

BOOK REVIEW

In Their Right Minds: The Lives and Shared Practices of Poetic Geniuses by Carol Brooks Platt. Exeter, UK: Imprint Academic, 2015. 220 pp. \$26. ISBN 978-1845407896.

The author introduces her remarkable book with this remark: “My interest in the voices and visions of poets and prophets was precipitated by a dear friend’s claim to channel angels after her mother died.” How was it possible for her friend to undergo such a substantial change in her sense of reality? How could she accept angelic encounters as *really* real?

Witnessing this transformation galvanized Carole Brooks Platt to do twenty years of research, the present book resulting. The book indeed contains a wealth of densely packed ideas, data, and references, drawn from diverse sources and disciplines. Although it would be impossible to cover so much in a brief review, I will say something about the main points.

The question Platt poses is a large one. What kind of world do we inhabit? What is it like to be a human being? Do poets, prophets, mediums, and others break out of their material shells and reach into other dimensions of reality, or is all that illusion, self-deception, escapism? This is a great metaphysical as well as an intensely personal question of our time. Although typically not discussed in the major news media, the issues it entails lurk in the background of all that we think and do.

In Their Right Minds has three layers: first, reportage of a fascinating array of alleged facts, experimental and historical; second, an attempt to come up with an explanatory scheme to make intelligible the curious data; and third, the many authorities cited. About this last rather thickly distributed layer, there was so much that I was bewildered, and the explanatory links to the main ideas were sometimes tenuous. I found myself wanting to interact with the author’s ideas more directly instead of through the maze of her sources.

Much of the first layer revolves around the thesis that poetic creativity is in some unstated sense a function of brain laterality, specifically right brain filtering, which many studies purport to establish. Another index of poetic creativity is “bilateral” or equipotent hemispheric functionality, which harks back to Julian Jayne’s ideas (1976) on the “bicameral” mind: the presumed notion of our total mind before it is fractured by the excesses of the analytic left brain.

Central to Platt's research is the observation that various shocks and traumas to the nervous system sometimes open the floodgates of genius. Vico, on the first page of his autobiography (1744), describes how as a boy he had fallen off a ladder and cracked his skull and almost died, to which he ascribed the mobility of his imaginative life and therefore his genius. Genius, according to the implied view, transcends the everyday linear mind and is akin to the daimonic as portrayed in Plato's *Phaedrus*, while more recently Cesare Lombroso's *The Man of Genius* (1891) was rife with accounts of the lunacies and physical traumas of unusually accomplished people. Platt's book covers a wide range of cases in which individuals, for various reasons—congenital, accidental, or voluntary—reveal signs of right-brain creativity.

Apparently, there are many ways of mobilizing these right brain potentials, for example psychoactive chemicals. Another example is the near-death experience, especially if it involves cardiac arrest, which shuts down both hemispheres by instantly curtailing oxygen flow to the brain. During cardiac arrest, subjects sometimes report extraordinary experiences with powerfully creative consequences.

The main idea under study is paradoxical. Attacks on the normal adaptive functions of the brain may free up consciousness to perform in original, unexpected, and seemingly impossible ways—as with the author's friend's alleged conversations with angels. Certain kinds of experience impact one's very sense of reality, and ideas that seemed impossible now seem self-evident. Perhaps we overrate our routine sense of the real and confuse the habitual range of what we experience with the possible range.

The celebrants at Eleusis in ancient Greece emerged from the telesterion with a transformed sense of reality. St. Paul on the road to Damascus, after being knocked off his horse and out of himself by *something*, instantly acquired a new sense of reality, as it turns out to world-historical effect. Inevitably, there are some who cannot abide the notion of alternate realities having any claim to truth, at which point metaphysics and politics clash.

Platt is very careful to trace these expansions of consciousness, which assume various forms, back to the right hemisphere of the brain. We have to ask: How do the chemical and physical events in that right part of the brain relate to the mental experiences associated with the poetry, say, of Yeats or Sylvia Plath? It can't be that the "genius" (the novel words, flashing images, soaring ideas) is hiding somewhere inside those right brain lobes, waiting to be liberated.

The location in one lobe or the other of the brain is contingent, and the relation to creativity is correlative not explanatory. What difference would it make if the creative functions of the brain were located on the left side?

More crucial to creativity is this: the normal adaptive use of the brain as a tool of survival in the material world normally gets in the way of potential genius. Most of us are slaves of the survival-driven left brain.

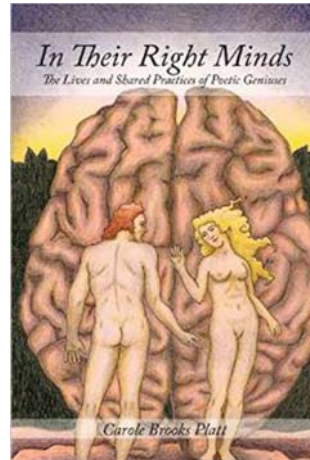
The foregoing are some background concepts shaping this book. Much of it zeroes in on the lives and practices of major poets—Blake, Keats, Hugo, Rilke, Yeats, Merrill, Plath, and Hughes, to mention a few. In her treatment, Platt adds two dimensions to discussing poetic creativity: the roles of group dynamics and of altered states of consciousness.

The poets are discussed in relation to their significant others, their muses, teachers, lovers, and nemeses. So Blake had his wife Catherine; Keats through letters his brother George and sister-in-law Georgina; Hugo his son Charles and mother in their joint mediumistic practices; Rilke his mother and several female muses; Yeats his young wife, Georgie; Merrill his partner David Jackson; while Plath and Hughes had each other.

Each poet is a complicated story. There is, for example, the politics of creativity, in which, as Platt sees it, male genius is sometimes prone to bully and exploit feminine (or other) receptivities. No doubt true in part, I thought she went overboard with Yeats. In Platt's account, Georgie Yeats shines as the feminine ideal incarnate while the poet himself is cast as a kind of intellectual thief obsessed with the occult.

The overarching message of these creative relationships: In surprising ways they often serve to unshackle the poet's intuitive and imaginative powers. One of the techniques used is to exploit automatism. For example, James Merrill's *The Changing Light at Sandover* (1993) was produced by Merrill and Jackson on a Ouija Board. The teacup they used to spell out the words would not move unless Jackson's hand was on it. In a sense, then, they were co-authors of this poem that Harold Bloom has assigned a place in his canon (1995). Platt's discussion of the group dynamics of Merrill shows clearly how two individuals can merge their imaginations, memories, and knowledge and create a greater mind, perhaps with powers that the individual alone could not properly deploy. Jackson, as Platt points out, was himself a writer and scholar of exotic languages.

Yeats and his wife Georgie collaborated in a different way. Georgie had mediumistic talents and part of her self-fashioning involved profound



rapport with her husband's creative work. Everything seems to have been orchestrated around her producing images that Yeats could use in his poetry. Yeats took full advantage of the material given to him by means of these automatisms. Platt calls attention to this notion of creative melding in the other poets she discusses.

As a matter of course, creative artists exploit all sorts of things that come their way, and are bound to step over boundaries. The unique thing about Yeats and Georgie was their rare deliberate partnership in the creative process. The lone genius in creative agony is a well-founded trope; the idea of genius as a product of intimate partnership has yet to fully establish itself.

The second big point is about intuition, the leap beyond left-brain rationality: the release of vision, inspiration, telepathy, clairvoyance, and the like. Again, as in Plato's *Phaedrus*, the poet, like the prophet, goes *ek-static*, out of his everyday-adapted mind, thus opening to the influx of *daimonic* consciousness. The daimonic, we could say, is the ferry between the rational and the subliminal self.

Platt found that the trauma of an aborted mother relationship was conducive to the "atypical" creative mentality. According to this book's thesis, "early trauma predisposes the poet to hear a dissociative Other who can say the unsayable from the vantage of enhanced right-hemispheric processing" (p.111). Clearly, this shattering of the mother archetype activates the imagination, so we find among great poets the quest for a "surrogate" mother that drives the poetic sensibility toward its fullest possible expression.

This, to my mind, suggests a poetics for our time, and Platt has touched a nerve here. Modern materialistic, technological civilization—fuelled by global capitalism and murderous militarism—represents the triumph and deification of the male principle. What's needed, one might say, is a poetics of metaphysical trauma; in short, the poetic remaking of the future will be about the return of the goddess. Along with Carole Platt, we have Henry Adams, Robert Graves, Carl Jung, and others to support the rationale of such a venture.

So, in researching the outer limits of creativity, we are wise not to go where people are happily adjusted and functioning normally. More likely the new miracles of creativity will emerge from global scenes of war, poverty, occupation, mass dislocation and migration, and climate catastrophe. With mother Earth traumatized by technological humanity, new forms of creativity may be looming on the horizon. As a prophylactic against apocalypse, we must be right in our brains—but not I hope in our politics.

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