of images from pagan antiquity in Renaissance art. He believed that this rebirth was not to be exclusively attributed to such factors as renewed interest in humanist study or new archaeological discoveries (such as the unearthing of the statue of Laocoön struggling against the snakes sent to dispatch him and his family, which Michelangelo so admired). Whereas earlier generations of art historians had seen in Greek culture "a calm and noble simplicity" that the growing refinement of the Renaissance appropriated, what Warburg saw was neither calm nor simple. Everywhere he turned, he saw Dionysian energies lurking in the folds of Apolline art.

One of the goals of the institute that Warburg founded was to remedy a certain schizophrenia he diagnosed in the study of art. On the one hand, he saw the necessity of formal and historical analysis, of the disinterested judgment Kant had

stressed. On the other, there was the experience of the work of art, an experience that in the best cases was full of passion, confusion, and contradiction. The first was art as analysis and accomplishment; the second was art as intoxication and immersion. Spurred by his trip to the American West, the young Warburg sought to understand the artistic image not only as a set of formal characteristics but also as an imprint of intense emotion—one in the traces of which lay cultural energies that might be reawakened. This aspiration led to the companion project to Warburg's library: *Mnemosyne.* Named after the mother of the Muses, this "image atlas," as he called it, attempted to capture the fundamental poses and postures of Western experience. From his enormous archive, Warburg chose images that would illustrate this process of cultural transmission at work; these were displayed on dozens of large panels draped in black cloth. On one such panel, an allegorical image of the Roman god Mars from a fifteenth-century manuscript was juxtaposed with illustrations from Kepler's *Mysterium Cosmographicum* (1621) representing the elliptical orbit of Mars, next to a martial photograph of the Graf Zeppelin dirigible tailed by a Japanese coast guard plane. On another, a graceful young golfer swings next to Donatello's Judith beheading Holofernes. Like Warburg's library, the image atlas was intended to track the mysterious movements of a culture's memory; both would never be completed because they could never be complete.

There was much in his work that Warburg found perilous, and he once described his scholarly writings as "ghost stories for the very adult." As accounts of the ravages of World War I reached him, he grew increasingly terrified. By 1918, his sensitive temperament was no longer able to bear the shocks he continued to receive from the images—or, as he called them for a time, "dynamograms"—around him. He imagined that his pioneering research into pagan antiquity had opened a Pandora's box. After centuries of restless sleep in the treasured images of Western art, primitive energies were now running amok, leaving very real death and destruction in their wake. This was what, pistol in hand, he tried to explain to his family on a dark night in 1918. His intent was to take their lives quickly and painlessly, sparing them a more terrible death at the hands of those drunk on the energies of the past.

Warburg's talk on a ritual that looked like madness—venomous snakes and all—seems to have functioned like a ritual that ended *his*

The French Money lender

madness. Not long thereafter, he was back at work in his library and the adjoining institute he had founded in 1921, and lived happily at its center until his death in 1929. Because what Warburg consented to publish during his lifetime was spare and highly specialized, his influence on art history has been like dark matter. Although not directly visible, it could be deduced from the intellectual orbits of his many celebrated friends and students, in E. R. Curtius's studies of literary *topoi,* Edgar Wind's explorations of art and anarchy, Frances Yates's work on the art of memory, Fritz Saxl's studies of melancholy, and Erwin Panofsky's iconological analyses of everything from the Rolls-Royce to Arcadia.

At a talk in Padua in 1994, E. H. Gombrich, the most famous art historian of the century, counseled his audience against "recent attempts to transform Warburg into a prophet of our century." This was not the first time he had made such a plea. In 1970 he published the long-awaited *Aby Warburg: An Intellectual Biography*. With so little of Warburg's writing directly available, readers—especially in the English-speaking world—were long dependent upon Gombrich's account. Though he directed the Warburg Institute for seventeen years, and was one of the first directors to succeed Warburg as its head, the two men never met. In fact, Gombrich was first hired by the institute in 1936 (it had relocated to London three years earlier) to catalog the sprawling mass of papers Warburg left behind at his death. The young Gombrich

quickly grew impatient with the winding inroads of Warburg's writing. When he came to the institute, two of Warburg's closest collaborators, Fritz Saxl and Gertrud Bing, were then at work on an intellectual biography of their friend and teacher that they did not live to complete. Gombrich's work in the archive put him in a position to take up this same task, and from 1946 to 1947 he wrote the bulk of a manuscript and showed it to others at the institute. He was promptly dissuaded from publishing it, not because it revealed intimate details about Warburg's private madness (Gombrich, in fact, generally avoids the matter), but for the simplified image it gave of the man and his work. Nearly twenty-five years later, with Bing and Saxl long dead, and Gombrich crowned by fame, he at last brought out the biography. The *Times Literary Supplement* immediately ran an urbanely scathing anonymous review (written by Warburg's spiritual successor, the mischievously brilliant Edgar Wind). But in large part those who might have defended Warburg's memory had departed, and what prevailed in the years to come was the image of a man who was ineffectual, maniacal, and, ultimately, of little interest.

Aby Warburg was, however, too charming and too weird a thinker to remain in the shadow cast by Gombrich's biography—something Gombrich himself had already begun to realize when he addressed his audience in Padua. Recent years have attested to this, as serious and sympathetic studies of Warburg's thought have begun to appear with increasing frequency. French thinkers, never ones to leave inspired weirdness unexplored, have been at the forefront. Phillipe-Alain Michaud's *Aby Warburg and the Image in Motion* (1998), recently translated into English and published by MIT, offers an enlarged view of Warburg and his legacy, stressing his manner of seeing images as the history of culture in crystallized form. Moving still further in this direction is Georges Didi-Huberman's exuberant and erudite 2002 work, *L'image survivante: Histoire de l'art et temps des fantômes selon Aby Warburg* (The Surviving Image: The History of Art and the Time of Phantoms According to Aby Warburg). In Warburg's native Germany, books such as Ulrich Raulff's *Wilde Energien: Vier Versuche zu Aby Warburg* (Wild Energies: Four Essays on Aby Warburg), as well as the long-delayed publication of Warburg's complete works, also testify to this renewed interest.

One of the reasons for this redoubled attention recalls the title of Gombrich's long-awaited final work, *The Preference for the Primitive* (2002). For Warburg, the primitive was not merely a stylistic possibility, a point on the pendulum swing of taste, or a stage in our past. When he remarked that "all mankind is eternally and at all times schizophrenic," he meant it. This was his way of saying that the primitive—the immediate and intense—response to the work of art, though it might be banned from the canon of cultivated judgment, should not be neglected. His quest to understand this element led him far from the traditional provinces of art history. This proved perilous territory—far more so than anything he experienced "beyond the railroad" in America's uncharted West—as he sought to return art to its primitive home, among the writhing of snakes, the roaring of lions, and the flight of fritillaries. For him, it was necessary not only to know how to walk around a museum but also how to dance around a sand painting alive with writhing snakes.

Although he indeed founded a library and an institute, Warburg did not found a school. And the reason for this is simple: he dictated no method—or, at least, no method that has proven easy to follow. Among Warburg's unpublished papers, however, is a sheaf of carefully bound notes, dating from shortly before his death, which addresses just this question. On the first page is a single word: *Method*. The next four pages also contain a single word apiece: *Nietzsche*, *Conclusion*, *Flight*, *Destiny*. Twenty perfectly blank pages follow. ✯