

**Heise, Carl Georg: *Persönliche Erinnerungen an Aby Warburg*, Wiesbaden:
Harrassowitz Verlag 2005**

ISBN-10: 3-447-05215-5, IX, 149 S.

Reviewed by: Mark Russell

The art historian Carl Georg Heise (1890-1979) - director of the Museum für Kunst und Kulturgeschichte in Lübeck (1920-33) and of the Kunsthalle in Hamburg (1945-55) - is perhaps best known to scholars as the author of a memoir on his mentor, Aby Warburg (1866-1929). His first and "life-determining" meeting with Warburg occurred in 1908 and initiated a student-teacher relationship and friendship which lasted until the latter's death in 1929. (10) Heise committed his memories of this relationship to paper in the spring of 1945 while trapped in the embattled city of Berlin. The manuscript was privately published in New York in 1947 and disseminated amongst a small circle of family, friends and colleagues. A slightly amended second edition was published in 1959 by the Gesellschaft der Bücherfreunde zu Hamburg.

Heise is frank about the shortcomings of his text. He emphasizes that it was written in extreme circumstances, without access to books or notes, and that there are holes in his memory. His brief account of Warburg's scholarship is qualified by the disclaimer that he was not a follower of his mentor's methods; indeed, his knowledge of Warburg's research interests was the result of observing them "only from the periphery." (22) Consequently, the book is more a sketch of Warburg's character than it is an insight into the particulars of his thinking. Furthermore, Heise's account of Warburg's life is of limited chronological scope: it is the years before the First World War - when Heise was closest to Warburg - that constitutes the book's focus. Writing of the 1920s, the author laments that "unfortunately, I know much too little to be able to sketch an image of this period which was probably the most colorful of Warburg's life." (65)

Yet Heise sees his work as constituting the "building blocks of a biography." He hoped this would be completed by Warburg's assistant, Gertrude Bing, from the wealth of documentary material that survives in the Warburg Institute Archive in London. As a preface to such an undertaking, he claims merit and authority for his essay by emphasizing that it relates a first-hand account of Warburg's life and work; the impressions gained through a personal relationship, he asserts, reveal more about the scholar than his publications ever will. Indeed, the author claims that friendship with Warburg granted him insight into matters of which his mentor never spoke. Furthermore, Heise firmly believes in the power of anecdote to reveal the "creative core a person." (5) He even claims an advantage for the fact that he was never closely involved with Warburg's scholarly work and did not belong to the circle of "Warburgianer"; it is this distance, the author insists, that allows for a clearer and deeper understanding of the man.

The memoir is full of colorful images and anecdotes. Warburg's presence is evoked, and his character revealed, through physical description of himself and his environment, as well as through the use of telling, and occasionally dramatic episodes.

We glimpse Warburg at work in his library; poring over the frescoes of the Palazzo Schifanoia in Ferrara; attending the International Art Historians Conference in Rome in 1912; working feverishly during the First World War; and finally succumbing to mental illness in 1918. Scattered throughout this account are several revealing and often amusing quotations from Warburg. Perhaps the most memorable of these is the assertion that his library is worth more than other rich families' horse stables. Through Heise, we also hear Warburg voice his disdain for much of contemporary art-historical scholarship, including that of Adolph Goldschmidt, and listen to him scoff at the work of Joseph Gobjeau, and Alfred Lichtwark, Director of Hamburg's Kunsthalle from 1886 to 1914.

All of these incidents and utterances are collected in a work of hagiography which presents a highly romanticized image of Warburg. Near the beginning of his account, Heise states that his mentor's "being and actions" were "enveloped with the magic of the extraordinary."⁽⁵⁾ Indeed, the author writes of Warburg as something of a visionary with the power to foresee the disasters of the First World War and his own death. He also understands his mentor's mental illness as intimately bound up with the nature and substance of his scholarship. Heise argues, for instance, that the achievements of the 1920s would not have been possible without the harrowing experiences of mental collapse and recovery. The dramatic and contrived account of the circumstances of Warburg's death - which was altered in the memoir's second edition - is an indication of the degree to which the author's "personal reminiscences" relies on literary conventions.

Unfortunately, this hagiographic tone has found an echo in much of the Warburg scholarship that has appeared in the years since the publication of Ernst Gombrich's biography in 1971. But in Heise's case, we must understand the tendency to idolize Warburg's life and work from the perspective of his experience of Nazism and the particular circumstances in which the book was written. For Heise, Warburg was representative of the tradition of German humanism that Nazism had attempted to destroy. More than an expression of nostalgia for a world that was quite literally reduced to rubble around him, the author must have understood his efforts as the beginnings of an attempt to restore to memory, and thus to life, what the Nazis had attempted to eradicate. This would have assumed particular poignancy for someone who was himself forced from his museum directorship in Lübeck at the beginning of 1934 as a result of his penchant for modern art. Heise may well have anticipated more severe consequences in early 1945 if the manuscript been had discovered by the Gestapo. Given these experiences, and under these conditions, any distortions of Warburg's life are entirely understandable.

The editors of this third edition are aware of these facts. Their commentary does much to enrich a reading of Heise's memoir. Appended to the text is a short biography of the author; an account of the memoir's writing, publication and reception; a discussion of Gertrude Bing's unsuccessful, and Ernst Gombrich's successful attempts to publish a biography of Warburg; a collection of editorial notes which provide details of the current edition's preparation; and an appendix with three short documents from Heise's hand that are related to the principal text. In all of this, the editors prove themselves to be circumspect: they note the author's prejudiced perspective and emphasize that many persons and issues are omitted from his account; they indicate Heise's lack of clarity in respect of particular details, admit that the accuracy of portions of the narrative are in doubt and correct his memory as to the occasion of his last meeting with Warburg. The editors are also to be commended for the many footnotes which illuminate issues and events mentioned by Heise, direct readers to relevant literature and occasionally provide corrections to the text.

Yet the commentary is more documentary in nature than it is interpretive and analytical. From the most general perspective, the publication of a new edition of Heise's memoir would seem to offer the occasion for an exploration of the issue of biography in Warburg scholarship. The editors are clearly aware of the importance of this issue; they note that despite the turn from a biographical-historical perspective in Warburg scholarship, there are still echoes "of the dispute over the authentic image of Warburg and the adequate treatment of the biographical legacy" in much of the recent literature on his scholarly projects. (109) A more detailed reading of Heise's work and a discussion of its importance from this perspective would have been opportune.

This would require proper qualification of the editors' claim that Heise's memoir is one of the "most influential publications" on Warburg. (vii) It is true that much scholarship has drawn on Heise's anecdotes and that these have helped shape the manner in which Warburg's biography has been constructed. The editors are right to value the text for its preservation of information that would otherwise have been lost. (89)

But it is possible to overstate the value of Heise's reminiscences, in the terms employed by the editors, as "an authentic autobiographical - biographical source" born of the unusual friendship and student-teacher relationship shared by the two men. (vii) The book, they claim, is not a polemical publication "in which the author presents highly subjective assessments which are partly hidden and partly admitted." (viii) While this appraisal might have some value as an elementary manner of distinguishing Heise's book from much subsequent writing about Warburg, it is much too bold and un-nuanced a judgment.

Given that the editors are ready to acknowledge the fallibility of Heise's account, they may have also provided a more perceptive and subtler reading of his implicit assumptions and evaluative standards. This, it would seem, is an essential aspect of fulfilling the purpose which the editor's claim as a reason for publishing a new edition of his memoir: to demonstrate its importance as a literary and historical document. Doing this would also require a more complete assessment of the book from the perspective of the circumstances of its creation. Furthermore, the editors would need to come to terms with the fact that there is much in the text about the author's interests, education, and achievements. Perhaps the lesson learned from a more comprehensive historical approach to the text would be that it tells the reader as much about Carl Georg Heise - and the period of German history in which he was writing - as it does about Aby Warburg.

Recommended Citation:

Mark Russell: [Review of:] Heise, Carl Georg: *Persönliche Erinnerungen an Aby Warburg*, Wiesbaden 2005.

In: ArtHist.net, Sep 25, 2006 (accessed Nov 29, 2024), <<https://arthist.net/reviews/130>>.

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 International License. For the conditions under which you may distribute, copy and transmit the work, please go to <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>