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**Under the Volcano.  
Warburg's Legacy**

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# Under the Volcano. Warburg's Legacy

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# Classical Tradition as a Method and a Way of Approach

Note on a Letter from Gertrud Bing to Raymond Klibansky (1947)

edited by Martin Trembl

Many know that Raymond Klibansky was a Warburgian. But that he belonged to the inner circle was previously unknown. He is co-author of *Saturn and Melancholy* (1964, now reissued by Philippe Despoix), which Panofsky never wanted, as he believed that his volume *Dürers Melencolia I: Eine quellen- und typengeschichtliche Untersuchung* (1923), written jointly with Fritz Saxl, would suffice. But it did not. What an irony it was that Klibansky was then named first in the new edition because of the order of the alphabet. And the KBW and the Warburg Institute? We now know that Klibansky was something like the crown prince after Saxl, or rather through the efforts of Gertrud Bing, in the late 1940s. A previously unpublished letter from 1947, which is kept in Warburg Institute Archive and is reprinted here, shows this. Klibansky was then in the process of securing a professorship at McGill University in Montreal, but he was still not sure whether he would not be better off in Europe. In the end, Canada won, and later he had very good connections to UNESCO. His status at the Warburg Institute became that of a Permanent Fellow. In the letter, we find Bing's caring concern both for Saxl, whose health continued to decline – he died just one year later – and for the Warburg Institute.

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Letter from Gertrud Bing to Raymond Klibansky,  
10th March 1947

My dear Raymond,

Thank you very much for your two handwritten letters, the second of which arrived the day before yesterday. Both were evidently written in great haste, and I appreciate them all the more because of the effort which it must be for you to keep your stream of correspondence flowing amidst all your other commitments. I am glad – and so is Saxl – that you like the work; I am sure you will create a reputation at McGill which it will be very hard for your successors to live down. Yet, I cannot help hoping that the need to find a successor for you may arise very



soon! You have no doubt received our cable in reply to the two questions posed in your official letters. They were comparatively easy to deal with, and as our answer was not sent before we had an opportunity to of consulting the Chairman of our Committee you can see that the university authorities are really bent on allowing us as much freedom to follow our own minds as they can. They have also gone to some length to make the salary attractive (according to their lights and the state of British finance) – but of course it is trifling compared with[!] the sums which you mention. They seem hard-earned, though, with teaching obligations at two universities! What you write about old and new loyalties touches me to closely for me to be able to comment upon it – so there is only the third aspect of your present conflict that needs an answer from me. The wording of your title as Reader is a thing once mentioned and then forgotten and buried in the Academic Registrar's files. It would not bind you as to the courses which you would give, and the limitation to the "Classical Tradition" will be only stipulated to avoid any objections raised against the establishment of another readership on grounds of "overlapping". In practice nobody will bother about what you are doing (Good at any rate must be near retiring age) and it would only depend on the teaching programme of the Warburg Institute which it wouldly be your own job – in consultation with Saxl – to determine, whether systematic philosophy would find a place in it or not. I think I am entitled to say that our experience with the university has been so far quite free from any attempt at binding anyone to anything. As far as the initiative has started from other colleges (as in the case of the Renaissance course in the History school now given by Saxl) they will of course choose a subject within our terms of reference and intended to act as an intercollegiate link; but nobody would have objected if Saxl had wished to give a course or lectures on Rembrandt in addition.

Of course you commit yourself to the Classical Tradition by the mere fact of joining this Institute – but then, is not your proficiency and your interest in it the reason why you were asked, and are contemplating to join it? And as it has been made abundantly clear by us, at various times, that the Hist. of the Class. Trad. is not a programme to be filled – still less a subject to be expounded – but a method and a way of approach, it rests with you to demonstrate how any given part of systematic philosophy fits into it – let alone all the fields which need to be cleared up in the interest of the "Warburg method" proper, like semantics etc.; but I do not think you were having those in mind when you wrote to me. I can only imagine any attempt at "binding you down" to the terms of your Readership if someone wanted to be very nasty – and I do not think we need to take that eventuality into account because it is inherent in any appointment and cannot therefore be made an excuse for accepting or rejecting a job. It may even be that you will be asked by other institutions to lecture on systematic philosophy just as for instance Wittkower lectures at the Court. Institute on the purely art historical aspects of his subject, although his title is Reader in the Class. Tradition in the Hist. of Art, or as Buchthal is invited by the Inst. of Hist. Research to give a course on MS illumination to their palaeography students.

Your readership is to have the added qualification "with Special Responsibilities" – a clause which finds expression in the increase of the salary by something like 200 £ above the normal

Reader's salary. This, in addition to the post of Director of Studies at the W. I., raises your post anyhow above the usual rights and obligations of a Readership.

As regards your proposal to return to London for 6 months during your second year of office at McGill it would be excellent, in fact nothing could be better, provided you would definitely decide to take over for good in August 1948. I think on that assumption our Committee would even be prepared to wait for you without your coming here until the session 1948/49. But I am afraid they would want a decision in the course of this summer term. When your cable was read at the last meeting the temper of the committee was obviously in favour of making all allowances provided the answer would be "yes" ultimately. If they could count on that they might give you the time you want in order to leave McGill with all due considerations for them. And provided you were quite decided to take up the post here in August 1948 you might prefer to spend the intervening time either entirely at McGill or divide it between Canada and U.S.A. But for us your offer would be admirable. Saxl would welcome your help enormously. Contacts might be made, plans laid, and curricula prepared to your liking in anticipation of better things to follow.

There is one more thing which I feel I must add – at the risk of appearing to attempt a bit of blackmail. Saxl is – as Warburg used to say – a[!]right from the collar upward; and his health is infinitely better than it was last year. He will carry gladly all the burdens imposed on him, and there is no danger of him breaking down under them. But some mysterious quality has gone out of his resilience. He is tired much more easily than he used to be, and with tiredness a kind of irritation comes over him at times which saps his energy, his convictions and his will to achieve. In the long run this must affect his work. Up till now he always pulls himself together. But what I feel (or rather know) is that this would disappear the moment he would know that some date you would come to help him. He would feel the Institute was safe, in good strong hands; there would be someone to assist consolidating it, and he would not be alone to do everything singlehanded for an indefinite period of time. This should not decide you – no doubt he would be very angry with me for mentioning him at all – but if the balance is anyhow slightly in favour of your accepting the post here it might make it a little easier for you to do it gladly, knowing that a little bit of human relationship would be added to the scale in which the objective pros are being weighed.

The first part of *Melancholia* translated is with Lotte – for revision of the translation of the Greek texts. When she returns it work will go on. And I am also now writing to Miss Tremayne asking her whether there is a chance now of her coming to work in London.

I care [?] have to go to a lecture and do not want this letter to be delayed any longer.

All good wishes and kindest regards from yours

G. B.

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## **Abstract**

Martin Treml presents a 1947 letter sent from Bing to Raymond Klibansky who together with Fritz Saxl and Erwin Panofsky edited the influential work *Saturn and Melancholy* (published in 1964). The letter shed light on lesser-known aspects of Raymond Klibansky's involvement with the Warburg Institute.

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*keywords* | Gertrud Bing; Raymond Klibansky; *Saturn and Melancholy*; Warburg Institute; Classical Tradition.

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