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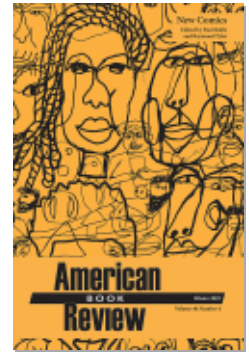
Understanding Madness by Carlo Levy (review)

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UNDERSTANDING MADNESS

Carlo Levy

Atopon Books

<https://www.atoponbooks.com/understanding-madness>

74 pages; paperback, \$10.00

Eyal Amiran

This memoir of mental instability, balanced between the unassailability of personal experience and its opacity, finds a language for a state of mind impossible to convey fully in any medium, and creates an elastic space in which to be. It's a small book that has no news to tell: the author moved from a Santa Monica, California, to Seattle, his father left the family, his mother tends plants, he befriends an elderly neighbor, walks in the park, and is living with an artist. Instead the book is about affective experience that requires the quotidian world but makes it feel irrelevant, like the page of an Escher drawing.

Autobiographers of madness often experience the opposite, a sense of grandeur and the world-historical seriousness of their subject. Think of Daniel Paul Schreber's *Memoirs of My Nervous Illness* (1955; first published in German in 1903), in which he is the only living person in the world, locked in a conflict with God, or Leonora Carrington's *Down Below* (1972; first published in French in 1944), in which she knows how to end World War II. Those books do convey states of mind but try to explain cosmic arguments. Their madness is rational and combative. Levy does not adopt a Napoleonic pose, nor is he so entirely inside the madness, as he tells it, even when he eats laurel leaves in an attempted suicide:

Writing this makes me wonder about my own mind, and all the paths and crevices into the past, sometimes finding their way again to my foolish, impatient suicide attempt in that attic room when I was thirty, lying down on the bed after eating a handful of shiny laurel leaves I had picked from a hedge a few blocks away. I grow embarrassed and uneasy remembering how madness surprised me, a city untying the strings of my head to look inside, stirring a com-

motion of telepathy and collected hearts, filling dark rooms in an actor's soul.

How did we get from hedge leaves to strings, from strings to stirring, from stirring to hearts, from hearts to an actor? There is a connection, but the book avoids instrumental logics to explore what it feels like to be both seen and unseen, forthright and indirect, clear about uncertain things and uncertain about clarity. In the book the world seems both simple and impossible.

Levy rejects grand accounts of madness—like the idea some paranoids have had that we are controlled by “influencing machines,” remote electric or mechanical media—and cannot abide what he calls “totality.” Yet Levy’s emotions, epigrammatic and distant, attach to repeating images and patterns, like leaves of plants and books, radio sounds, rooms, crevices, and seeds. Never suggesting a whole, these images become linguistic figures for a world or a way of looking at a world. His mother gardened at

the unwanted margins and odd corners all around the garden the older tenants claimed for themselves. Her herbs began to fill the cracks and crannies, in thin troughs along the garage, and borders of the alley fence. . . . Once again she became a tinker of boxes of lettuce, her memory of arias broadcasting seeds and songs of birds feeding nests the neighbors heard on the radio through the kitchen door.

The unwanted margins, older tenants, cracks and borders, all assume a metaphorical resonance that can't be spelled out. “Tinker” leads to thoughts of music, broadcast sounds to the sowing of seeds, and seeds and songs converge on birds, sounding through the window like radios. It's not absent mindedness we follow here, nor a snapshot of the garden scene, but thinking almost on its own.

The figure of song describes the world of the author's father as well. “After he died, I wondered, would a familiar song lead him through the old, crowded lives of the dead, as if a book by my father could appear in their expressions? Then I found out all along he had been throwing his notes away, believing there was nothing worthwhile to save.” His father throws notes away, broadcasting songs that might guide him through an underworld. Later Levy describes a childhood idea of “the world of childhood radios,” an idea that electric voices

come from inside clouds and celestial bodies: “We picture the voices deep inside the clouds, the sky, the voices of the moon tuning the electricity of invention for the sun to keep shining.” How hard it is to preserve such childhood ideas that are discarded as soon as they appear! The sky and clouds are traditionally a place from which dead ancestors and divinities surveil the living. When Levy thinks people read his mind, they occupy a parental vantage point associated with birds of the air: “Everyone was a kind father, patient with my limitations, waiting for me to learn what couldn’t always be expressed in words. Life looked at me so oddly, like an owl reading my thoughts.”

Understanding Madness puts us in the position of reading Levy’s thoughts, figuratively, but also always literally. He is understandably uncomfortable with that relation, inevitable in such a memoir, and wonders who we are he is talking to. There is always the danger that one is talking to oneself, just as paranoids are likely their own persecutors. Everyone might be a character in this book. “We are characters continuing each other’s books,” he says, and the readers, too, continue his book. A memoir about this kind of madness is a self-fulfilling prophecy, even if others don’t read it. It makes the reader a paranoid, reading into the book as well as out of it, and makes all thought generally paranoid-schizophrenic, dispersed among cultural affects and images.

So for instance in the verbs and cadences of a passage quoted above—“remembering how madness surprised me, a city untying the strings of my head to look inside, stirring a commotion of telepathy and collected hearts, filling dark rooms in an actor’s soul”—I hear an echo of “The Waste Land,” a poem where madness interchanges the personal and the collective: “mixing / Memory and desire, stirring/ Dull roots with spring rain. . . / Summer surprised us.” Are these echoes, and if so of what? Of Levy’s radio, or of Eliot’s, or of the many voices in “The Waste Land,” a poem Eliot originally titled “He Do the Police in Different Voices,” itself a line from Dickens? They might be echoes of my own thoughts that never were on the page.

On the one hand, Levy’s radio reflects a mind, the seeds cast by his father, for example, now departed: “My pearl, the bright, fictitious transistor in my head, where the voices turn around and around, chasing their words like fishes in the sea, only guesses you can hear me, when my privacy and silence are lost. So I play a small role on the radio, damaged and half-empty.” On the other hand, in these lines again we may hear an echo, of Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*

this time, also cited in “The Waste Land” (“O O O O that Shakespeherian Rag,” as Eliot says): nothing remains but a small role on the poet’s radio, damaged but half-full. Levy’s radio reflects the world in which he is reflected, a spectral image in the library window: “My subconscious, wooden and glass face blurs into the outside world, the letters of old-fashioned ancient atoms becoming pictures on those strange Pythagorean stations, on the frequency of luck. Who turns the little dial of my fate in dreams?”

We take a turn, in this book. Levy visits a new library, but “the contents of my old character are still inside.” The objects in the library (books and musical instruments on display) are metaphors for Levy’s mind, old wine in new bottles; they stand-in for the way a culture of sounds and images gathers elements—not fragments—like Levy’s collage work reproduced in the book, as a half-empty ruin . . . and like the collage work, it leaves the image of the whole outlined but not wholly filled. Instead this writing finds words for a life that others might not be able to hear, the older tenants, but it speaks anyway, no apologia but a gift that you get when you read.

EYAL AMIRAN is *Professor of Comparative Literature at UC Irvine, where he teaches literary theory, early newspaper comics, and outsider literatures. His published work includes books on Beckett and on Modernism and essays on digital culture and twentieth-century fiction. He edits the journal Postmodern Culture and lives in Los Angeles with his famous cat, Poa.*



FIGURE 1. Carlo Levy, "Untitled ca. 1992." Mixed media. Reproduced by permission of the artist.