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Psychiatry in Literature

Sensibility and schizophrenia: Wilhelm Waiblinger on Friedrich Hölderlin's life, poetry and madness

George Ikkos  and Giovanni Stanghellini 

'Most German of Germans' and key figure in German Romanticism, Friedrich Hölderlin (1770–1843) entered the Monastery at Maulbronn in 1786, where he promptly fell in love with the daughter of its administrator. Terminating their affair later, he wrote 'surely you will understand that you could never have been happy with your morose, ill-humoured, and sickly friend'. Having disappointed his mother's expectations of a career in the cloth, failing work as a tutor took him in 1793 to Bordeaux, where he composed his famous *Andenken* (Remembrance):

'The current sweeps out. But it is the sea
That takes and gives remembrance,
And love no less keeps eyes attentively fixed
But what is lasting poets provide.'

Sadly, after only a few months in Bordeaux, Hölderlin returned home in Nürtingen on foot, 'pale, cadaveric and scrawny, his eyes possessed a wild, vacant look, his hair and beard were long [...] dressed like a beggar.' Diagnosed with 'hypochondrias' during the 1790s, in 1804, after 2 years as an in-patient in Tübingen's University Clinic under Dr von Autenrieth, he was deemed incurable and taken in by cultured carpenter Ernst Zimmer, whose home was in a tower in the city's old walls. Remaining there for life, he was visited regularly by Romantic poet Wilhelm Waiblinger (1804–1830) between July 1822 and October 1826.

Friedrich Hölderlin's Life, Poetry and Madness, Waiblinger's loving short memoir of the great poet's 'existence in the shadows and above all its terrible nexus', offers elegant descriptions of psychopathology, even engaging psychological formulations. Reported are mannerisms and stereotypes, agitation, blunted and inappropriate affect, grandiosity, formal thought disorder, conversations with himself, age disorientation, altered identity, apathy and social deterioration. For example, Waiblinger presents and explains bizarre behaviour: 'You can make out a few words, but most are so confused that it is impossible to reply [...] The visitor now finds himself addressed as "Your Majesty", "Your Holiness" and "Merciful Father"' and 'I was convinced that this unceasing monologue with himself was nothing more than the disequilibrium of thought and his inability to gain significant purchase on any object'. The reported literary deterioration is particularly poignant: 'He wrote to his mother, but always had to be urged to do so. These letters were not irrational; he took trouble over them and they were even lucid. But their style was that of a child who cannot write in a fully developed way or sustain a thought'. Waiblinger even speculates sympathetically how spiritual sensitivity, loftiness and humourlessness possibly contributed to the poet's eccentricities and 'terrifying' solitude.

An unusual couple. A poet writing about another in the grip of schizophrenia. Is diagnosis important? Yes, but here we follow Waiblinger who, with grace and tact, almost with shyness, leads us hand in hand through the labyrinth of the wacky ghostly delicate lunar landscape of the most poetic of the forms of madness. Schizophrenia or not, a sensible heart that feels the sensibility of another tormented by its own sensibility will always encounter a living soul. The mutual attachment of the two poets is luminous and Hölderlin emerges as both stranger and one of us.

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