
**A Mind Apart: Poems of
Melancholy, Madness, and Addiction**

edited by Mark S. Bauer, MD. Oxford University Press, Cary, NC, 2009, 404 pages, \$25.95 (paper).

Dr Bauer's anthology of English-language poetry, representative of "current conceptions of 'mental illness' (in psychiatric terms) or 'madness' (in cultural criticism terms)" (p xxiv) is a splendid and timely contribution to the psychiatric literature at a time when our field is suffering from a skewed and fixed descriptive perspective that fosters reductionism.

Turning to the humanities for the informative effect of viewing the multiple and unique perspectives of individuals that are expressed in poetry is an enlightening way to experience the wide spectrum of what the author refers to as the "dimensional continuum" in mental illness. This approach frames mental difficulties as being the products of interactions of varying genetically influenced temperaments and social and cultural contexts. An individual's perceptions of and responses to these interactions may or may not constitute mental illness but reveal the mental states of humanity all the same.

Our descriptive nomenclature tends to overlook or leave behind colorful and telling narratives describing the unique lives in which symptoms occur. Poetry imparts and makes accessible a more complex, though realistic and telling, array of individual experiences along the spectrum of adaptive success and failure. It enables one to feel more empathy with that experience and the suffering that accompanies a disrupted mental life.

The book is thoughtfully divided into 3 parts: an introduction, an anthology of poetry (a bountiful collection exemplifying the subtitle "Poems of Melancholy, Madness, and Addiction"), and a section containing biographical notes on each poet. The introduction superbly outlines the editor's approach to the poetry (some of which is mentioned above) and orients the reader toward viewing the individual poetic expressions as perceptual transformations related to the source and place on the continuum of the poets' difficulties and the context in which the poet finds himself or herself. While Dr Bauer assembles poetry with the recurrent themes of melancholy, madness, and what he calls "sweet melancholy," the poems gather up multiple areas of distress such as addiction and substance abuse, psychosis, grief, and suicide.

The voluminous anthology of poems ranges in time from the 1300s to almost contemporary. The poetry runs the gamut from William Shakespeare's Sonnet 129, with its somewhat dark and telling commentary on the lascivious nature of man's desires; to Siegfried Sassoon's "Repression of War Experience," with its crescendoing exposition of repressed post-trauma related to war; to Anne Sexton's "The Addict" and its almost musical reporting of the experiences of addiction. Poetry from popular songs and some anonymous poems are also included.

The last section of the book consists of concise, illuminating biographies of the known poets. These complement the reading

of the poetry by giving glimpses of the individual histories that shaped the poets' responses to their perceptions of the senses and the happenings of their internal and external lives.

I found this book to be an excellent reading experience, and I highly recommend it. My only dilemma became the question of when to read the brief biography of the poet—prior to reading the poem, or after reading it. I compromised by doing some of both, and in either case found the biographies most helpful.

I believe that the book would be an excellent choice for study and discussion by residents. My fear, however, is that psychiatrists who most need to read and study this book will brush its nonstatistical but broadening view of the uniqueness of humanity aside as irrelevant, while those who read and savor the book will be the group that already operates in a truly committed biopsychosocial style of interpreting mental illness. I hope that this is not the case, for Dr Bauer has provided us with a substantial contribution to our field in a book that can expand the reader's sense and knowledge of not only the people we treat, but also the people we walk among every day.

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