The Edgar Wind Journal

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Reflections on Edgar Wind

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Abstract

This brief review delivered at the launch of *Edgar Wind: Art and Embodiment* (Trinity College, Oxford, 10 April 2024) discusses Wind's role in the transfer of the Warburg Library from Hamburg to London in 1933 and his quarrel with Fritz Saxl in 1945. It also considers Wind's reflections on encyclopaedism, the example of Athenaeus's *Deipnosophistae* and the consequences of Wind's 1945 refusal of the directorship of the Warburg Institute.

Keywords

Warburg Institute; Encyclopaedism; Athenaeus; Chastleton; Sibylline Oracles

My connection to Edgar Wind (1900–1971) hovers on the fringes of Mnemosyne. As a first-year student of Classics in 1958, like everyone else in the University, I was swept up in the enthusiasm for the lectures of the new Professor Wind, the first Professor of the History of Art – identical lectures given twice weekly in the Playhouse Theatre because there was no university lecture room large enough to contain the crowd. I must have attended the course on Leonardo, though I do not recall its contents. For the first time, my studies in the Classics began to make sense. Subsequently, for my first prize as a student of ancient history in 1960 I chose Wind's *Pagan Mysteries of the Renaissance* (first edn, Faber 1958), which I still possess, embossed with the crest of Exeter College, Oxford. Subsequently in 1967–8 almost a decade later, thanks to my supervisor Arnaldo Momigliano, without knowing anything of Wind's connection with the Warburg Institute, I was elected to a three-year Senior Research Fellowship at the Warburg. This was the golden year of my life, when I spent every day lunching with the director Ernst Gombrich, D.P. Walker and my especial favourite scholar, Frances Yates;[1] watching the silent refugee scholars Otto Kurz and A. A. Barb and communing in the corridors of the library with my contemporaries Michael Baxandall, Michael Podro and the young Liz McGrath. After a year, with intense regret, I departed for a Fellowship at Balliol College, Oxford, as the necessary permanent post for a young scholar with a family. Subsequently, I recall a party in Trinity College, Oxford given by Margaret Wind on her late husband's birthday. She

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[1] A decade later, I met Frances Yates in Duke Humfrey in the Bodleian; she smiled at me and at the ancient chained books around, and said 'Heaven will be like this'.

confided to me that its secret purpose was to celebrate the centenary of his birth; so that dates it to the year 2000.

Despite these tenuous connections, it seems to me that my life has been bound up in mysterious ways with Edgar Wind. In the final lecture of his Reith Lectures of 1960, now recovered from the BBC archives, Wind discusses the relationship between belief and the will: 'I might wish … that I might meet Mozart or David Hume in the street, but it is beyond my power to believe in any such thing; and no effort of the will can change the fact that my belief on these points is settled.'[2] Fortunately, this observation does not hold for the world of dreams, for the last time I met Edgar Wind was in February 2024. I was fulfilling a lifelong ambition, staying in the luxury parador hotel on the Alhambra Palace hill in Granada that now occupies the monastery of San Francisco, founded by the *Reyes Catolicos* after they had finally evicted the last Arab ruler from their kingdom in 1492.

My dream within a dream was appropriately vivid. Wind appeared younger than I remembered, more like the photographs of his youth. It was an evening garden party, and we talked about the rescue of the Warburg from Hamburg in 1933; he confirmed my belief that he was indeed the chief negotiator of the transfer of the Warburg to London; that it was he, not Fritz Saxl, who had attended the crucial first meeting of the Academic Assistance Council at which it was decided in principle to assist this transfer and that it was he who as assistant director had been instrumental in settling the Warburg into its new home.

We moved on to the reason why his role in this transfer had been written out of the official account of the rescue of the Warburg, as a result of his quarrel with Saxl in 1945, when Saxl came to the United States, apparently to offer him the directorship of the Institute as his successor. This had been the greatest desire of both Wind and Saxl, but the discussions revealed fundamental differences between the two men that had evolved during the long war years. Saxl wanted the Institute to continue as a home for the expatriate scholars who had taken refuge there during the war years, and most of whom were now established with permanent posts in research often far removed from the interests of the founder of the library. In contrast, Wind had a vision for a renewal of the founder's aims through the creation of a research institute in the humanities of the type of the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton, founded in 1930. Wind may well have wished to remodel the staffing of the Institute in pursuit of this aim: he was certainly not prepared either to serve as an assistant to Saxl, or to take nominal charge with his predecessor ensuring continuity as an *éminence grise*, or indeed to accept the demotion and serious loss in salary that would ensue from moving to post-war England.

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[2] *Art and Anarchy* lecture 6 (18 Dec 1960); see Jaynie Anderson, 'Understanding Excessive Brevity: The Critical Reception of Edgar Wind's *Art and Anarchy*', in *Edgar Wind: Art and Embodiment*, ed. by Jaynie Anderson, Bernardino Branca and Fabio Tononi (Peter Lang, 2024), pp. 353–84 (353 n.1). The printed version is slightly different: *Art and Anarchy* (third edition 1985), p. 75.

But beyond these practical and organisational difficulties, it seems that there existed a fundamental disagreement over the nature of the cultural aims of Aby Warburg's foundation. Saxl had arrived in the United States with a proposal to embed the Warburg in the existing positivist tradition of British culture by establishing as one of its aims the organisation of medieval and renaissance scholarship into a mighty encyclopaedia modelled on the venerable nineteenth-century *Realencyclopädie der klassischen Altertumswissenschaft*, known as 'Pauly-Wissowa' – an alphabetical inventory of facts and ideas typical of the nineteenth-century obsession with tabulating information in an accessible form.

This positivistic travesty of the aims of the founder was the opposite of the ideas of Aby Warburg and what Wind had come to believe was the essence of encyclopaedism. Elizabeth Sears quotes his view that had evolved over the period in the USA:

> The general public and the majority of scholars are equally unaware of the great tradition associated with the institution and the very name of Encyclopaedias. Contrary to the common belief that an encyclopaedia is nothing but a handy though somewhat bulky instrument of reference, consisting of articles alphabetically arranged and therefore without any connection between them, the word *encyclopedia* originally meant 'education in a cycle (or circle)' and referred to a harmonious organization of knowledge in which the different disciplines, reflecting and utilizing one another, were grouped around a common center. From classical antiquity down to the early Nineteenth Century this encyclopaedic tradition (in the original sense of the word) underwent a great variety of transformations but persistently reasserted, throughout all its changes, the underlying principle of a common 'universe of knowledge'.[3]

It is not surprising that the two men could not agree on the future of the Warburg Institute (although indeed Saxl's proposal was ultimately stillborn).

Until I read Sears' chapter in *Art and Embodiment*, I had not realised how far my own course as a scholar had reflected the preoccupations of Wind. She refers (p. 301) to his proposal for a series of books of 'Encyclopaedic Studies', one of which was to be written by F.M. Cornford on 'The Greek Symposium and its Relation to the Encyclopaedic Tradition'. Some seventy years after Wind's formulation, I was indeed led to consider the organisation of the chief literary source for my research on Greek drinking customs, the massive compilation of the early third century AD known as *The Deipnosophistae* of Athenaeus.[4] This long work survives almost complete in a single manuscript that was brought to the west by Cardinal Bessarion in 1423 and now resides in the Biblioteca Marciana in Venice. The manuscript itself is a fascinating survival because it is taken from a

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[3] Elizabeth Sears, 'Edgar Wind and the "Encyclopaedic Imagination"', in *Edgar Wind: Art and Embodiment*, pp. 299–328 (299).

[4] 'Athenaeus the Encyclopedist', ch. 25, in Oswyn Murray, *The Symposion: Drinking Greek Style* (Oxford University Press, 2018) = *Rivista storica italiana*, 126 (2014) pp. 689–720.

late ninth-century copy by John the Calligrapher, whose marginalia show clear evidence of the structure of the original author's manuscript.[5]

This massive work (originally fifteen 'books', each split between two papyrus rolls) purports to be the record of an interminable *symposion* or dinner party of learned scholars, who quote (often at great length) passages now mostly lost from works that go back through a thousand years of literary culture to the origins of Greek civilization with Homer. The vast proportion of our modern collections of fragmentary lost works of Greek lyric, elegiac and comic poetry derive from this learned compilation, which rightly or wrongly gives a sympotic flavour to the whole of Greek culture.

But how is it organised? The rather perfunctory framework of a literary dinner continually breaks down, the contributors are for the most part not given convincing characters, and the fiction of the record of an imagined dinner party is only superficially maintained. This is not a record of a real event, but an encyclopaedic collection of quotations. How I asked did the author imagine his readers navigating it in order to find any particular desired quotation; for Athenaeus clearly expected his readers to find his book useful as a reference source, and indeed we know of one contemporary (Aelian) who did so use it? Most scholars had ignored this problem and simply quarried the text for their own purposes of compiling collections of lost works; they had assumed that Athenaeus was a mechanical compiler copying out hypothetical lost intermediary works in an almost random manner. But this completely failed to explain how the book could have emerged as a coherent set of quotations in which there was no repetition and in which the majority of the quotations were grouped into thematic sections.

In investigating the underlying structure, I was led to consider the principles behind the organisation of ancient encyclopaedias and books of quotations. The alphabetical system of modern works of reference creates a total incoherence of subject matter: nothing is connected with anything else, and it presupposes the existence of books with pages and perhaps indexes rather than papyrus rolls or other forms of record. The ancient world required meaningful structures.

In *Les mots et les choses*, Michel Foucault begins from the uselessness of alphabetical ordering and quotes an imaginary Chinese encyclopaedia invented by the comic fantasist J. L. Borges, whose categories explode the trivial ordering of words and things in our own culture. And in reflecting on this, I came to the conclusion that alphabetism is a cultural disease, a form of isolation and fragmentation, and a way of making a civilisation or a tradition meaningless. True encyclopaedism is originally, as Wind saw, a way of making sense through the ordering of events.

My conclusion was that like many other works of information in the ancient world Athenaeus himself had structured his information in order for it both to make sense and

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[5] Murray, *The Symposion*, pp. 344–45.

to offer an Ariadne's clue to the reader in order to guide him through the use of the work. The ordering was in fact that of an ancient meal: each topic was taken up at the appropriate point in an imagined feast. This explained both the logic of the order and the reasons for various omissions in the coverage of the work. Moreover, the imagined framework was not that of a classical Greek *deipnon* and *symposion*, but that of a Roman banquet of the imperial period, in which the appropriate order was the appearance of food as successive dishes; the rhythmic structure was that of the slaves clearing away and replacing the dishes, until finally the guests departed to their respective homes accompanied by torches. Nothing was out of place, and the reader would be able to locate every significant passage by reflecting on its gastronomic place in the ordering of a feast. Indeed, this natural ordering of his universe by Athenaeus lay at the foundation of, and was the originator of, most subsequent gastronomic literature, which even today in our modern cookery books follows the order of the meal, from soup to fish to meat and vegetables, sweets, with bread and wine fitted in as appropriate. This was a meaningful encyclopaedia in the sense of Edgar Wind, embedded in social and conceptual practices and giving cultural meaning to the ordering of knowledge. Here lay the future of any work of reference created in the tradition of Aby Warburg.

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One of Edgar Wind's most problematic and controversial theories was that formulated in his article for the *Proceedings of the British Academy* for 1965, which had always puzzled me.[6] What is the programme behind the appearance of Michelangelo's sibyls and prophets in the cornices of the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel? This became for me a pressing problem when in retirement I served as a guide at the Jacobean country house of Chastleton, built shortly after 1600 by the parvenu and immensely wealthy lawyer Walter Jones.[7] The main entertaining room, the Great Chamber on the first floor, was decorated with a rather amateurish set of alternating sibyls and prophets (possibly disordered at some point in their history). Surely this had nothing to do with the Sistine Chapel series; yet did it not suggest the existence of a conventional iconographic tradition common to both the Vatican Chapel and the English country house?

This problem led me to discover the book of Jessica Malay published in 2010, *Prophecy and Sibylline Imagery in the Renaissance*,[8] which is a model account of the sibylline tradition in western thought. In her detailed iconographic and literary research, she provides the perfect example of the analysis of a true *engramma*. Malay shows how Varro's original account and naming of the ten sibyls of the classical world was picked up by Lactantius and transmitted to Saint Augustine in his *City of God*. The Christian tradition

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[6] Edgar Wind, 'Michelangelo's Prophets and Sibyls', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 51 (1965), pp. 47–84.

[7] See Oswyn Murray, 'Ireland Invents Greek History: The Lost Historian John Gast', in *The Muse of History* (Allen Lane, 2024), pp. 63–93.

[8] Abingdon: Routledge, 2010.

had recognised the parallel between these ancient prophets, who through Virgil's Fourth Eclogue had prophesied the coming of Christ, and the twelve canonical prophets of the Old Testament. This was a common comparison throughout the Middle Ages. Under the influence of this parallel Varro's ten sibyls were increased to twelve by the time of Filippo Barbieri 's book of 1481, *Sibyllarum et prophetarum de Christo vaticinia*[9] in time to be a commonplace in the age of Michelangelo and Julius II in 1508.

An actual Greek collection of the *Oracula Sibyllina* was published by Xystus Betuleius in 1545 and more authoritatively by Sebastian Castellio in 1555; and it began a great controversy as to their genuineness. Johannes Opsopoeus, in his *Sibillina Oracula* (Paris, 1599), already believed them spurious; finally, Isaac Casaubon, in his refutation of Cesare Baronio's *Annales Ecclesiastici*,[10] proved them to be a Jewish-Christian compilation from ca. 180 BCE to late antiquity, down to the 640s and the Arab conquest.

Despite this controversy, sibyls proliferated in Shakespearean England under Queen Elizabeth and King James I. Macbeth's witches were sibyls, and they were all over Elizabethan literature. The Chastleton Great Chamber images belonged to a set of pictorial representations common in Jacobean England that derived from Michael Droeshuit, *XII Sibyllarum Icones* (1610–20), who had in turn borrowed from engravings by Crispijn de Passe (The Netherlands, 1601); the sibyls were common decorations from 1611 to the 1630s.[11] So there is nothing odd or esoteric about this combination of sibyls and prophets, but a question remains: Why were there seven prophets and five sibyls in the Sistine Chapel? Surely this implies an unsuitable iconographic choice. Admittedly there were only twelve available positions, but why not divide them equally? In his long and learned article, Wind connected the selection with Savonarola and the circle of Julius II. Now Bernardino Branca has offered a brilliant analysis in terms of the *Pathosformeln* of Aby Warburg.[12]

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What would have happened if Wind had accepted the offer of the directorship of the Warburg Institute in 1945? He was a difficult man – how difficult is shown by the collection of his slides in Oxford's Department of Western Art. As the first Professor of the History of Art, Wind insisted on creating a collection of old-format glass slides in black and white because he believed that colour seduced the viewer by its beauty into ignoring the iconological significance of images. In the age of photographic transparencies

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[9] Malay, *Prophecy and Sibylline Imagery*, p. 52.

[10] *De rebus sacris et ecclesiasticis exercitationes XVI* (London, 1614). See A. Grafton, *Defenders of the Text* (Harvard University Press, 1991), pp. 172–77.

[11] Malay, *Prophecy and Sibylline Imagery*, pp. 146–48, discusses sibyls at Cheyney Court in 1611, at Wester Liviland in Stirling in 1629 (now in the National Museum of Scotland), and in Buntisland, Scotland. She also mentions a set acquired by Edward Alleyn (now in the Dulwich Picture Gallery) and, of course, the series in Chastleton Great Chamber.

[12] Bernardino Branca, 'Edgar Wind: Metaphysics Embodied in Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel Ceiling', in *Edgar Wind: Art and Embodiment*, pp. 187–219.

and, subsequently, internet Powerpoint presentations, these slides rapidly became completely useless; requiring an obsolete form of projection they were already becoming difficult to use at the time of creation, and are now under threat of destruction as the Art History Department moves to smaller premisses.

Could the Warburg have survived in London under the reign of Wind? The personalities of Wind and Saxl had become antipathetic. Eric Warburg's 'official' account of the transfer of the Warburg Institute to London[13] was accepted by Ernst Gombrich in his official biography of Aby Warburg; but, as Edgar Wind suggested in a famous review in the Times Literary Supplement, Gombrich's book is worthless.[14] Fortunately, we now have the exemplary biography of Hans C. Hönes to lead us through the tangled paths of Warburg's thought.[15] But the role of Edgar Wind in the history of the transfer of the Warburg Institute still needs to be corrected, as I tried to do once again in my chapter.[16]

Hidden in the collection of essays that we are celebrating is an intellectual tragedy – the conflict between English positivism and continental idealism. This conflict is only now being healed by the efforts of Italian scholarship from Venice University in the website *Engramma* run by Monica Centanni,[17] and of course by *The Edgar Wind Journal.*

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[13] Eric M. Warburg, 'The Transfer of the Warburg Institute', *The Warburg Institute Annual Report 1952–1953*. This account appears on the website of the Warburg Institute.

[14] Edgar Wind, *The Eloquence of Symbols* (Clarendon Press, 1983), pp. 106–13.

[15] Hans C. Hönes, *Tangled Paths: A Life of Aby Warburg* (Reaktion, 2024).

[16] Oswyn Murray, 'Edgar Wind and the Saving of the Warburg Institute', in *Edgar Wind: Art and Embodiment*, pp. 275–97.

[17] Monica Centanni (ed.), *Aby Warburg and Living Thought* (Ronzani, 2022).

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