

# JOURNAL OF INTERDISCIPLINARY HISTORY OF IDEAS



2023

Volume 12 Issue 24  
Item 9

– Section 2: Reviews –

Book Reviews

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JIHI 2023

Volume 12 Issue 24

Section 1: Articles

Special Issue / Numero spécial: On Nature and Property

1. *Introduction* (R. Míguez Núñez)
2. *On Universalizing Nature and Property: the Unravelling of a Master Narrative* (M. Graziadei)
3. *A Kaleidoscopic Reflection on Territory and Property: Histories, Cultures and Inequalities* (P. Urteaga Crovetto)
4. *Nature, Bodies, and Land: Reframing Ownership and Property in Early Modern Spanish America* (M. Bastias Saavedra, A. Rodríguez Sánchez)
5. *Les vagabonds. Entre humains, chiens et loups* (S. Vanuxem)
6. *Propriétarisation: la voie pour une gestion raisonnable et durable de la nature?* (P. Crétois)
7. *Inappropriate Nature: Natural Resources as Common Goods* (I. Ortiz Gala, C. Madorrán Ayerra)

Section 2: Reviews

8. *History, Interests, and Groups: Some Remarks on Two Recent Books on Adam Smith; Essay-Review* (M. Santarelli)
  9. *Book Reviews* (V.M. Di Mino, E. Pasini)
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# Book Reviews

V.M. Di Mino, E. Pasini

*Reviews of Menin*, *Il sole nero dei lumi*. Sade filosofo, *Carocci 2023*; Despoix, K. B. W.: La Bibliothèque Warburg, laboratoire de pensée intermédiaire, *Les presses du réel 2023*; Caleb Clanton & Goode, eds., *Great Ideas in History, Politics, and Philosophy*, *Baylor UP 2021*; Brzezinski Prestes, ed., *Understanding Evolution in Darwin's "Origin": The Emerging Context of Evolutionary Thinking*, *Springer 2023*.

**1** MARCO MENIN, *Il sole nero dei lumi*. *Sade filosofo*, Roma: Carocci, 2023, 326 p., € 29.

The French 'Sade-Renaissance' of the 1950s and 1960s, undertaken by prominent intellectuals such as G. Bataille, P. Klossowski, M. Blanchot and R. Barthes, restored dignity to the work of the 18<sup>th</sup>-century intellectual, disengaging him from censure and moral judgments, putting artistic status back at the center of discourse and giving theoretical and literary dignity to the writings of the Marquis himself. These authors, while connecting the erotic imagery unleashed by Sade's works to the libertarian and youthful drives emerging at the heart of European and Western societies, did not delve into its deeply philosophical dimension. Sade's reflections, in fact, are crucially rooted among the grooves of Enlightenment discourse, a 'minor enlightenment' that does not live by the reflected light of reason of Kantian memory but feeds on the multiple facets of the material dimension of human action, especially its disturbing and deviant variants. Menin's book is concerned with unearthing this terrain, highlighting similarities and differences between the Enlightenment mainstream of Diderot and Voltaire, the materialist mainstream of Helvetius and D'Holbach, and the alternative and antagonistic mainstream of Sade. For Menin, Sade is an intellectual affected by the cultural spirit and, ambiguously, the social and political drives of his time, which he rereads, reworks and systematizes in a mutant work that is equally public and obscure. This can be seen as the first paradox of

the author Sade, whose analytical heart is aimed at the liberation of passions—even the most destructive ones—and bodies from the cloak of clerical morality and prevailing philosophical respectability, whose biography speaks of sexual events and practices closely intertwined with narrative elaborations, and who politically turns out to be a moderate, fearful of Jacobinism and the strength of popular societies, skeptical of the republican form that France had taken. Nonetheless, the vitalism in the pages of the Marquis is affected by the enthusiasm and fears in the French streets and squares; indeed, the monstrous allegory of the Politician enacted in *The 120 Days of Sodom* represents both the metahistorical and transcendental force of Power as an element with which to produce obedience through violence and humiliation, and the freedom of the body as an element exceeding established power relations and capable of imagining other forms of subjectification through sexual practices. The Sade enigma, simultaneously monster of instrumental rationality, explorer of deviance, enthusiast of freedom, represents an analytical laboratory with which to read, from a different angle, a specific phase of French (and European) thought through the extreme limit represented by the Marquis.

The book is divided into four chapters in which Menin, in addition to offering a biographical profile of the French author, analyzes him by following the theoretical declinations present in his literary work, analyzing his thought in relation to the different articulations of the Enlightenment and in relation to materialism, highlighting its anthropological and pedagogical nature, the open subterranean connections with atheism, and the pursuit of happiness as a properly ethical and moral element.

Menin defines Sade's work as a philosophical novel, in which narrative elements are hybridized with more properly philosophical themes as dialogues between characters. The primary questions of morality, ethics and passions are reworked alongside a changing and iridescent literary subject, such that it does not constitute an original philosophy per se, but serves as an innovative articulation of an existing philosophical matrix, from which the French writer draws heavily. In this context, both the 'forbidden' and 'honest' writings and the theater are pieces of a picture in which the sovereign individual, the epicenter of the Sadean cultural device, is exposed in confrontation with the other, simultaneously object and bodily subject of passions and practices. At the same time, the philosophical novel is a form of social criticism of the mores of its age, in

which excess represents both the extreme limit of rationality and a narrative representation of freedom. The figure of the libertine is exalted as a profoundly philosophical figure, who speaks to his own body and makes amorality the cipher of his own reflection; vice, as the mirror opposite of the virtues propagated by Ancien Regime cultures, is the operator of a new ethical action faithful to the subject and his deepest desires. Excess and vice determine the line of confrontation with Enlightenment thought for Sade, who embodies reason in the carnal materiality of bodies. La Mettrie's *ante litteram* machinic materialism and Helvétius's quest for the materiality of the spirit are the poles along which Sade hinges the figure of the libertine and his all-worldly quest for the pleasure principle. The tension that drives this quest is often at odds with the physical and material dimension of Nature, conceived as a structured organization endowed with its own function of heterogenesis, which Sade reads through as a maternal and destructive figure, capable of distributing benefits and calamities. The intimate link between the human desire for integral liberation from constraints and imposed limits and the evil dimension of Nature and the material constitution defines what Menin, following Barba's lead, calls "impossible liberation".

Another point of analysis, building on the previous one, is the original Sadean anthropological and pedagogical reflection. Sade is, by his own admission, a heretical disciple of Rousseau, the tutelary deity of pre- and post-revolutionary critical thought, but who develops his own autonomous way of analyzing passions, emotions and relationships. To the *pietas* of the Genevan author Sade substitutes self-love as the constitutive element of the subjective passions, to overturn the meaning of action, no longer devoted to the domination of the passions through reason, but to an amplification of them through another use of reason itself. The pedagogy of vice is rooted within a sensibility open to the modulations of body and nature, that is, capable of materially feeling and experiencing rationally produced sensations and pleasures. In this sense, the prevailing social pattern for Sade is that of corruption, despotism, and domination, in which reason must indulge by pursuing the maximum pleasure; the relationship between violence, sexuality, and pornography, consequently, is to be read within this analytical machinery, in which the pursuit of excess is a conscious product of the selfish social matrix and a deepening of the *jouissance* got through the other, which is a pole in which the subject-actor consciously mirrors himself. Thus, Sadean anthropology is articulated into three recurring

elements: the first is isolationism, the egotic centrality of the individual; the second is intensivism, which constitutes a body of knowledge about the body through the centrality attributed to sensations: the connection between these two types contributes to the creation of what Menin calls ‘relational egoism’, a particular form of relationship based on the search for the Other as the necessary pole of the search for singular pleasure. The third element is antiphysism, the rejection of the state of nature and its destructive and evil norms, which can only be countered by bringing the invariant bring of destruction to its acme.

On this point, one can latch onto Sade’s fierce atheism, which identifies religion as a structure for restraining the passions and disciplining bodily sensations, and the morality of virtue as a denial of the actual reality of the state of nature. His immoralism, on the other hand, takes on eudemonistic overtones of Epicurean descent, and thus becomes the vector for pursuing happiness understood as a balance between perpetual motion and the stillness dictated by *ataraxia*. Happiness thus becomes the operator that mediates between pursuing pleasure through excess and pursuing wisdom as the means to access happiness itself, which translates the selfish drive into the form of the expression of the fullness of enjoyment. Happiness, in essence, is the *telos* that holds up the complex architecture of the Sade’s work, being the end point of the material expression of the passions—even through the suffering of the other inherent with the egoistic will—and also the point of development of a paradoxically virtuous wisdom, that is, the practice of happiness as the foundation of an alternative morality based on individual and collective enjoyment.

Menin shows Sade from a radically different perspective. Recognizing philosophical dignity to the Marquis’ writings, the author places him within the Enlightenment theoretical paradigm, to expose the original Sadean reading of some key themes of the debate. Moreover, by placing the pursuit of happiness at the center of the Sade’s philosophical system, Menin opens Sade himself to a political reading that is uncoupled from previous interpretations and more situated within the revolutionary debates on the collective pursuit of happiness as a properly constituent force. From this perspective, and also through the allegorical reading made by P.P. Pasolini of the relationship between violence, pornography, freedom, and subjection, that Sade, although subject to limitations arising from his historical distance from actuality, still shows today his surpassing and transgressive relevance.

Vincenzo Maria Di Mino



2 PHILIPPE DESPOIX, *K. B. W.: La Bibliothèque Warburg, laboratoire de pensée intermédiaire*, Dijon: Les presses du réel, 2023, 392 p. (145 ill.) ISBN: 9782378963385, € 28.00.

The author of this book heads the “Warburg Library Network” project at the University of Montreal. Everything is intermedial in this Warburg connection: the author’s Centre de recherches, the journal “Intermédiatités”, as well as this book. From our point of view, the challenge it poses might be framed so: is it possible to weave together picture collections, image series, slideshow orderings, building plans, a library design and organization, and a peculiar historiographic lexicon applied to such objects as stars, snakes, conic curves, wind-blown dresses, all symbols, all migrated in time and space, and find therein the thread of an “intermedial” history of ideas? The result would suggest that it is.

Warburg’s approach to the history of culture, a notable mix of success and failure, comprised a focus on relatively timeless *Stichwörter* that have features pretty similar to Lovejoy’s conception of ‘ideas’; and it has produced its own characteristic strands of the history of ideas since when, as a ‘contribution to the history of concepts’, Panofski penned the history of *Idea* itself in 1924. The book attempts to analyze Aby Warburg’s vast body of work, including source collection, reproductions, and archiving; cartography and mapping; slideshows and exhibitions, in sum all the activities within the ‘Visual History Laboratory’, jointly directed with Fritz Saxl and Gertrud Bing, which culminated in the Kulturwissenschaftliche Bibliothek Warburg (KBW, Warburg Library of Cultural Sciences) in the 1920s. The author suggests that the specific concepts developed in the course of this exploratory process did not obey a strictly textual-discursive logic, and relied instead on visualization techniques that can be described as “intermedial operators” connected to pictographic devices, particularly Warburg’s famous photographs: his approach “was not based on a textual history of ideas”, but rather in terms of their autonomous discursive dimension and of “their practical impact—be it therapeutic, astromagical or mathematical

knowledge” (118). The book thus presents, in a way, the genealogy of a radically different kind of history of ideas, or *Begriffsgeschichte*, Warburg’s ‘nameless science’ in relation to which subsequent and current iconology is more a departure than a development.<sup>1</sup> The author suggests to name it, anachronisms notwithstanding, “visual anthropology” (335). But this is the point of arrival of a long and attentive analysis of Warburg’s own starting points, of various networks of sources, influences, suggestions (Darwin, Joshua Reynolds, Osthoff, Max Weber, etc.), of the academic context and the group of scholars within which his research unfolded<sup>2</sup>, and of the media it mobilized, and the practices it gave rise to (especially within the KBW), characterized by the “heuristic gestures” (9) of photographing, reproducing, classifying, serializing, projecting and exhibiting.

Two chapters are crucial for this reading. The third deals with the function of Warburg’s ‘migration maps’ (*Wanderkarten*) depicting the routes of cultural transfer of ancient representations across the Eurasian space. Both a methodological tool and an empirical result (“nowhere were Aby Warburg’s research methods more innovative”, 85), this spatio-temporal cartography also provided support for diachronic serializations, tracing the iconography of cosmic figuration and, in collaboration with Franz Boll (1913), the neglected impact of astrology in the transmission of the classical legacy, when only those ancient divinities that had astronomical status persisted as bearers of dynamic symbols and meanings. Here Warburg first moved from a schema that was essentially temporal, to its combination with a properly spatial mode of representation. To another fundamental medium (in this case of serial presentation), the slideshow projection which characterized Warburg’s conferences from the outset, chapter four is devoted. The genesis of the famous Kreuzlingen lecture (in Binswanger’s

<sup>1</sup> His “process of development by typological poles quite clearly differentiates the Warburgian gesture from Panofsky and Saxl’s later study of Dürer’s etching, whose horizon is more akin to that of a hermeneutic of the work” (119fn).

<sup>2</sup> “Warburg, Cassirer, Saxl, Bing, Panofsky, Wind, Klibansky—the implicit formation of a group of scholars of Jewish origin is by no means accidental and must be noted. In view of the almost total exclusion of graduates of Jewish origin from university posts during the Wilhelminian era, the Weimar Republic had in fact opened up, by promoting the creation of new universities, prospects of partial integration for this marginalized group of intellectuals. The fact that an institute like the KBW was self allowed it, without risking the conflicts always latent within the to welcome young Jewish researchers without any particular number of young Jewish researchers, thus helping to crystallize a specific of a specific scholarly milieu” (185).



Sanatorium Bellevue, in 1923) on the ‘Serpent Ritual’, it is maintained here, shows that the choice and order of slides constitute the formal *a priori* framework of the arguments presented, rather than their illustration. The unpublished manuscript shows that “exhibition, lecture-projection and portfolio, far from being illustrations of [Warburg’s] thought, also seemed to constitute the conditions of its possibility” (15). And thanks to his experimentation with photography, Warburg developed “novel devices for collecting, organizing and serially exhibiting reproductions”, and so was able “to sketch out a pioneering anthropology of and through the image” (129).<sup>1</sup> This recollection of Warburg’s Pueblo experience had important effects on his main area of research: “The comparison between the Hopi ritual of *tsu’ti’kive*, the sculptural conception of ancient religious pathos and its ‘posthumous life’ in medieval astrological illustration or post-Renaissance painting, involved the optical confrontation of reproductions of each document” (158).

Warburg’s return to Hamburg marked a new stage in his project, with the construction of a building specifically designed to fulfill both the practical and symbolic functions that were called for. The new library also marked “the systematization of collaborative work under the then three-headed KBW management team, comprising Warburg, [Fritz] Saxl and [Gertrude] Bing” (215). The library, with the reorganization of books and photographic materials under the privileged connection between word, action and image (*Zusammenhang von Wort, Handlung und Bild*) centered around *Stichworte* and “thematic neighborhoods” (199), gave rise from 1927 onwards to a flurry of exhibitions based on “series of images” (*Bilderreihen*) displayed on panels, that “introduced a new complexity into the Warburgian demonstration device [...] from a few dozen slides, they could increase, depending on the exhibition, to several hundred reproductions. The series of materials projected over time gave way to their juxtaposition on the panel space laid out in the reading room” (235). It was only moving from one panel to another, that the complex was deployed in its various components (247), and thus the seeds of the *Mnemosyne Atlas* were planted.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Reproduction of these visual anthropological devices is limited in the book: faced with the demands of the Hopi community and their ban on photography, the author chose not to reproduce the corresponding slides, “and only offer a glimpse in the form of drawn outlines” (152).

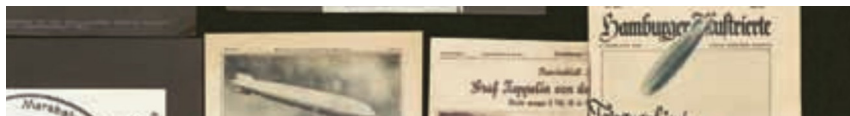
<sup>2</sup> As Christopher D. Johnson, *Memory, Metaphor, and Aby Warburg’s Atlas of Images* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP 2012), 11, puts it, “the nondiscursive, frequently digressive character [that] frustrates

Yet equally relevant for Warburg's research was the possibility to extract from these imagic landscapes a set of *Urworte* (primordial terms), the morphology and syntax of which is thoroughly analyzed (256ff) as another crucial stage of developments. If illustrations, when placed in series, revealed a rule of composition that was independent of accompanying texts or narrative episode, they also brought to light recurring elements (visual affect, physical impulse, performative speech, actions) that 'primordial terms' characterized on the successive panels. "Touching both the content of the panels and their succession, the fundamental mobility and openness of the apparatus appeared as a function of the modes of visualization appropriate to the morphological and historical dimensions involved in the transmission of images. This was to be an essential feature of the Mnemosyne project, partly outlined here in the *Urworte* series." (266-267).

The *Mnemosyne* image atlas, which in its incompleteness "shares the fate of great modernist fragments like the Musilian essay-novel, *The Man without Quality*, or the historiography of the Benjaminian *Passagen Book*" (271), is considered first in detail, and finally, in particular, through the lens of "the extreme recurrence of the preposition 'between', *zwischen*" in the introductory fragments (285). This moves conclusively the focus away from "any appearance of linear progression", in direction of an ultimate "central notion" denoted by the term *Zwischenraum*. The author translates it literally as *espace intermédiaire*, 'intermediate space' (286) and underlines its relation to the cognate term *Denkraum*, 'space of thought'. These "qualitative" spaces (320) are inscribed in the double mode, "discursive and pictorial", where "notional lexicon and visualization form an inseparable whole" (321).

The end of the book is quite flamboyant, with the public advent of telephotography, and Warburg's insertion of it in the final panel of the *Mnemosyne Atlas*, marking in the author's view a hidden political stance: with this final telephotography, Warburg was also aiming at the programmed destruction of the intermediary spaces; and so Warburg's words on the "electrical instant connection" that would destroy every space of thought, and on the need for a humanity that, with the discipline of consciousness, would set limits to it, can be summoned as a conclusion.

any smooth critical narrative of its themes and contents".



3 J. CALEB CLANTON, RICHARD C. GOODE, EDs., *Great Ideas in History, Politics, and Philosophy*, Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2021, 704 p. ISBN: 9781481316187, \$ 64.99.

A historian of the philosophy of religion and a political historian, who both taught at Christ-centered, faith-based Lipscomb University (a private college with a Center for International Peace and Justice, as well as Pat Boone's alma mater), have teamed to edit this ambitious collection, that appeared in 2021 for a publishing house whose declared mission is "to foster scriptural, historical, and theological scholarship on Christianity, Judaism, and Islam". Now, while a variety of sources is indeed laid out in plain view for the reader in the table of contents, religious texts have been sparingly made us of. The editors have refrained from including poetry, sacred books, and works of fiction, favoring instead "ideas and primary sources in history, politics, and philosophy". Great ideas in natural science and technical knowledge are also absent: the editors consider this collection a contribution to the preservation of humanistic inquiries and education, at a time when the academic disciplines of the humanities are being more and more sided by institutions of higher education; yet to bring a historical gaze on non-directly-humanistic human enterprises would also be part of such a contribution.

The expression "great ideas" is "inevitably vague", starting from the meaning of 'great'. The editors have gone to some length in order to clarify this point. They distinguish a "normative or prescriptive sense" (as valuable or beautiful, "commendable in some way"), from a "normatively benign sense", that is, having been "consequential in shaping human experience in some way", independently from their constitution, implications, or impact, being deemed positive or negative. Thus 'great' ideas might be "exemplary or deserving of our affirmation", having "somehow conduced to our improvement"; they might be great because they "made a profound impact or otherwise shaped human affairs, worldviews, and civilizations". In further meanings of the word, famous

ideas might be called ‘great’ because they are “well-known or recognizable”, or because they are “provocative of the queries and considerations with which humans need to wrestle” (one is tempted to add: or the other way around). The editors aimed to present “ideas” that would be “great” in one or the other meaning of the expression, “endorsing a critical engagement with them”. This implies an effort of understanding and contextualization, a will to challenge and be challenged, as well as a “charitable” approach, that is born out of the historical confrontation and may develop an attitude more “empathetic toward others—both then and there and here and now”.

What is meant by ‘ideas’, instead—by “a range of ideas that have emerged throughout human history”—is less clear. It probably need not be pinpointed; it seems in fact that ‘ideas’ is used as an umbrella term for doctrines, concepts, worldviews, ways and systems of thinking, and the like.

Apart from these aspects, and from “canon wars” the editors refuse to engage in, an interesting emerging feature of the table of contents is the interweaving, at any epoch, of the Western and Christian intellectual traditions the collection is “nonetheless tilted, as it were, toward”, with at least one component, variable with the epochs, of completely different ascendancy. This is the sign of an important shift, that various cultural developments of—at least—the last century (reception and appropriation by hegemonic powers of the more or less ancient cultures of the colonized, post-colonial cultural conflicts, ecumenism, the rise of ‘global history’, etc.) have indeed produced.



**4** MARIA E. BRZEZINSKI PRESTES, ed., *Understanding Evolution in Darwin’s “Origin”: The Emerging Context of Evolutionary Thinking*. Cham, CH: Springer, 2023, 424 p. ISBN: 9783031401640, € 135.19 (HC) 106.99 (e-book). <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-40165-7>.

Great ideas are often presented in great books. This collection aims to encourage the reading of the work that introduced the conceptual couple of ‘common

descent' and 'natural selection', i.e., Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*. It comprises contributions from great or well-known authors too, such as, among others, Pietro Corsi, Janet Browne, Thierry Hoquet, Michael Ruse, Charles Pence. The editor suggest that this operation has a principal didactic character: have students to read a classical work to help them "understand and appreciate the central concepts of evolution" (ix), keeping them as safe as possible from the march-of-progress fables, or the fables of intelligent design. History of science can and should inform almost all our teaching of science. Historical context, a "narrative map for how concepts might fruitfully develop step by step" and an explicit link to the "epistemology of science" are the key ingredients (ib.).

The way to do it is, in this volume, to present the *Origin* in its first edition, theme by theme, chapter by chapter, theory by theory, in the historical context of their formation and production. The contributions open with Corsi's presentation of discussions on the origins of living beings and on their capability for transformation and transmutation in the late-18<sup>th</sup> and early-19<sup>th</sup> century, a lively landscape that at least in part caught Darwin's attention, though he did not acknowledge it in the "Historical Sketch" prefixed to his work. This point returns in Brzezinski Prestes's own chapter on Darwin's public account of predecessors, that intends to clarify and, so to say, make teachable, Darwin's "meta-scientific discourse" (163) on the difference between others' theories and his own and Wallace's. The relationship between Wallace and Darwin and their agreements and disagreements are also treated in a specific chapter, by Arruda do Carmo and Pereira Martins. Not quite in the same territory as these chapters, but not far from it, the way the *Origin* provided compatibility between the principle of the 'conditions of existence' stressed by Cuvier and the 'unity of type' highlighted by Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire, is discussed by Gustavo Caponi as the main accomplishment of Darwin's work. Nonetheless, he notes, St-Hilaire's principles of regulated transformation of biological structure are nearer to Darwin's conception of natural processes that minimized the production of new structures.

There really is at work a variety of approaches. A quite innovative chapter on a knotty subject is devoted by Héctor A. Palma to Darwin's relationship to the Fuegians (the inhabitants of the Tierra del Fuego), some of whom were being repatriated by the Beagle after having been brought to England by force. In chapter 8, Marsha Richmond introduces the readers to Darwin's researches

on cirripedes and the connection of the study of barnacles with foundational evolutionary tenets laid out in the *Origin*, in particular as regards the difficult problem of the evolution of sex. This is a particularly felicitous contribution.

Another scabrous topic is dealt with in the chapter on Darwin's agnosticism by Kostas Kampourakis, who interprets this agnosticism literally and not as a cover for a proper atheism, connecting it to Darwin's shift from the perfect adaptation of natural theology to the relative adaptation of natural selection. A similar approach, which in a collection of papers amounts to a certain insistence, is found in João Cortese's chapter on God's existence according to Darwin and on the compatibility of natural selection with religious views.

Readers' motivation is again considered in Bárbara Jiménez-Pazos' chapter on "the most emphatically expressive parts" of the *Origin*, to help those readers ready to renounce its reading, showing the presence in it of scientific-aesthetic emotions towards nature.

Part III is devoted to the presentation of the *Origin*, as said, chapter by chapter. The volume concludes with an opening to the afterlife of Darwin's theory, and precisely with their comparison to Huxley, Mayr, and Dobzhansky's 'Modern Synthesis', by Susana Lamas, and a very dense chapter by Thierry Hoquet that puts it in relation to the challenges raised by various 'syntheses' (and one might say, anti-syntheses, at least since Gould is appropriately included) that have been produced in the domain of abstract biology up to recent times. It should be clear at this point that this ambitious collection is more far-ranging than a teaching aid and will be useful to various kinds of readers outside of students and teachers.

*Enrico Pasini*



*“[Warburg, Mnemosyne] Plate C. Evolution of the representation of Mars (reconstruction)” (Despoix 2023, 288).*