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Retrieving Warburg's Tradition

There have been many re-evaluations of the golden age of German historiography in recent years, some receptive, some critical;¹ yet none as far as I know has been written from a feminist standpoint. One exception is Svetlana Alpers's essay 'Art History and its Exclusions', in which she argues that art-historical categories and judgements of value in the work of Wölfflin and Panofsky are based on the model of Italian Renaissance art which is characterized by 'a commanding attitude taken toward the possession of the world'.² More often feminist critiques have been directed at the tradition of the social history of art; witness, for example, Griselda Pollock's insistent objections to the work of one of the most eminent bearers of that tradition, T.J. Clark.³ And just as Pollock intends not to denounce social history but to free it from its masculinist fetters, so too my project has positive and negative moments. The focus of my critique is on the tradition of art-historical scholarship founded in Hamburg at the beginning of this century by Aby Warburg and Erwin Panofsky. Warburg, as one of the important founding fathers of the discipline, has attracted much critical commentary from many quarters. Nor, given the centrality of his position, should he be excluded from feminist reassessments. But, rather than criticizing, we may choose to enlist him as an ally. In the difficult task of elaborating a new art-historical methodology, his work might prove valuable, usable. The nature of Warburg's contribution can be best appreciated by setting it beside Panofsky's.

One possibly valuable dimension of Warburg's work is his implicit critique of the ideal of total detachment in either aesthetics or scholarship. He maintained a dialectical grasp on the need for distanced reflection and intimate connection. I want to develop this theme of detachment/connection, later introducing some related conceptual pairs: disembodiment/embodiment and homogeneity/heterogeneity. My claim is that Warburg's approach anticipates in many ways feminist critiques of science and phallogocentric logic.⁴ Although the polarities associated with that logic—mind/body, reason/sense experience, logos/pathos and so on—structure his work, they tend to lose any strict hierarchical ordering and become dynamic, dialectical polarities. In sharp contrast, the project of his illustrious 'follower' Erwin Panofsky

seems to have been to re-instate the original fixity of these oppositions. The same can be said of his biographer Ernst Gombrich, formerly director of the Warburg Institute in London. In their hands Warburg is deproblematized, becalmed, and his complex and conflicted theory of art turned into an unambiguous affirmation of Enlightenment ideals. If they can be said to carry forward Warburg's tradition, they do so in a way which perhaps reminds one that the word 'tradition' is etymologically related to the word 'traitor'. One might want to argue that there are good historical reasons for this tradition; namely, that Panofsky (1892–1968) and Gombrich (b.1909) are of younger generations and both became Jewish exiles forced out of their countries in the 1930s. Warburg died in 1929; only his library under the directorship of Fritz Saxl sought asylum in England in 1933. Yet Warburg suffered so dreadfully during the chaos of World War I that he had to be institutionalized for five years. He had reason enough to dread unreason.

Perhaps the clearest illustration of what I see as a defusing of Warburg's historiography in Panofsky and Gombrich turns on their conceptions of classical antiquity. It is well known that Warburg was deeply influenced by Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872) and by his radically new re-reading of Greek culture as a creative tension between Dionysian and Apollonian forces—one side dangerous, nihilistic, emotionally unfettered and physically in motion, the other side a beautiful and calm illusion which enabled the Greeks to live.⁵ Warburg thought of antiquity as best symbolized by a Janus-faced herm with the faces of Apollo and Dionysus. In Warburg's 1906 lecture 'Dürer and the Italian Antique', he directly attacks Winckelmann's 'one-sided classical doctrine' and argues that 'artists in fifteenth-century Italy sought as keenly after representations of intense pathos just as much as classically idealized calm'.⁶ In Panofsky's essay 'Albrecht Dürer and Classical Antiquity' (1921–2),⁷ which makes frequent reference to Warburg, a completely different gloss is put on antiquity's value. The 'pathos formulae', which for Warburg were exemplary expressions of primitive emotion and 'tragic unrest', become in Panofsky's scheme 'universals' which exemplify classes of particulars: 'Thus to have captured and ordered the multitude of phenomena is the eternal glory of classical art'.⁸ Further, 'typification necessarily implies moderation' and so 'there is no place for extremes'. He continues: 'Classical aesthetics insists on harmony and the mean'⁹ and affirms with Warburg: 'Nietzsche was right in stating that the Greek soul, far from being all *'edle einfalt und stille Grösse'*, noble simplicity and quiet grandeur, is dominated by a conflict between the 'Dionysian' and the 'Apollonian'.¹⁰ But he immediately defuses Nietzsche and Warburg by adding that in Greek art these principles are reconciled: 'In it there is neither beauty without movement nor pathos without moderation.'¹¹ While Panofsky continually interprets both antique and Renaissance art as an harmoni-

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ous reconciliation of opposites, Warburg sees antiquity as a cultural mint which coined enduring expressions of both sides of the opposition. His view of *Laocoön* as 'a vivid embodiment of dire human suffering' suggests that for him it represented not moderation but the very superlative of pain and tragic pessimism.¹² Panofsky's aim, here as elsewhere, seems to have been to turn Warburg's dynamic, conflicted, heterogeneous antiquity into an homogeneous, harmonious whole.

One can find evidence of a similar agenda throughout Gombrich's biography of Warburg. In the Preface, for example, he claims that Warburg in no way departed from the late nineteenth-century belief 'that the art of the Italian Renaissance, the art of Leonardo, Michelangelo and Raphael, was the visible expression of a supreme moment of human civilization—bordered on the one side by the barbarism of the bigoted Middle Ages and on the other by the deplorable excesses of Baroque rhetoric'.¹³ While it is true that Warburg acknowledged Raphael's achievement on more than one occasion, Gombrich's emphasis is insistently one-sided:

Though he saw the Renaissance as an area of conflict between reason and unreason he was entirely on the side of reason. For him the library he collected and wanted to hand on to his successors was to be an instrument of enlightenment, a weapon in the struggle against the powers of darkness which could so easily overwhelm the precious achievement of rationality.¹⁴

A fairer reading of Warburg would indicate his equal concern for the losses incurred by too much rational detachment from 'the powers of darkness', that is, myth, tragedy, emotion or what we might call the unconscious. In Panofsky, and even more so in Gombrich, the Apollonian and Dionysian appear as simple positive and negative poles, as good rational distanciation versus bad emotional abandon. On this reading, the Renaissance is understood as a triumph of distanciation from medieval superstition. Yet, in Warburg's account of the entry of classical antiquity into Quattrocento Italy, one of its heralds is the swift-footed Nympha who rushes in to disturb the staid company assembled for Ghirlandaio's *Birth of St John the Baptist*.¹⁵ This descendant of an ecstatic maenad or winged Victory flies in the face of such reductionist readings of the Renaissance.

Before moving on to more detailed contrasts of certain aspects of Warburg's and Panofsky's work, I want to locate my own methodological standpoint. I am guided in my reading by recent feminist, post-structuralist and psychoanalytic critiques of science which now amount to so considerable a body of literature that I cannot do justice to it here.¹⁶ Perhaps the best way to sum up the general drift of this literature is by re-telling the fable first told by a young woman in 1816, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. It is clear that Dr Frankenstein is meant to represent the thoroughly enlightened scientist who has turned away

with contempt from his childhood preoccupation with magicians and alchemists. His conversion is brought about in adolescence when he witnesses the terrible destructive power of a bolt of lightning which reduces an ancient oak to ribbons. Yet even before this supernatural sign of prohibition, he is explicitly contrasted with his 'feminized' friend Clerval who concerns himself with 'the moral relations of things',¹⁷ and who later in life studies Oriental languages and literature, 'so different', as Frankenstein remarks, 'from the manly and heroical poetry of Greece and Rome'.¹⁸ Completely on the side of the phallic principle, young Frankenstein is encouraged by his university professor 'to penetrate into the recesses of nature and show how she works in her hiding places',¹⁹ advice which repeats the sexually inflected discourse of science founded by Bacon and Descartes.²⁰ Scientific research is couched in the language of sexual transgression. So utterly demystified and secularized is the doctor's world that he is prepared to violate graves to further his study. Deferring his marriage, he creates life without the aid of woman. His creation, an unnamable Monster, returns with a vengeance like the repressed and eventually destroys him. Shelley herself made the connection between the single-minded desire for mastery of nature with overweening political ambition and colonial expansionism. Frankenstein, ruined by his own Promethean hubris, observes that if these desires had been tempered, then 'America would have been discovered more gradually, and the empires of Mexico and Peru had not been destroyed.'²¹ In this tragic parable Shelley links together a castrating trauma in youth, distance from familial ties, abstraction from ethical context, and overweening desire for knowledge as a means of wielding power and winning fame.

Frankenstein anticipates by nearly two centuries recent feminist and postmodernist reflections on masculinist technology and science and, further, does so in a way which points forward to a psychoanalytical model which underpins many of them. One such critic, Julia Kristeva, observes in 'Woman's Time' that because of certain bio-familial conditions and relationships, men tend to magnify both separation from the mother and the order of language into which they are inserted and, terrified, attempt to master them.²² Masculinity, then, is likely to have an obsessional character. This psychic propensity is mirrored in certain scientific epistemologies. In an article of 1973, Kristeva notes that theories of meaning or of representation are at a crossroads. Along one path they become increasingly technico-mathematical and, as she observes, based 'on a conception ... of meaning as the act of a *transcendental ego*, cut off from its body, its unconscious, and also its history'. Along the other path, however, they incorporate 'the theory of the speaking subject as a divided subject (conscious/unconscious) and go on to specify the types of operations characteristic of the two sides of this subject'—that is, both social constraints and pre-symbolic drives.²³ Within the

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body of feminist theory to which I have referred, a 'feminine' de-centred, situated, divided, overdetermined subject is set in opposition to a 'masculine' transcendental ego, which is theorized as having an autonomous, constitutive rationality. These two conceptions of the subject are, then, linked to different methodological approaches to the products of culture. My contention is that if Warburg represents the former of these tendencies within the discipline of art history, then Panofsky represents the latter.

Kristeva's observations are cast in a post-Lacanian framework, yet Freud said something very similar in his essay 'Some Psychological Consequences of the Anatomical Distinction between the Sexes' (1925). As a man of his time, Freud tended to have a high regard for the virtues of neutrality and distance and to ascribe them to men. He connected this ideal of rationality with the Oedipal moment when the child represses his love for his mother: he exchanges the physical proximity of the mother for identification with the position of the father whose law he must internalize in the shape of a severely critical super-ego. He is, so to speak, hollowed out and normalized. Freud thought that women, as they had nothing to lose, could not be threatened with castration and so did not suffer such severe repression. 'Their super-ego is never so inexorable, so impersonal, so independent of its emotional origins as we require it to be in men.'²⁴ It is possible to read this last description as a positive tribute to women, especially in the light of the writings of 'New French Feminists', such as Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous, who stress the virtues associated with being less cut off from the maternal body—flexibility, connection with others, embodied-ness.²⁵

The feminist critique of the ideal of detachment helps to explain why Warburg's art history is so sympathetic and fascinating; it stays so close to the emotional origins both of the art under study and of the interest of the art historian in the objects he studies. His work suggests a sensibility which remembers proximity to the mother, that is, the lack of differentiation between self and other; remembers the pain of separation. He sees the necessity of separation and also the impoverishment of a complete loss of contact which results in a hyper-trophy of the intellect. In the notes for his lecture on *Serpent Ritual* (1923) [Images from the Region of the Pueblo Indians of North America], Warburg meditates on the losses and gains of separation and repression:

The primeval category of causal thought is maternity. The relation between mother and child displays the enigma of the tangible-material connection bound up with the profoundly bewildering trauma of the separation of one living being from another. The detachment of the subject from the object which establishes the zone for abstract thought originates in the experience of the cutting of the umbilical cord.²⁶

In the Freudian scenario, the crucial separation is psychic and is effected by a threatened cut. Yet the ultimate consequence is the same for both: it splits the subject. Also in the notes Warburg writes: 'All mankind is eternally and at all times schizophrenic.'²⁷ The double need Warburg saw for connection and detachment is apparent in a passage from the lecture on Rembrandt in which he praises the artist's close contact with classical antiquity: 'May these tours through the semi-subterranean regions where the expressive contours of the mind are minted help to overcome a purely formalistic approach to aesthetics ... The ascent with Helios towards the sun and the descent with Proserpine into the depths symbolize two stages which belong as inseparably to the cycle of life as do the alternations of breathing.'²⁸

Warburg's tradition is understood to have been carried forward by Panofsky, yet to my mind the latter was the very model of the detached scholar, cut off from his body and unconscious. His early contact with the neo-Kantian philosopher Ernst Cassirer set the pattern. The tendency of his thought is evident in the 1920 paper 'Der Begriff des Kunstwollens', his critique of and appropriation of Alois Riegl, which sets out to find an Archimedean point, that is, a fundamental *a priori* concept outside the historical phenomena.²⁹ The concept would function in a way analogous to Kant's concept of causality which combines with necessity different presentations as it is part of the mind's contribution to experience. In Panofsky's 1921 'Proportion' paper, this Archimedean point comes to be associated with the achievement of a reflexive awareness of the nature of our knowledge, which combines both attention to the world and a recognition of the subjective conditions of perception—that is, experience as described by Kant.³⁰ For Panofsky, Renaissance art embodies this achievement; it is a synthesis of receptivity and spontaneity. A similar argument is mounted in the 'Perspective' paper (1924–25), to which I will return. In all these papers, Riegl's sliding scale between objective and subjective attitudes to the world, which was specifically elaborated so as not to privilege any period style, gets collapsed into a uniquely legitimate norm, and every other period is regarded as either approaching or falling away from it.³¹ Although Panofsky did not elaborate a theory of the subject, I am suggesting that his positing of an *a priori* schema and his privileging of a single aesthetic norm are bound up with the conception of a transcendental ego.

Another repeated motif in Panofsky's work confirms what I have said about the insistence on distance in 'masculinist' scientific discourses. One could cite many examples in his work of the principle that knowledge requires separation and distance. In his methodological manifesto 'History of Art as a Humanistic Discipline' (1940), for example, Panofsky wrote: 'To grasp reality we have to detach ourselves from the present.'³² He saw a parallel between the elaboration of

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systematic perspective construction in the Renaissance and the attainment of a truly historical point of view; both imply separation and objectification. This detachment may be tinged with hostility; in 'The First Page of Giorgio Vasari's "Libro"' (1930), Panofsky argued that it was precisely Vasari's antipathy to the gothic that enabled him to see it as a distinct style.³³ Or again, in 'Albrecht Dürer and Classical Antiquity' (1921-22), the German artist is said to have grasped more fully than the Italians the nature of classical antiquity because of his 'complete estrangement from it'. As a consequence of his remoteness, his attitude to classical art had to be that of a *'conquistador'*: 'It was for him a lost 'kingdom' which had to be reconquered by a well-ordered campaign.'³⁴ Oddly, Panofsky uses this unblushingly Eurocentric imagery again in his tribute to Warburg, comparing the group of scholars that he gathered around his library to a 'crew for his Columbus-ship'.³⁵ The point is clear enough: if something is to become an object of knowledge it must be split off from the subject and, if necessary, denigrated and conquered. It is rather as though one believed that the European colonizers of the New World were in the best position to understand native American culture.

Warburg, too, certainly saw the need for detachment. The first sentence of the introduction to his last, unfinished work reads: 'The conscious creation of distance between the self and the external world may be called the fundamental act of civilization.'³⁶ Yet for him, it is the constant oscillation between close identification with the object or its concrete representation and the abstractions of thought which is both our fate and our salvation. Art's history oscillates between moments of fusion and dissociation. For Warburg, *grisaille* is an example of a poise achieved between one extremity and another, and he is especially close to Nietzsche's vision of the artist in this: 'Even the image of the angry Achilles is only an image to him whose angry expression he enjoys with the dreamer's pleasure in illusion. Thus, by this mirror of illusion, he is protected against becoming one and fused with his figures.'³⁷ The consequences of one-sided rationalistic detachment which is not in this way dialectically related to fusion are most clearly spelled out in the 'Serpent Ritual Lecture' to which I will return. However, some measure of Warburg's dialectical grasp of our condition is contained in the following poignant sentence from that lecture: 'Human culture evolves toward reason in the same measure as the tangible fullness of life fades into a mathematical symbol.'³⁸

Because Warburg's interest was in following the oscillations of culture rather than in establishing an authoritative point of view, he focused on moments that were in a heterogeneous state of transition: the early Renaissance and the period of the Reformation in northern Europe. His interpretation of them tended to increase their heterogeneous quality; their incorporation of Oriental astrological belief and

imagery, for example, and the circulation of images between northern and southern Europe. His Quattrocento Florence could accommodate business-minded merchant art lovers, perfectly pious and yet also believers in the Fate of the ancients and the astrology of the East.³⁹ For Warburg, this *was* the Renaissance and not the resolution of a preceding state of conflict.

The library Warburg created was designed to encourage heterogeneity in scholarship, that is, to draw the reader away from a narrow specialization. He complained bitterly about disciplinary border police.⁴⁰ In a letter of 1927 he wrote: 'Not until art history can show ... that it sees the work of art in a few more dimensions than it has done so far will our activity again attract the interest of scholars and of the general public.'⁴¹ Yet it is doubtless his unfinished project for a *Bilderatlas* or picture book (1928–29), which has been variously called a 'pictorial symphony',⁴² a mosaic, a montage and even dadaistic,⁴³ that best sums up Warburg's extraordinary cast of mind. Gombrich relates how he kept on changing the sequence of the reproductions which he arranged on large screens without commentary or even captions;⁴⁴ even this non-discursive, non-linear form of expression seemed to him too rigid. And the pictures themselves mix classical sculpture and early Renaissance frescoes with pages of medieval manuscripts from East and West, cheap popular prints, calendars, astrological charts, tapestries, advertisements, playing cards, stamps and newspaper clippings. Part of the introduction to the Atlas, called the *Grundbegriffe* or fundamental concepts, reads like concrete poetry. Not even the project's title *Mnemosyne* was quite fixed; other ideas included *Gespensstergeschichten für ganz Erwachsene* (*Ghost Stories for Grown-ups*), and *Bilder Atlas zur Kritik der reinen Unvernunft* (*Picture Book for a Critique of Pure Unreason*).

Warburg's heterogeneity, his play with words and contradictions, stand in sharp contrast to Panofsky's high evaluation of systematicity and homogeneity. Panofsky once tellingly quoted from Goethe: 'The highest thing would be so to grasp things that everything factual was already theory.'⁴⁵ In other words, the world must be thoroughly absorbed and rendered thought-like. The achievement of the Renaissance was for him precisely its resolution of contradictions between things and voids, subject and object. This can perhaps best be seen in 'Perspective as Symbolic Form',⁴⁶ which has the added advantage in this context of bearing on the theme of embodiment/disembodiment as well. According to Panofsky, the history of conceptions of space as they appear in works of art and in documents shows how the raw material of experience has been systematically elaborated and how space has become a mental construction: 'For the structure of an infinite, unchanging and homogenous space, in short, purely mathematical space is directly opposed to that of psycho-physiological space.'⁴⁷

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The argument is supported by reference to Cassirer's second volume of *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*⁴⁸ on myth where he noted that perception is unacquainted with infinity and that psychologically relevant spatial relations—in front/behind, above/below, right/left—are not, like mathematical spatial relations, equivalent. Panofsky concludes, with Cassirer, that infinite, homogeneous space is not given in experience; it must be constructed and perspective construction 'abstracts fundamentally' from psycho-physiological space.⁴⁹ All this, and more, is brought in evidence against a naïve realist's view of perspective construction which might suppose that it represents the world exactly as we experience it; on the contrary, perspective is the culmination of a long history in which perceived space is systematically modified, mathematically corrected and thoroughly unified.

While one would not want to criticize Panofsky's celebration of perspective construction in the name of some romantic notion of immediate sense experience, it is still worth observing that he values it because all the coordinates of space which pertain to the body are expunged while those relating purely to thought instated. Troublesome oppositions or contradictions in earlier spatial organizations are transcended in the purely mathematical conception of space which is later theoretically elaborated by, for example, Descartes.

Panofsky concludes that systematic perspective opens up the possibility for post-Renaissance styles to take advantage of its two-sided significance. Because perspective both recognizes the distance between mind and things and overcomes that distance 'by drawing into the eye, as it were, the independently existing world of things',⁵⁰ artists can move with great flexibility between one possibility and the other.

So the history of perspective may be understood with equal right as a triumph of the distancing and objectivizing feeling for reality and as a triumph for the distance-denying human struggle for power; equally well [can it be understood] as a fixing and systematizing of the external world as an extension of the ego's sphere.⁵¹

Although this sounds superficially like a Warburgian 'two-sided' formulation, in fact both sides of Panofsky's polarity dominate the object—one by studied distance, the other by overwhelming force. Warburg's polarities, on the other hand, are always structured around active and passive positions: domination and submission, 'calm contemplation' and 'orgiastic surrender to the emotions', 'murderous cannibalism' and 'helpless brooding'.⁵²

In the 'Perspective' paper, the intellectual ideal of distancing is given a theory of vision in which measured distance, fixity, monocularity and mastery define the spectator who looks out on a space/object which is rectilinear, abstract and uniform. In a suggestive article called 'Scopic Regimes of Modernity', Martin Jay points out that this kind of

vision is 'conceived in the manner of a lone eye looking through a peephole' and goes on to say that 'the abstract coldness of the perspectival gaze meant the withdrawal of the painter's emotional entanglement with the objects depicted.'⁵³ The spectator becomes a disembodied point of sight, abstract identity, and the body of the other is subsumed under a generalized conception of 'extended substance'.⁵⁴ While Warburg's 'vision' can be understood as situated, shifting, tentative and partial, just like embodied perception, Panofsky's ideal is locked into a fantasy of a fixed and universalizable point of view.

Warburg also gave a socio-political dimension to the dialectic of fusion and detachment. He saw advanced technological progress as a creature of enlightened rationality which threatened to bite its own tail. This he discussed in 'A Lecture on Serpent Ritual' which was written and delivered in 1923 at the end of his stay in the institution where he was being treated for his mental illness. In it he brought his polarities to bear on the culture of the Pueblo Indians whom he had visited in 1896 and on the modern American culture which was overwhelming it. He was sharply critical of the latter.

The forces of nature are no longer seen in anthropomorphic shapes; they are conceived as an endless succession of waves, obedient to the touch of man's hand. With these waves the civilization of the mechanical age is destroying what natural science, itself emerging out of myth, had won with such effort—the sanctuary of devotion, the remoteness needed for contemplation.⁵⁵

It is interesting to compare this with the ideas of another thinker, Walter Benjamin, who also made use of the metaphors of proximity and distance, drawn from Riegl, and who likewise observed the way in which technology abolishes distance.⁵⁶ Benjamin, however, unlike Warburg, perceived a revolutionary potential in the shock of the new media. But in the passage I have just quoted, I do not think that Warburg is only referring to new media or, as Gombrich thinks, merely expressing his distaste for the wireless.⁵⁷ Just before the passage I have quoted, he describes a snapshot he took in San Francisco of a man in a top hat, whom he calls 'Uncle Sam'—the personification of the United States. He is the conqueror of the Serpent cult and of the fear of lightning, the heir to the original inhabitants, the gold-seeking intruder in the land of the Indians, proudly striding down the road in front of an imitation classical rotunda with an electric wire overhead.⁵⁸ It is not a flattering portrait. 'Uncle Sam' is aggressive and materialistic and his art and architecture are imitative, cut loose from their source, hollowed out. 'Electricity enslaved, the lightening held captive in the wire has produced a civilization which has no use for heathen poetry.'⁵⁹ Modern science and technology, which at first created the necessary distance for thought, 'Denkraum', ends up by destroying that 'Denkraum', the saving interval between impulse and action, not to mention the very life of

another culture. Warburg comes close here to articulating the paradox of civilization so forcefully described in Adorno's and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*:

Myth turns into Enlightenment, and nature into mere objectivity. Men pay for the increase of their power with alienation from that over which they exercise their power. Enlightenment behaves toward things as a dictator toward men. He knows them in so far as he can manipulate them.⁶⁰

Warburg saw that the progressive march of modern civilization is accompanied by destruction, not only of indigenous cultures, but of the conquering culture as well. This happened, he thought, because technology, unlike the symbol, is one-sided; it so completely controls its object that distance quickly degenerates into demonically possessed domination. The essay closes, however, on a hopeful note: 'Myths and symbols, in attempting to establish spiritual bonds between man and the outside world, create space for devotion and scope for reason which are destroyed by the instantaneous electrical contact—unless a disciplined humanity re-introduce the impediment of conscience'.⁶¹