Book Review

Poets on Prozac: Mental Illness, Treatment and the Creative Process

Edited by Richard M. Berlin, M.D.
(Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008, 200 pgs.)

Reviewed by Roxanna Font

One needs only to look at some of the most heralded poets of the twentieth century to recognize a connection between mental illness and verse. But for every Sylvia Plath there was a William Carlos Williams; one was well-known for writing through the lens of her affictions while the other's legacy remains his imagery and not the psychotherapy he sought out late in life. The times have become arguably more confessional and as our culture's appetite for the stuff of memoir has increased, the stigma once attached to therapy has diminished. It seems fitting, then, that Richard M. Berlin has now brought forward a memoir has increased, the stigma once attached to therapy has diminished.

Berlin is also a poet, but it was primarily his work as a psychiatrist treating artists of various disciplines that provided him with the impetus for the book. “As I shared my patients’ satisfaction with their progress,” he writes in the book's introduction, “I wondered how psychotherapy, psychoactive medications, and other forms of psychiatric treatment might free us to work at our highest creative levels.” In another's hands the discourse here could have easily digressed into stereotype, but Berlin is an exceedingly careful reviewer of other works on the subject, among them Kay Redfield Jamison's seminal study, *Touching with Fire*, in which she examines the manic-depressive tendencies of artistic geniuses. Although Berlin's introduction begins accessibly enough, as he goes on to consider more esoteric theories on creativity I found myself distracted, and eager to dive into the personal essays. Perhaps instead of a breakdown of each contributor's story, Berlin might have provided the reader with a general overview and let the poets speak for themselves.

The opening essay of the collection, “Dark Gifts,” by Gwyneth Lewis, echoes many of the ideas presented by Berlin. In her first-person account of severe depression, Lewis gives us a smooth and readable entry into the psyche of a poet dealing with a disorder. In the essay that follows, “The Desire to Think Clearly,” J.D. Smith delivers a welcome dose of humor along with a sense of the history of depression among writers. Berlin asked his contributors to include work that displays the effects of treatment, so Smith presents samples of his poetry, but I remained more engaged by the prose. Though the poetry samples are generally evocative of change, the changes don't necessarily seem indicative only of the effects of his depression—a poet's writing is inevitably influenced over time.

Poems in some of the other essays, however, seem more intrinsically tied to the illnesses at hand. In “Perfecting the Art of Falling,” Thomas Krampf's work clearly shows the changes he endures during the progression of his schizophrenia, in large part because the forms vary dramatically. However, it's what he doesn't include that leaves us craving more. Krampf admits how excruciating it was for him to dredge up “material for this essay...being forced to confront things [he'd] much rather forget,” but it's in those details of his experiences that the poetry gains relevance in the context of this book. While these are studies on the creative process, what makes them accessible are the personal stories behind the craft.

Jesse Millner uses startling imagery to strong effect in “My Oldest Voice,” his very personal account of depression and alcohol addiction. The consistent tone delivered in short punches of prose keeps the essay taut and the poems seamlessly threaded into the narrative. Renée Ashley's “Basic Heart: Depression and the Ordinary” similarly showcases work without overt self-analysis. In her lyrical yet eminently relatable style, she presents the journey of her life with depression, and the poems enhance that story.

Considering that most of the essays in the collection deal with depression, it's a welcome turn to read “Food for Thought,” by Caterina Eppolito, a licensed psychotherapist as well as a recovering anorexia. “Poetic form is an anorexic form of writing,” she argues, and goes on to trace the arc of that realization through her poetry. Also riffing on a fresh central theme is Liza Porter, whose essay “Down the Tracks: Bruce Springsteen Sang to Me” divulges the complex framework of abuses that eventually led to her diagnosis of depression. All the way, “The Boss” provides the accompaniment.

But with the majority of the essays, it's impossible to avoid a self-conscious edge, primarily because of the inclusion of the author's poetry. As subjective as evaluating writing is, bias is inherent when a poet analyzes his or her own work. There's a good reason why introductions to collected works are not authored by the poet himself.

Sixteen essays comprise *Poets on Prozac* and while each voice is unique, some overlap, especially on the subject of depression, cannot be avoided. Despite that redundancy, each essayist (and the book as a whole) certainly has an audience, most faithfully in poets and especially those who've struggled with depression.

Chase Twichell, perhaps the most well-known poet included in the book, gives the collection a gorgeous ending with her inspired essay, “Psychopharmacology and Its Discontents.” “Each of us,” she writes, “like the voice in a poem, is a fiction in constant flux”—just one example of the brilliant one-liners that pepper her essay and elevate it to a level worthy of any anthology on the craft of poetry. For more than twenty years, Twichell has written poetry while on psychotropic drugs and, for her, the consciousness with which she writes (medicated or not) is the one she continues to explore through her writing. “The brain is a durable mystery. A nut that remains uncracked.” And so the mystery continues, even as the poets in Berlin's collection bravely put their nutcrackers to the test.

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