

Ouroboros The Circle as a Concept of Infinity

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Warburg, the snake and ancient Egypt

At first sight, our joint topic has little to do with the work and thinking of Aby Warburg.¹ As far as I know, the emblem of the Ouroboros has never attracted his attention. Although he had a keen interest in form, the formal perfection that the ancient Egyptians achieved in creating and mastering their specific cultural style may even have had a cooling effect on him. Warburg looked for the hot sources of energy behind cultural forms and artistic expressions, pointing to the effort and labour in the process of domesticating the affects and reaching formal solutions which, for him, retained marks of this very struggle. Perhaps the ancient Egyptians had effaced the traces of this struggle too efficiently to stimulate Warburg's interest.

In spite of this, let me try to reconnect our topic of the Ouroboros with Warburg's life and work. In the immediate vicinity of the city of Konstanz, where I am coming from, Warburg spent three influential years of his life in the Ludwig Binswanger clinic in Kreuzlingen, Switzerland, where he recovered from psychic attacks after the Great War. In his famous "Kreuzlingen Lecture" (1923), a self-assigned task to test his intellectual sanity, he presented ideas that he had hatched for a long time, going back to memories of an early research trip to Pueblo Indians in Arizona and New Mexico. The center of this visit was a snake ritual that was performed as part of a local festivity in the cycle of seasons. Warburg witnessed in these rites the transformation in which the power of the snake, celebrated as the most important and most demonic source of energy, was tamed for the benefit of the community. In his lecture, Warburg traced the snake back to texts from the Bible in the story of Adam and Eve and the miracles performed by Moses to classical sources relating to Laocoon and Medusa, emphasizing the continuity of its negative and terrifying influence.

For Warburg himself, the snake embodied demonic forces lurking as an ongoing residuary in the deepest layers of human psyche. He considered this layer to be

¹ Cf. the paper by Jan Assmann in this issue of *Aegyptiaca*.

productive as it provides a basic energy of culture and the perennial creative spirit, but was also convinced that it must be tamed, as it carries a threatening and destructive force. Warburg confronted the snake that the Indians associated with the destructive impact of lightning with Benjamin Franklin's and Uncle Sam's lightning rod representing the victory of human reason and technology over these primordial forces. This line of progress, however, remained for Warburg a highly ambivalent achievement, because in overcoming the dark forces of human existence, it also liquidated the resources of the creative spirit, the arts and culture.

Unfortunately, Warburg was not interested in Egypt and its culture, although the recovery of Amarna, Akhenaten and Nefertiti was a spectacular event that had mesmerized in the early twentieth century a trans-national public. The history and culture of Egypt, however, lay outside his frame of interest, which was confined to a history evolving over three steps:

- 1) the so called "primitive" oral cultures that recently came into the focus of new scholarly attention through the new discipline of ethnography
- 2) pagan antiquity, represented by the classics of Greece and Rome, and
- 3) modern European and Western culture from the Renaissance to the present day.

We can only speculate why Warburg was not attracted to Egypt. One reason may have been that it did not fit into his frame of history. Another reason may have been that in Egypt, the primordial force of the snake was fully controlled and transformed from the very start in manifestations of religious and political energy. It was present in the Uraeus-snake projecting from the crown of pharaoh spitting venom, but this aggressive potential was used for a strictly apotropaic function.

Egyptian culture abounds in snakes; they are so varied and multifarious that no single study so far has been dedicated to their overwhelming presence. If such a comprehensive Egyptological study is still lacking, it is for the obvious reason that there is just too much material: snakes in Egypt are all over the place. One of them—and this is my transition to our topic—is the Ouroboros. The Ouroboros did not quite fit into Warburg's system of bi-polar forces; in the shape of an emblem, it presents the mystery of overcoming the destructive force of a snake without neutralizing its power. In this ambivalent shape, it found its way into Western tradition where it challenged binary forms of thinking.

The Circle and the Line

In sharp contrast to the Egyptians' perennial image of the snake biting its own tail, Western thinking was dominated by the dichotomy of the circle and the line. In the line and the circle, two different qualities of time are symbolized: the first one alludes to things and phenomena that appear and disappear in a linear succession, while in the other everything recurs in the guaranteed regularity of recurrence and repetition. These two symbols proved amazingly productive wherever thinkers reflected upon the relationship between time, eternity, nature and history.

It was the Greek physician Alkmaion who started such a discourse with his impressive statement about the dual character of time: "Men die", he speculated, "because they lack the power to join the beginning to the end."² Death obviously has another meaning in the natural world than in the world of man. Nature is the realm of continuity and duration, because the emphasis lies not on the existence of individuals, but rather on the continuity of the species. Human time, on the other hand, sees individual death as a final break; it departs from the reproductive cycles of nature and takes on the form of a straight and irreversible line.

In the mid-eighteenth century, the English poet Edward Young returned to the pair of the circle and the line, when grieving the loss of various family members and seeking consolation in writing a long poem. In this private process of mourning, Young created a poem in which he drew on a tradition of philosophical and melancholic meditations. He compiled these in his cycle of poems titled *Night-Thoughts*, which focuses on the age-old questions of human existence, time and death.³

² Quoted in Karl Jaspers, "Existential Philosophy", trans. R. F. C. Hull and Grete Wels, in Wolfgang Schirmacher, ed., *German 20th Century Philosophical Writings* (London: Continuum, 2003), 140.

³ Edward Young, *The Complaint, or: Night-Thoughts on Life, Death, and Immortality* (London: Dodsley and Cooper, 1743).

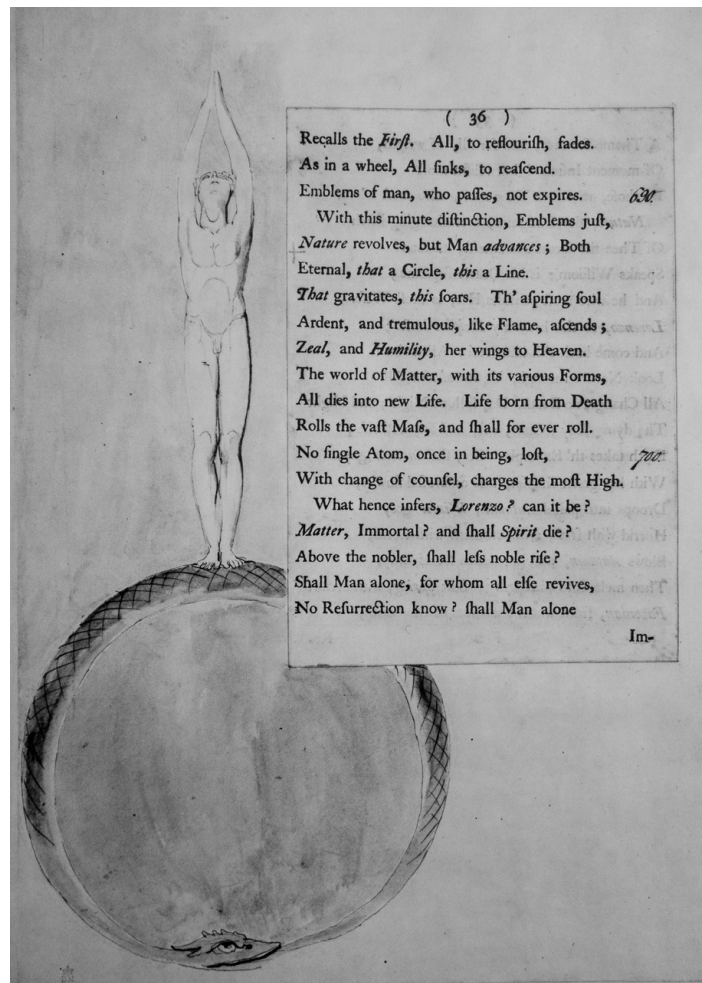


Figure 1: William Blake's design for Edward Young's *Night thoughts*, chapter VI, verses 677–97, according to Grant, *William Blake's Designs* (cf. note 5).

In the sixth night of his literary meditation, he elaborates on the relationship between the circle and the line:

Look Nature through, 't is revolution all;
All change, no death [...]
[...] All, to reflowerish, fades.
As in a wheel, all sinks, to reascend.
Emblems of Man, who passes, not expires.
With this minute distinction, emblems just,
Nature revolves, but Man advances; both
Eternal, that a circle, this a line.
That gravitates, this soars. Th' aspiring soul
Ardent, and tremulous, like flame, ascends;

Zeal, and Humility, her wings to Heav'n.
The world of matter, with its various forms,
All dies into new life.⁴

Young's *Night-Thoughts* soon became a European bestseller. The Romantic poet and painter William Blake later illustrated and immortalized the symbols of circle and line in an impressive constellation. In this image, the circle is represented as an Ouroboros. In this illustration, both principles are closely related and are given a new meaning in the spirit of the Enlightenment. The circle now stands for the eternal cycle of the emergence and passing of material life, while the line stands for movement, progress, and transcendence. We are no longer dealing with an opposition between nature and man, but rather with the opposition between matter and spirit as two components of human nature. After death, these two elements fall apart. In his and her material nature, man continues to participate in the cyclical dynamics of nature, which constantly renews itself. At the same time, in his and her spiritual nature, humans rise above matter and strive for eternal transcendence (figure 1).

Following the tradition of Horapollo and his Egyptianesque hieroglyphs, Blake gave these highly abstract philosophical and metaphysical thoughts a visual and sensuous shape.⁵ He contrasted the dark figure of the Ouroboros with the stretched shape of a light skinned youth whose feet are placed on the serpent while his outstretched arms reach up into the air. His shape resembles the form of an arrow or a flame. Both components of the human being, matter as well as spirit, are released after death to join their destined elements and respective eternities, one in the cyclical movements of nature, the other in the lofty sphere of the sky.

⁴ Edward Young, *The Complaint, or: Night-Thoughts on Life, Death, and Immortality*, ed. Charles Edward De Coetlogon (London: Chapman, 1765), chapter VI, verses 677–97, 148–9; see also:

<https://ia800304.us.archive.org/28/items/nightthoughtsonl00youniala/nightthoughtsonl00youniala.pdf> (accessed June 6, 2019).

⁵ William Blake, *Illustration to "Night-Thoughts"*, chapter VI, verses 690–2; plate VIII, in H. B. De Groot, "The Ouroboros and the Romantic Poets: A Renaissance Emblem in Blake, Coleridge and Shelley", *English Studies: A Journal of English Language and Literature* 50 (1969): 553–64, here 560. John E. Grant, ed., *William Blake's Designs for Edward Young's "Night Thoughts": A Complete Edition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980).

Circles in Motion

When, in the first half of the nineteenth century, the American philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson discovered the circle as a key symbol of his world view, he endowed this old symbol with an entirely new meaning. Emerson translated what was once a Platonic symbol of perfection, unity, and eternity into a symbol of movement, transcendence, and renewal (figure 2).



Figure 2: Variations of the Ouroboros symbol, cf. the paper by Jan Assmann in this issue of *Aegyptiaca*.

“Look Nature through” Edward Young had recommended, for whom divine creation as an open book, the reading of which can be quite profitable:

Nature [...] to Man
Speaks wisdom; is his oracle supreme;
And he who most consults her, is most wise.⁶

100 years after Young, the American philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson, who was also a parson, supported the same Romantic tradition but gave it a new twist. In his essay *Circles* (1841), he introduced the figure of the circle, which also for him was no longer a geometric form, but rather a natural phenomenon and experience. The essay begins with this powerful sentence:

⁶ Young, *The Complaint* (1765 edition, see note 4), chapter VI, verses 672–4.

The eye is the first circle; the horizon which it forms is the second; and throughout nature this primary figure is repeated without end. It is the highest emblem in the cipher of the world.⁷

Emerson's symbol of the circle is based on the human act of seeing. The iris is a circle and the horizon of the field of vision forms another one. Emerson's circle is a symbol for the structure of perception, experience and revelation. It is not an offspring from geometry and the Platonic tradition, where it is a symbol of perfection, unity and eternity, instead, it is an offspring from Christian mystical traditions: "St. Augustine described the nature of God as a circle whose centre was everywhere, and its circumference nowhere." What is remarkable about Emerson's use of the divine emblem of the circle is anything but stable. It appears and disappears again before our eyes; it is a transient symbol of imperfection, which stands for the insight that nothing is complete in itself and "that every action admits of being outdone".⁸

Instead of looking at the circle from the outside, Emerson places himself within it. Through his gaze, his perspective, and his horizon, this thinker has always been part of a universal dynamism. Furthermore, Emerson no longer speaks of the circle, but rather of circles (plural). For Emerson, there is no circle that can be fixed, since "around every circle another can be drawn".⁹ The symbol that he envisions appears on the surface of water when a stone is thrown into it. Whatever has been discovered, researched, experienced, known, or believed, allows for another discovery, experience, knowledge, or belief: "there is no end in nature, but every end is a beginning."¹⁰ This sentence recalls the axiom of the philosopher Alkmaion. What cannot be achieved by men can obviously be achieved by nature: it joins together the end and the beginning. Nature exists in the mode of eternal transformation. According to Emerson, this pattern should also be copied by culture, since every human achievement, every spiritual position can be exceeded by another. Emerson thus sees in the circle not eternity and repetition, but rather permanent change. It stands for the restricted human horizon, which is, however, continuously transcended and expanded by other

⁷ Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Circles" (1841), in Emerson, *Complete Works* (London: Bell & Daldy, 1866), 125–34, here 125 see:

http://digital.onb.ac.at/OnbViewer/viewer.faces?doc=ABO_%2BZ257535401&order=9&view=SINGLE.

⁸ Emerson, "Circles", 125.

⁹ Emerson, "Circles", 125.

¹⁰ Emerson, "Circles", 125.

visions. History is driven by precisely this power to transform and renew the given.

Emerson speaks in the context of his philosophy of history not of “progress”, but rather of the “mysterious ladder”,¹¹ on which man can rise vertically, in much the same way as the human spirit in Blake’s illustration. Thus, for Emerson, the figures of the circle and the line do not stand in opposition to one another, but are closely connected to each another. He saw himself at an historic turning point, at which the light of culture in Europe faded and dawned auspiciously in America. Across the Atlantic, the light of old Europe had faded and been rekindled anew in the US. One movement was connected to the other, as Emerson was convinced that “the new continents are built out of the ruins of an old planet”.¹²

Recycling: culture as memory and palimpsest

A strong normative orientation towards progress receded and the vision of an ever better future faded with a growing awareness of the ecological crisis. This had immediate consequences for the use of age-old symbols. As it turned out that not only human resources were limited but also those of nature, this also affected our age-old symbols. Not only the line of progress disappeared from the scene, but also the circle changed its meaning; the generating principle and unlimited reproductive power of the circle was replaced by the concept of recycling. Memory and the past became new topics during the last decades of the twentieth century. The spirit of general exhaustion was expressed in the trope of the “end of history”. The disenchantment concerning permanent growth and innovation led to a new interest in the past and memory. Baudrillard declared that “nothing of what was considered to be historically obsolete has really disappeared”. This was the beginning of the new interest in recycling: “All the archaic, anachronistic forms are there ready to re-emerge, intact and timeless, like the viruses deep in the body. History has only wrenched itself from cyclical time to fall into the order of the recyclable.”¹³ After the end of cyclical history came linear history, and after linear history the circle reappeared, but this time in the new shape of recycling. The growing importance of recycling as a creative

¹¹ Emerson, “Circles”, 127.

¹² Emerson, “Circles”, 125.

¹³ Jean Baudrillard, *The Illusion of the End*, trans. Chris Turner (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), 27.

artistic strategy rests on a new time regime, the most important strategy of which is to level and de-dramatize the difference between the old and the new. In the modern time regime, opposing the new to the old was the first commandment in a cultural, scientific, technological and artistic process. The leveling of this basic distinction was accompanied by a discarding of paradigmatically modern concepts such as originality, genius and innovation. In art, the strategy of bricolage has replaced the myth of the *creatio ex nihilo* (or *ex genio*). Post-modern works of art, which were backed up by a new aesthetics of memory, tended to display acts of recycling of older patterns and materials and the structure of the archive in highly self-conscious and often playful ways.

The modernist concept of culture-as-history was transformed into a post-modernist concept of culture-as-memory. In this process, linear temporal structures of evolution and innovation give way to spatial models of simultaneous coexistence. Many theorists of memory from Freud to IT-specialists hold the view that though much in it is displaced, buried, forgotten and repressed, nothing is totally lost.

This material cultural memory is highly fragile, however, not only because it is always threatened by natural destruction, but also by war and other acts of power and violence. The historical horizon of the cultural archive, as Orwell reminds us in *1984*, shrinks dramatically under totalitarian rule, which always aims at a homoeostasis between the present and the past. In such a state, only that segment of the past is stored and preserved which can legitimize the present constellation of power. It is interesting to note that artists under Stalinist rule such as Ossip Mandelstam had already developed visions of an extended cultural memory of humanity.¹⁴ They assembled and constructed a cultural memory that transcended the constraints of political censorship. It was under similar conditions in the Moscow of the 1960s that the artist Ilya Kabakow discovered trash as a secret and hidden form of the cultural archive. The following passage is his description of the dump of Moscow as an alternative cultural memory and the possibility of recycling and “resurrection” under the imminent threat of total extinction:

The world which I saw already in a retrospective glance, seemed to me like a huge dump. I wandered myself around the dumps of Moscow and Kiev; they are smoking hills composed of everything, reaching to the horizon. When looked at

¹⁴ Ralph Dutli, *Europas zarte Hände. Essays über Ossip Mandelstam* (Zürich: Ammann, 1995).

form a distance, this is the trash, the dirt, the refuse of a huge city. But when examined more closely, when wandering around in it, you discover that this huge heap breathes in a majestic way, that it is still animated by all the past life, that this hill is full of sparks which resemble stars, stars of culture. You recognize the remains of books, a sea of journals, in which photographs, texts and ideas are hidden, as well as objects that once were used by someone. Thus an enormous past is opened up behind all these boxes, bottles, sacks, behind all the packages, which were once needed by human beings. They have not yet lost their forms, they did not die when they were thrown away, they are a cry of the life that still inhabits them.¹⁵

The Circle as a Symbol of a Higher Reason

In 2016, the film *Arrival* by the Canadian director Denis Villeneuve was released in cinemas. It is based on the short story *Story of Your Life* (1998) by Ted Chiang and belongs to the genre of science fiction. In this case, however, no spectacular battle takes place between mankind and aliens, but rather something quite different becomes the focus of attention, namely the problem of contact, of translation, and thus the issue of the (im)possibility of communication between two incommensurable worlds.

The leading figure of the film is female, which already indicates that, here, it cannot be primarily about strategic stealth and an outbidding of powers. The protagonist is a linguist and is equipped with an almost fantastical knowledge of all human languages and an expertise in semiotics. Together with a colleague, she is given the task of deciphering the language of the aliens and communicating with them in order to better react to their intentions. The so-called heptapods consist primarily of two feet with six toes each. They have landed simultaneously on twelve planets, and have conveyed mysterious messages that must be deciphered. Everything thus depends on reacting appropriately to these messages and establishing contact with the aliens. Time pressure arises from impatient politicians, who would prefer to solve the problem not with signs, but rather with the strength of their weapons.

The first premise of the scientist is that these alien beings must have a language—and, linked to this, also a form of writing—in order to understand

¹⁵ Ilya Kabakow, *The Garbage Man* (Oslo: Museet for Samtidskunst, 1996), 141–3.

each other. Contact is initiated, according to the elementary rules of politeness, with a self-introduction. By painting the letters of the alphabet onto large signs and compiling words, such as HUMAN, and then pointing to herself and her partner and pronouncing the names of the two human communication partners, the scientist provides the aliens with initial insight into the human system of signs. The response to this is spectacular: the aliens accept this offer of communication and secrete curious signs from their toes with the help of an ink-like fluid. With this, an intensive deciphering process begins—under the constant pressure of the politicians, who are planning a military operation.

Yet the film breaks with the antagonistic patten of the conventional narrative of science-fiction films by setting the stage for a sign-theoretical—and thus also, at the same time, political—and philosophical problem. It demonstrates the key importance of communication and international cooperation, which can secure peace and the survival of mankind in the age of the information society.

The problem of deciphering an alien sign system simultaneously leads to the fundamental question regarding higher forms of reason. At this point, the sign system of the heptapods, the basic element of which is a circle, now comes into play. All significant differences, on which a sign system depends, are inscribed by the aliens onto this basic structure of the circle. The preliminary work for this film idea was quite complex: together with his author, Eric Heisserer, the director Villeneuve developed a sign system for the aliens with more than one hundred different logograms (figure 3).



Figure 3: *Arrival* (USA 2016, directed by Denis Villeneuve).

Each of these signs, with which the aliens communicate, is based on the circle, a structural order that differs substantially from the linear structure of the alphabet and human speech sounds. Whereas man can only express himself discursively within a chronological sequence based on the dimension of time, with the help of the circle, the aliens are able to communicate in a synchronous order, within which there is neither a beginning and end, nor a before and after. They thus prove themselves to be beings of a higher reason, which, speculatively speaking, humans could conceptually and theoretically attain, but which, as a temporally organized being, they could not practice themselves.

In fact, the opposition of temporal and transtemporal or timeless experience is an age-old theme within the Western tradition. In John Milton's epic poem *Paradise Lost*, the same question as in the film *Arrival* is already posed, because here Adam and Eve benefit from being able to communicate with angels, who are, of course, equipped with a higher reason and supernatural vision:

Immediate are the Acts of God, more swift
Then time or motion, but to human ears
Cannot without process of speech be told [...].¹⁶

To differentiate between human and supernatural perception, Milton referred to the contrast of the "discursive" and the "intuitive" that had been introduced by Plotinus.¹⁷

The Egyptian sages did not use written characters, literally representing arguments and premises and imitating meaningful sounds and utterances of axioms. Rather, they wrote in pictures, and engraved on their temples one picture corresponding to each reality [...]. Thus each picture is a knowledge, wisdom [...] perceived all at once, and not discursive thought or deliberation.¹⁸

The director of the film did not pick up on this old European tradition of thought, as he was probably unaware of it. In contrast, in interviews he explicitly refers to contemporary mathematical and physical theories, which are based on the boundaries of human reason and strive to transcend these. He is obviously

¹⁶ John Milton, *Paradise Lost* (London 1667), book 7, verses 176–8; see also http://www.dartmouth.edu/~milton/reading_room/pl/book_7/text.shtml (accessed June 6, 2019).

¹⁷ In his text in the present publication, Jan Assmann quotes Marsilio Ficino's comments on this passage in Plotinus's treatise.

¹⁸ Plotinus (Enneads V 8, 6, 1–9), quoted in Pierre Hadot, *Plotinus, or the Simplicity of Vision* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 40.

less interested in philosophical speculations than in scientific experiments. With his film, he strives to build on the theory of Relativity and other alternative logics, which he also partially finds in Indian traditions of thought. This hypertechnical and transcultural approach fits very well with the digital information age, in which computers have long since achieved a capacity that surpasses human reason. This raises the fundamental question as to whether mankind is not now also on its way to making an evolutionary leap, which could greatly expand its cognition. The linguist in the film makes this leap. She gains a form of perception that transcends time, in which the past, the present, and the future flow together at once. The film demonstrates that it can be liberating to look beyond the boundaries of death; but it also demonstrates that the knowledge of future suffering alienates the bearer of this knowledge from other humans and leads to a melancholy form of isolation.

The history of the Ouroboros is itself a never-ending story, which was incorporated into Western tradition under new auspices and, as I wanted to show, is still continuing. From early on, the circle and the line have replaced the Egyptian Ouroboros in Western thinking, but the Egyptian symbol has remained a normative orientation for those who aimed to transcend in their speculation the established frames of Western rationality.