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The Songs of the Maniacs: Four Books on Madness and Creativity

Kristine Somerville

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REVIEW

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

The Songs of the Maniacs: Four Books on Madness and Creativity

Kristine Somerville (bio)

Books, 1998, 230 pp., \$24 (paper).

Kay Redfield Jamison, *Touched with Fire: Manic-Depressive Illness and the Artistic Temperament*, Free Press, 1996, 384 pp., \$16 (paper).

Alice W. Flaherty, *The Midnight Disease: The Drive to Write, Writer's Block, and the Creative Brain*, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2004, 320 pp., \$15 (paper).

Richard M. Berlin, *Poets on Prozac: Mental Illness, Treatment and the Creative Process*, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008, 200 pp., \$24.

An anecdote that has become part of poet Theodore Roethke's legend concerns his first mental breakdown in 1935, when he was a young professor at Michigan State. He struck his students as a rare teacher who talked to them without condescension about the problems of their lives and how to tackle their inner conflicts through poetry. Meanwhile he was going crazy. He was forgoing sleep to work on his teaching, taking midnight walks to build stamina and going for long periods of time without food. In order to keep functioning, he was dosing himself with whiskey, coffee and aspirin by the handful. He recalled nine years later to friends that suddenly he started feeling good, almost magical. While walking in the woods, he felt as if he had entered into the life of everything around him—grass, trees, even a rabbit. As he was passing a diner he suddenly felt that he knew what **[End Page 190]** it was like to be a lion. He went inside and asked the counter man for a raw steak. Eating it standing in the middle of lunch-hour rush, he noticed the expressions of the customers and began to realize that perhaps his behavior was a little strange. Shortly afterward, he was committed to a sanitarium. Psychiatrists diagnosed him as manic-depressive neurotic. His brief teaching career at Michigan State was over.

Recounting the fantastic moments of unreason in artists' lives, we tend to assume that they are troubled and haunted by madness. The belief that creativity and mental illness are intertwined is widely held. For artists, the level of intensity necessary to create something fresh and new can often feel like a type of insanity, yet does mental illness exist at a vastly disproportionate rate among them? Is there an overlap between mental illness and the artistic temperament? If so, why? Several books from the fields of psychiatry and neuropsychology have attempted to

answer these questions, while artists from past and present have offered their own varied insights.

In *Manic Depression and Creativity*, D. Jablow Hershman and Julian Lieb claim that some of the greatest works of art would be inconceivable without the intense levels of energy, passion and daring that come from states of manic creativity. The authors narrow their discussion to manic depression and note that mental illness has been destigmatized overall. "The manic-depressive is not an alien from outer space, he is one of us," Hershman and Lieb write.

Philosophers of antiquity such as Aristotle, Socrates and Plato all supposed that most extraordinary individuals are melancholic and that no invention comes unless the artist is out of his senses, yet Judeo-Christian tradition provided Western civilization with the tenacious belief that the mentally ill were possessed by the devil. Enlightenment theorists argued that mental illness was as natural as physical illness and that reason could provide people with every conceivable benefit, including cures for psychological infirmities.

The Romantics repudiated the Enlightenment's overemphasis on reason in favor of emotion. To them, logic played a limited role in human affairs. They believed artistic genius to be the highest calling and the arts the noblest. Fits of inspiration were sometimes hardly distinguishable from episodes of mania or hallucinations. The French novelist George Sand proclaimed, "Between genius and madness there is often not the thickness of a hair." Like the thinkers of antiquity, the Romantics linked genius and creativity with wide-ranging, powerful emotions and expanded imaginations. The artist became a vessel of special revelation who suffers for rare ability and [End Page 191] insights. Some might have argued that their exceptionality also...

The Songs of the Maniacs

Four Books on Madness and Creativity

Kristine Somerville

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