reviews

Creative Malady. By George Pickering. Pp. 327+8 plates. (Unwin and Allan: London, 1974.) £5.25.

THE relationship between creativity and illness is one which stimulates the interest of most of us, particularly when an achievement is of the order of genius and seems to involve an impressive destructive action upon the subject's personal life. In this book Sir George Pickering, former Professor of Medicine at London University, attempts to elucidate this peculiar relationship by studying the lives of six famous people: Charles Darwin, Florence Nightingale, Mary Baker Eddy, Sigmund Freud, Marcel Proust and Elizabeth Barrett Browning.

The main hypothesis put forward by Sir George is that creative malady takes two quite distinct forms. In the first, exemplified by Darwin and Florence Nightingale, the illness serves a specific purpose: that of protecting the 'invalid' so that he or she can undertake the immense creative task undisturbed and unmolested. The second kind of creative illness can be observed in the lives of Freud, Proust and Mary Baker Eddy. In these cases productivity followed a period of "great turmoil and torment of mind" which were of sufficient degree to merit the term illness. Freud noted himself that he could not do creative work when he felt well and happy. The last subject in the book, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, unlike the others, showed no obvious connection in her life between creativity and illness.

Sir George gives most of his attention to the first of these types of illness as displayed by Darwin and Florence Nightingale. He has a rare gift for concise and vivid biography and these two lives make fascinating reading. Moreover, he is able to show clearly that the two subjects did indeed use their illnesses as a defensive barrier against forces which would have impinged on their work. (Both of them, for instance, became prostrated by palpitations and other symptoms in the face of intrusion by unwelcome friends, relations or public engagements.)

Creative Malady would, however, have been better if Sir George had focused throughout on that theme, for when he turns to other factors in creative illness he underestimates the complexity of the problem and is far less convincing. 'Creativity' and 'illness' are not simple and unambiguous con-

Genius and the mortal afflictions

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Little wonder they are scarred or ill". Proust (pictured right) was only one of many so afflicted. Review by Peter Lomas

cepts and the two cannot be treated adequately as distinct entities. Take, for instance, Darwin's confessions about himself:

"I have said in one respect that my mind has changed during the last twenty or thirty years. Up to the age of thirty, or beyond it, poetry of many kinds, such as the words of Milton, Gray, Byron, Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Shelley, gave me great pleasure, and even as a schoolboy I took intense delight in Shakespeare, especially in the historical plays. I have also said that formerly pictures gave me considerable, and music very great, delight. But now for many years I cannot endure to read a line of poetry; I have tried lately to read Shakespeare, and found it so intolerably dull that it nauseated me. I have almost lost my taste for pictures or music.

This curious and lamentable loss of the higher aesthetic tastes is all the odder, as books on history, biographies, and travels (independently of any scientific facts which they may contain), and essays on all sorts of subjects interest me as much as ever they did. My mind seems to have become a kind of machine for grinding general laws out of large collections of facts, but why this should have caused the atrophy of that part of the brain alone, on which the higher tastes depend, I cannot conceive."

The impoverishment which Darwin describes could itself be considered either as a form of illness (in the sense of psychological disturbance) or as a state of mind liable to provoke manifest illness. How much impoverishment can a person take before becoming ill? To what extent was Darwin's neurosis caused by conflict between creative drive and the reluctance to pay the heavy price? And what is the origin of a drive so strong that it can, in many cases, wreak such personal havoc? Sir George does not really get to grips with questions of this kind and

that is because, in spite of his admiration for Freud, he places too little emphasis on early individual development. He comes closest to that in describing Proust's relationship with his mother.

Proust was 'in love' with his mother all his life and wrote *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu* only after her death, as if to fill a void. But I suspect that the real void began much earlier. Sir George quotes a moving passage from the great novel in which Proust describes his passionate dependence, as a child, on his mother's all-too-brief goodnight kiss. Sir George writes:

"Why then did Proust write a masterpiece while I have not? A difference of talent no doubt. Moreover, Proust was rich and never had to earn his living. While Proust was able to devote his whole talent to creating his book, I was leading an extremely busy life of practice, teaching, research and public affairs. But there is another great difference. While I was devoted to my mother, as he was to his, and while I had more need of her, since my father died when I was three, my *Recherche du Temps Perdu* would not have lingered on or indeed referred to any incident when my mother withheld the goodnight kiss. If she did so, I have no memory of it whatsoever."

That, I believe, is the crucial factor in an exceedingly complicated and little known phenomenon. Creative genius arises, in a few rare people, out of an early despair of loving. They create an alternative world as a substitute for the world they have lost. Therein lies the strength and ruthlessness of their drive. Little wonder they are scarred or ill.

Sir George may not have written a masterpiece. But he has given us a book which not only contributes to our understanding of creativity but also is a delight to read. □