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## psychiatry in literature

### Saturn: star of melancholy

George Ikkos 

Celebrated ‘*Saturn and Melancholy: Studies in the History of Natural Philosophy, Religion and Art*’, by Klibansky et al, was published in English by the Warburg Institute in London in 1964. The Institute started life in Hamburg in 1909 as the Warburg-Bibliothek für Kulturwissenschaft, a library for art studies established by Aby Warburg (1866–1929), scion of the city’s renowned Jewish banking family. He had ceded his inheritance to his brother, in exchange for a promise to buy him any book he requested. In 1926 the Library became an Institute, later affiliating with Hamburg University. Under Nazi threat, in 1933 it relocated to London and in 1944 became associated with London University. Established in 1798, M. M. Warburg & Co, still in Hamburg, is the longest surviving bank in the world.

Saturn is our solar system’s furthest planet visible to the naked eye, hence the darkest. The first direct reference to it as relating to melancholia occurs in Arab astrology during the 9th century. Attributed to it were what initially appear to be bewildering and contradictory powers. It is the darkness that links the planet to black in black bile and hence melancholia. It is also this link that helps make sense of its superficially contradictory powers in the light of earlier Greek and Roman humoral theories of temperament and illness. It also carries it forward in history to Renaissance literature, coloured by Christianity. In the Western pictorial tradition Melancholia was most famously depicted in 1514 at the threshold of Enlightenment in Albrecht Dürer’s eponymous engraving of brooding contemplation. A power attributed to Saturn was to delay projects associated with it. The final proofs for the book had originally been set in German in Hamburg in 1939 but were destroyed during the annihilating bombing of the city by the Allies during the Second World War. It was not published in its original language until 1990.

Aby, an emotionally unstable and volatile child, rejected his family’s religious practices and married Mary Hertz, daughter of a senator and member of the Evangelical Lutheran Church Synod against their wishes. A pioneer in multidisciplinary art history, he challenged romantic ideas of artistic genius and rejected the offer of a professorship in Halle University before accepting one in Hamburg in 1919. He suffered relapsing mental illness and was admitted to hospital in Kreuzlingen, Switzerland, in 1921 under Ludwig Binswanger, with a differential diagnosis of schizophrenia. Emil Kraepelin visited and diagnosed ‘mixed manic–depressive’ state. He was discharged in 1924 but lectured only occasionally thereafter. When he died in 1929, he was working on the unfinished *Mnemosyne Atlas*, an idiosyncratic collection of panels with nearly 1000 pictures from books, magazines, newspapers and other quotidian sources pinned on them. He wanted to share with others the comfort they had given him during periods of suffering. It was published in book form in German in 2008, the year of global financial crisis. At the time of writing, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the Warburg Institute is offering a virtual tour of its *Atlas* exhibition. Mnemosyne was the classical Greek goddess of remembrance.

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