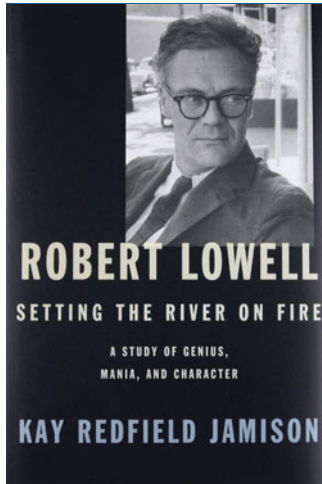


Book reviews

Edited by Allan Beveridge and Femi Oyeboode



Robert Lowell: Setting the River on Fire: A Study of Genius, Mania, and Character

By Kay Redfield Jamison.
Alfred A. Knopf. 2017
£25.00 (hb). 416 pp.
ISBN 978-0307700278

Robert Lowell (1917–1977) – the poetic genius with manic-depression – is the latest subject for this in-depth analysis by world expert on the disorder, Kay Redfield Jamison. The US-based professor, herself a fellow sufferer of bipolar illness, has used a variety of uniquely available sources to produce a deeply insightful account of the highly acclaimed poet's life. Drawing from interviews she conducted with many of those most affected by Lowell – including his daughter who also granted access to her father's psychiatric records – Jamison offers a fascinating picture of a genius whose life was punctuated with destructive mania.

Jamison was introduced to his work through a gift of *For the Union Dead* from a teacher when she was in the throes of adolescent bipolar mood swings. She has lived through her own challenges in his shadow and confronted the same stigma.

This is a long work of great scholarship and joyous empathy. Like Lowell she is a commander of metaphor and we read about his mania in a rich vocabulary – mania intoxicating to experience but heart-breaking to witness.

Her study of Lowell's forebears (a Boston pedigree from the Mayflower) is remarkable for the extent of both mental illness and civic achievement. Lowell studied at Harvard, which his ancestors had helped to fund, and was hospitalised in 1967 in the same Boston institution (McLean) in which his great-great-grandmother had been insane in 1845. His inheritance produced a tension between puritanical discipline and restraint, and pure wildness. His education and reading made him close to the great writers of the past and to historical and mythical figures with whom he identified when ill – Achilles, Shakespeare, Napoleon (a childhood idol whose battles he loved to recreate) and Hitler.

The pattern of his illness was recurrent cycles beginning with intense writing – 'messy spurts' – (to be revised later when depressed or better), infatuation and infidelity, wild overactivity and paranoia, hospitalisation with psychotic grandiosity followed by exhaustion, depression and a struggle to reconstruct damaged relationships and to face the certainty of another episode – but not self-harm. In 1967 having had at least 13 admissions for mania and years of psychotherapy, he started lithium and his illness improved.

The theme of manic destructiveness ('brutal words') and the courage to recover ('character') is explored with reference to soldiers

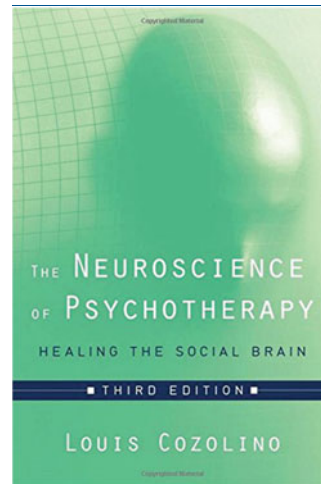
in World War I, described by Lord Moran. Jamison weaves a web linking the poet's illness and character to his much admired writings, teaching and activism.

His final years were spent in England, including fellowship at All Souls Oxford and marriage to his third wife, to whose portrait by her previous husband Lucian Freud he was clinging when he died of a heart attack in a New York taxi returning to his second and most stabilising wife, the writer and critic Elizabeth Hardwick.

His life illustrates the changed relationships that followed the willingness to talk more openly about mental illness that he encouraged and the sexual revolution of the 1960s.

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The Neuroscience of Psychotherapy: Healing the Social Brain

(3rd edn)
By Louis Cozolino,
W.W.Norton and Company, 2017,
£30.80 (hb), 608 pp.
ISBN: 978-0393712643

I approached this third edition of *Neuroscience of Psychotherapy: Healing the Social Brain* with some reluctance. I had purchased the first edition with the catchy title *Neuroscience of Psychotherapy: Building and Rebuilding the Human Brain*. How much change is needed to justify another edition of a large textbook with an equally ambitious title? How many extra bits would there be to justify the additional expense of a new book? In fact, the reference section alone has been tripled to keep up to date with the continuing development of knowledge.

The author attempts to persuade the reader that the considerable advance in neuroscience should inform our work as psychotherapists and was keen to encourage us to consider ourselves both psychotherapists and neuroscientists. He has a persuasive and enthusiastic approach and it made me think that perhaps the psychotherapy section of the Royal College of Psychiatrists would embrace the term 'consultant psychotherapist and neuroscientist'.

He quotes Freud's entreaty that 'all of our provisional ideas in psychology will presumably one day be based on an organic substructure' and makes considerable attempts to demonstrate that we are somewhere near this point.

Being retired, I do not read proper books and mostly stick to frivolous fiction on the Kindle. If anyone is going to make the effort to read such a sizeable book it must be a special experience, and this was a treat. It is a beautiful book to read in many ways. Physically it is substantial, it has lovely smooth white paper (early edition had the colour and consistency of a recycled toilet roll).