



A STUDENT OF RHETORIC. THE FIELD OF ART HISTORY: FROM CURTIUS TO PANOFSKY

Posted on March 1, 2024 by Marc Fumaroli



Marc Fumaroli (1932–2020) was a leading French historian who greatly advanced our understanding of art, rhetoric, culture and all those by-ways of culture which gird Western civilization. He taught at the Sorbonne and then at the Collège de France and was member of the French Academy. He was the recipient of the famed Balzan Prize, as well as many other honors. This paper was delivered at the *Panofsky Symposium*, Princeton, on October 2nd, 1993. Philippe-Joseph Salazar [introduces us to the master himself](#), whom he knew well.



It is sometimes necessary to come back to the original and seminal texts. It is a principle of philological wisdom which may be welcome in a Panofsky symposium. I shall therefore begin this tribute to the Princeton master with two quotations from very famous texts, whose literal meaning is often obscured or forgotten. The first one is the main source of 20th century modern Art theory: Guillaume Apollinaire's *Les Peintres cubistes*, 1912. We read there:

"Avant tout, les artistes sont des hommes qui veulent devenir inhumains. Ils cherchent péniblement les traces de l'inhumanité, traces que l'on ne rencontre nulle part dans la nature. Elles sont la vérité, et en dehors d'elle nous ne connaissons aucune réalité."

This sort of sublime and compelling utterance, which has thrilled several European generations, has today lost its immediate power. But I want to quote in chronological disorder, an even more famous text, dating back to 1637, which is found in Descartes' *Discours de la Méthode*:

"Ceux qui ont le raisonnement le plus fort, et qui digèrent le mieux leurs pensées afin de les rendre claires et intelligibles, peuvent toujours le mieux persuader ce qu'ils proposent, encore qu' ils ne parlissent que bas-breton et qu' ils n'eussent jamais appris de rhétorique".

Both these texts may be superposed. They have, each on their own level, a common summoning content. The *tabula rasa* presupposed by the Cartesian Ego is no less radical than the methodic *inhumanité* Apollinaire required of the creative self. Cartesian or Apollinarian modernity supposes the elimination of memory, and of rhetorical invention founded upon a shared *sensus communis*. This

superposition has abrasive potentialities which are today all around us. I dare to say that "we" (in a commonsensical meaning alien to the "nous" of Apollinaire in 1912) are more inclined to agree with the scholar who published in 1940 *The History of Art as a Humanistic* discipline, than the imprudent, if great poet, who invited artists to become inhuman before the two world wars had taken place!

It took thirty years before *The Meaning in the Visual Arts* reached the French public, in Bernard Teyssèdre's translation, in 1969. When I read it for the first time, I was struck by footnote 18. There Panofsky quoted at length a Letter to the Editor published in the *New Statesman and Nation*, in June 1937. Written by an English Stalinist, this letter considered that it was morally sound that Stalin should fire from Russian Universities professors who insisted on teaching Plato and the classics of Western philosophy. This sort of teaching according to this moralist, was aimed at barring students an immediate and fresh access to the study of Marxism, the modern scientific truth. Panofsky contented himself with the following brief comment:

"Needless to say, the works of Plato and other philosophers also play an antifascist role in such circumstances, and Fascists too recognize this fact."

Twelve years earlier, there appeared the French translation of a book which, in the field of literary studies, has had a decisive impact upon my generation: *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, by Ernst Robert Curtius. In the Preface to the 1953 German edition (the second one) Curtius wrote:

"This book doesn't content itself with scientific purposes; it attests a concern for maintaining Western civilization."

And further, the great German Romanist, Curtius, quotes Georges Sainsbury's sentence:

"Ancient without Modern is a stumbling block; Modern without Ancient is utter and irremediable foolishness."

Recently I happened to read the unpublished, pre-World War Two correspondence, between Curtius and a French lady poet, Catherine Pozzi. It throws an extraordinary light upon the genesis of the Curtius' masterwork, and its philosophical significance. Curtius, who did his best since 1918 to awaken the French from their own nationalist conceit, is just as indignant about the so-called Nazi national

revolution in Germany. He describes with a stern lucidity the budding lawlessness of the new regime and its cynical violence. But he is a scholar, not a hero, and he wrote in 1933:

"Je fais un cours sur la littérature latine du Moyen Age qui m'intéresse passionnément... Je suis lassé de toute modernité. Les siècles obscurs me reposent... Je me tapis dans mon coin. Le présent me dégoûte. Je ne désespère pas de l'avenir. Il nous apportera de nouvelles révélations de beauté et de bonté. Mais vivrai-je pour les voir? La beauté créée ne vaut-elle pas mieux? Mais comment y atteindre?

A spark disturbs our cloud. But at
present I realize more the cloud
than the spark."

The reading of this correspondence makes clear what an immense labour of hope and love this European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages, started as an University course in 1928-1929, had been until the end of World War Two. When it appeared in German, in 1948, dedicated posthumously to Aby Warburg and to the great Romanist Gustav Grober, it looked like a dove above the ruined landscape of Europe. In his correspondence with Catherine Pozzi, Curtius mentions on several occasions their common friend James Joyce, then working on *Finnegan's Wake*. He says to his correspondent that this new novel in order to be correctly understood, will require a full acquaintance with Giambattista Vico's *Scienza Nuova*. This first-hand information is retrospectively illuminating for me. When I first discovered Curtius' masterwork, at the beginning of the Sixties, I was engaged in reading Vico's Opening Lecture, *On the Study Method of Our Time* (1699), where the Neapolitan humanist launches his first fierce attack against the excesses of Cartesianism, and defends the traditional primacy of rhetoric in the teachings of the humanities. Without being fully aware then of the issues at stake for us in these 17th century debates, I was nevertheless struck by the correspondence between Vico's thesis, and the role a philologist like Curtius attributed in his masterwork to rhetoric as the frame for the correct reading and understanding of Western Literature. And when at last I had the opportunity to read, in the early seventies, Panofsky's *Meaning in the Visual Arts*, I was ready to recognize the methodological kinship between the two German scholars—Aby Warburg's disciple and Aby Warburg's friend—who since the thirties had worked on both sides of the Atlantic, and Vico, whose *Scienza Nuova* is after all the Italian seed of German romantic historicism. I am personally convinced since then that this alliance between the Warburg school, the best of German Roman philology, and the most able spokesman for the Ancients in the 18th century, has been in our century the only spiritual home and pledge against the dominant anti-humanist trends at work in the modernist poetics of Apollinaire, as well as in the Cartesian *Cogito*. I should like to ponder upon this alliance today. There is more here, I think, than a

nostalgic and respectful glance to the past and its scattered achievements: I see there a living moral and scientific force, a spark illuminating our own clouds.

So, before assessing how Panofsky's method may be fused, without losing its own sharpness, with the same field of reunified and enlarged humanities as that of Curtius, I should like to recall briefly the latter's originality and enduring contribution to literary studies. I hope that this suggestion of synthesis will be attuned to this symposium, and to our guest's expectations, Professor Irving Lavin. I cannot forget that he has himself pointed out the same direction in his excellent Washington lecture: *Art History as a Humanistic Discipline*.

Nineteenth century positivism, the radical heir of Cartesianism, has split academic literary studies and teaching between *res* and *verba*. *Res*, related to the outside world, was left to biographical and referential research; *verba*, related to the subjective talent of the author, was left to stylistical and philological scrutiny. This split reflected the Cartesian division between the knowing subject, related to positive science, and the sensitive or irrational one. The task of the literary historian was therefore to separate the expression of the subjective self, from the objective facts to which this expression may be related. Rhetoric was rejected from literary studies on the double grounds of a formalist hindrance to free subjective expression, and of an archaic cloud obscuring scientific truth. Curtius took a contrary stance, following the path opened up by Norden and Dilthey. He discovered—or rediscovered—that the Cartesian division between *res* and *verba* was not applicable to the *res literaria*. In the rhetorical regime of literature, *res* and *verba*, invention and style have been, in the Western past as in the contemporary most self-conscious writer, James Joyce, a continuum, not two ontologically different realms. *Res* were themselves language constructs in time, which have their home in collective memory, their kernels in classical texts, and their structure in the "places" among which rhetorical-literary invention moves in order to find the proper contours of the thing it has to say or write; order and style gave to the matter thus gathered the appropriate form in order to exert an effect upon the auditor or the hearer. *Res, res literaria*, were therefore forms of human experience accumulated and ordered by a collective and proleptic memory; it was there that the inventive *ingenium* had to journey before finding the right response to its own challenge, in prudent agreement with contemporary commonsense. This rhetorical artistic *ingenium* is not alienated, as the Cartesian *raison* or the Apollinarian *génie*, from its natural and social embodiment: it possesses the mnemonic resources to shape itself into a human form. Literature is the most complex and complete use of the rhetorical *ingenium*.

A friend and client of Carl-Gustav Jung, Curtius became a friend and admirer of Aby Warburg in 1928.

He attended in the winter of that year, in Rome, at the Hertzian Library, the famous Warburg's lecture about the great project Mnemosyne. Warburg died the next year. But Curtius, who had been enthusiast of the project, never forgot this decisive meeting. He found in the topoi re-used often with striking originality by medieval and Renaissance writers, the equivalent of Jung's archetypes, of Warburg's mythical places of memory, and of Vico's *universali fantastici*, a vast and relatively autonomous frame of symbolic forms where the poetical, philosophical and social experience of the West, has been treasured and ever renewed since Antiquity. Even style, the persuasive new form that this mnemonic fount of accumulated wisdom has to receive in order to find new effectiveness, had its own objectivity and relative transcendence from circumstances and whims. Curtius enucleated in the medieval "longue durée," what Vico called *corsi* and *ricorsi* of classic and mannerist styles, the first moulded on a few models of naturalness, the second eclectic and above all virtuoso, up to the point of ostentatious artificiality. Why can this rhetorical tradition be called humanist? Curtius hated the insipid and goody-goody abuse of the word. He insisted that humanist literature deserved this name because it was founded upon well-tried precedents crystallized in symbolic forms and classical texts, and confronting through them the past experience of humanity with the new, contemporary one. Time transfigured in Space was the compass of European wisdom. Antihumanism, either in the Cartesian school of modernism, or in Apollinaire's, abstracted human reason or unreason from any reliance on the scale of wisdom summarized and symbolized in the literary tradition.

Far from being limited to medieval Latin Europe, this rhetorical approach, and the method of study it implies, could, and has been since Curtius, extended to Early Modern and Modern literature. If today we expect a renewal of literary studies in France, after the failure of the so-called *sciences humaines*, it will obviously be in the Curtian line. I am happy to say that I work in perfect intellectual agreement with Curtius' best pupil, Harald Weinrich, who is German, and despite his nationality, if I may use that very inappropriate clausula, my full-time colleague at the Collège de France.

Why does Art history, as exemplified by Panofsky's *Meaning in the Visual Arts* relate so naturally with literature history as exemplified by Curtius' *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*? This is the question which haunted me since my first reading of Panofsky, and it is, I think, a good question to raise today if we agree that, at the end of this century, when the modernist credo has become less credible, the future lies in a wise reunification and renewal of the humanities.

It is not so much, in my view, their common philological and critical exactness, nor their common use of definite concepts, like classic and mannerist, that resume the kinship between Panofsky as Art historian

and Curtius as a historian of Literature. It may be correctly assumed that this common ground of textual *acribia* was the general heritage of European and German Roman philology. What brings them so close, in spite of their specialized fields, visual images and literary texts, is their common rupture with the positivist assumptions of modern history and philology. This positivist rationalism could easily be associated with nationalism, which is absent in the generous Romanist Curtius and is subtly derided in Panofsky's polemics, for example when he stresses the indebtedness of Albrecht Dürer's classicism to Quattrocento Italian artists. The anti-positivist stand, in both Panofsky and Curtius, is manifest above all in their common reliance upon rhetorical notions in describing and understanding the working of the topical and inventive imagination. Both, before any theory, were magnificent performers of what they tried, as historians, to resurrect. Curtius, not only in his correspondence and essays, but in his scientific work as well, is a foremost and virtuoso writer. Panofsky's own humanity combines moral insight and literary grace: he knows not only how to prove, but how to revive the contradictory human facets of his subjects, their natural evidence. In his magnificent piece about Suger, Panofsky exposes the elusive personality of the Abbot of Saint-Denis to the proof of the different places of human experience, character, temperament, national type, social *persona*, culture, taste, and his narrative synthesis, imbued with humour and sympathy, equals the art of the best *novelists* by its power of bringing alive a superb example of balanced and ogival humanity. It is a scientific, literary and moral portrait, it is history, it is history of art, at their best at one and the same time. But Panofsky's rhetoric was inseparable, like Antique and Renaissance rhetoric he understood as few other did, from the philosophical quest for truth. This philosophical background, far from being impaired by literary skills, is serenely asserted in the concluding chapter of *The Meaning in the Visual Arts*. Cassirer's friend quotes Goethe and Kant, and locates himself in a tradition of thought which goes back to Cicero's New Academy. This tradition allows him to relate artistic and literary invention to the same memory. This memory, vital and ideal at the same time, harbours symbolic forms which may be mirrored in texts as well as in visual works, and generate plastic or literary eloquence. Humanistic emblematic language combined both regimes of expression. The memory-imagination is a store of "universals" which are not deduced from reality, by discursive abstractions, but give form and meaning to nature, through intuitive synthesis. This harvest of mnemonic forms allows a mutual understanding and a reciprocal stimulation between inventors of texts and inventors of images. It implies, between literary texts and visual images, rhetorical operations such as transposition, interpretation, variation and combination.

The description Panofsky gives of the genesis of Dürer's etchings or drawings does not rely only upon logical deductions: it reconstructs the poetic logic of imaginative invention, according to the four major rhetorical figures: metaphor, metonymy, catachresis, and irony-allegory. The last chapter of *The Meaning* is the birthplace of Panofsky's major achievement as a philosopher-historian of art: *Idea*, a

book that fortunately reached France much earlier than its belated translation, in 1983, may let us to believe this. The influence of this book on French literary studies cannot be overstated. It has merged with the influence of the Latinist and Romanist Alain Michel, who has renewed Ciceronian studies along the same line as Panofsky. Since the 19th century the major role of Cicero in the Western tradition has been generally understated, notably in France. Cicero has been viewed as a rhetorician and a translator: he could not be an original thinker. Michel has shown that the Ciceronian synthesis of rhetoric and philosophy, of Aristotle-ism and Platonism, was an original Roman achievement, and a fertile and enduring one. We may now trace, through Renaissance and Renascences, *corsi* and *ricorsi*, the seminal and central function of Cicero in the development of Western thought, literature and arts. Vico's *Scienza Nuova* has been, in full Quarrel between Ancients and Moderns, the most powerful re-assertor of this humanist tradition. What Panofsky's *Idea* revealed to us, was the pregnancy of this tradition and its fertility in European Renaissance Art. Aristotelian pragmatism combined with Platonic idealism, according to the liberal Ciceronian synthesis, allowed experience of the phenomenal world to be enlightened and shaped by proleptic Forms, themselves inherited from the collective experience of Western humanity. These Forms are not a logically deduced system, but a Theater of memory where ingenious invention may find the matter and the models of new ideas, responding accordingly to time, person and place, in the everchanging world of human history. Panofsky insisted upon the aesthetic flexibility of the Ciceronian philosophic rhetoric, able to sustain as well classicism as mannerism. He showed convincingly its liberal and shifting fecundity, capable of thinking unity and multiplicity at the same time. But what emerges from Panofsky's *Idea*, as well as from recent French studies on rhetoric, is the common ground that this new understanding of Ciceronism offers for literary and artistic studies. Modern Art theory, in spite of its debt to a poet, Apollinaire, has insisted upon the unbridgeable gulf between plastic and literary forms, between the visible and the word. This view, in a less systematic version, was not unknown to the rhetorical tradition. It is a founding presupposed principle of Ciceronian rhetoric, reasserted by Vico, that human experience ranges well beyond language, and that by its multifaceted and ingenious figures rhetorical invention essays what escapes unilateral words. The visual arts therefore offer another order of figures able to mean what is beyond the reach of words. But artistic invention, unless it claims to be creation *ex nihilo*, is no less rhetorical than that of the orator or the poet. Their invention draws upon a common mnemonic world of "places," and symbolic forms, mapping the multiple richness of human experience. And their style, through metaphorical transpositions, may be tasted and evaluated according to analogous standards. At least if we intend to reconstruct the meaning of works, literary or visual, invented according to these rhetorical assumptions, we may and we must learn again how a Rubens painting could resound with Seneca's Stoic amble or Ovid's Epicurean savours. Panofsky's own literary learning and sensitivity plays a major part in his reconstructing the full intended meaning and aesthetics effects of Old Master works.

There are, in the Western tradition, departures from the main Ciceronian line. Panofsky, like Curtius, was perfectly aware of this. Curtius has devoted brilliant pages to the theological domination of 12th and 13th century learning. Panofsky has devoted a major book to the scholastic background of the invention of gothic style. The Cartesian Ego, which pretends to do away with rhetoric, has been the cornerstone of a new rationalist rhetoric, which has been immensely productive, and which is the background of neo-classical aesthetics. The Rimbaudian *Je est un autre* is no less rhetorical, as Apollinaire's *Peintres cubistes*, a topical and tropical text, shows abundantly. But even these departures and ruptures can be measured and understood in relation with, or in reaction against, the main liberal tradition of the West, which after all is best qualified to understand the whole gamut of the human experience, since its central assumption is the infinite variety of humanity and of its access to form in different times, places and persons.

I apologize for this rather too allusive apologetics for a prospective *Scienza Nuova* of which Panofsky and Curtius have been the forerunners in this century. I would have preferred to content myself with listening to the discourse that the greatest French Warburgian, the late André Chastel, should have delivered today in this room. I hope I have been faithful to the living and burgeoning legacy of these Masters.

Marc FUMAROLI

(last corrections made on September 22, 1993)
