The rhythmic chanting in The Workman Arts Project’s performance of *The Chant* at Brock University’s Madness Manifest symposium in January of 2008 brought its audience of witnesses into the psychic fold of one whose life has been impacted by mental illness. But as we learned afterwards in our post-performance discussion with the performers of The Workman Arts Project, a company of artists whose work is based at the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health on Queen Street West in Toronto and informed by their own battles with mental illness and addiction, the repetitive, rhythmic pulse of this chant represented both the structure of mental illness and, paradoxically, the means of disrupting it on the path to mental health. *The Chant* is, in this way, a kind of pharmakon – both a remedy and cause, blessing and curse – that might describe the creative tension that lies in the mythos that surrounds the figure of the “mad artist” or “mad genius.” From Van Gogh to Beethoven, Dickens to Mahler and Schumann, the artist’s mental illness is thought to be the seat of creative genius – even “indispensable to genius” as D. Jablow Hershman and Julian Lieb argue – and its greatest impediment.

But like the ritualized performance of *The Chant* - its repetitive incantation unwinding in circular formation and (un)ending in an elliptic decrescendo of voices - madness, “genius,” and creativity are also characterized by incessancy and recursivity. The curse of the “mad artist” is the obsessive recurrence of the idée fixe, the spell of which is only ever broken by the “genius” that allows the neurosis to manifest itself in the form of artistic expression. For the poet Hölderlin, the particular “strength” of the artist is the compulsion to make known and make visible the strange, the disquieting, the taboo, the invisible. For Nietzsche, the madness of the artist lies in providing such a
vision and a way of seeing that breaks with an otherwise homogenized, compulsory, and consensual perception of the material world. With these perceptual powers, the artist becomes, in the cultural imagination, a kind of divining rod for the suppressed, the sublimated, and the uncanny, which may explain why the artist has been historically the locus of cultural anxieties. The disruptive vision of the “mad artist” or “mad genius” has the power to undermine epistemological claims, threatening a fragile sense of order founded on what are otherwise unquestioned systems of knowledge. This, arguably, is the “[r]use and new triumph of madness”, as Michel Foucault’s declaims in the final phrases of *Madness and Civilization*: “the world that thought to measure and justify madness through psychology must justify itself before madness”.

The Madness Manifest symposium held at Brock University sought to engage in a multifaceted investigation of this potent dyad of madness and creativity from a range of disciplinary vantage points, bringing together artists, students, and scholars from a variety of fields in the Humanities and Social Sciences, as well as members of the community. As part of the Department of Dramatic Art’s 2007-2008 mainstage season, the symposium also served as a forum to address questions concerning the representation of madness, which underpinned the department’s two feature performances: Carol Churchill’s *The Skriker* directed by David Fancy and designed by Kelly Wolf, and Peter Weiss’ *Marat/Sade* directed by Virginia Reh and designed by David Vivian. A panel discussion with the directors and designers of these two productions identified possible representational strategies that did not re-entrench homogenizing conceptions of mental illness and, consequently, re-stigmatize sufferers of mental illness as “abnormal” and other. A plenary conversation with Richard Rose, Artistic Director of the Tarragon Theatre in Toronto, continued this investigation revealing a “dramaturgy of madness” in the diagnostic analyses of the dramatic text and character he undertakes as a director. Stereotypical representations of mental illness were embodied and interrogated in an interactive workshop led by arts therapist Athena Madan, that had participants self-reflexively examining their own perceptions of madness as it has been constructed and represented historically in a range of discourses, from the popular to the medical. These praxis-oriented inquiries in the symposium were complemented by a diverse range of panel sessions composed of scholars investigating themes of madness in literature, film, theatre, philosophy, and psychology.

The articles featured in this issue are representative of some of the stimulating individual paper presentations that responded to the symposium’s principal themes. In “Just Playing Mad: Irrationalism in Automatism via Claude Gauvreau”, Gregory Betts traces the trope of madness in the European avant-garde to the post-World War II Quebecois surrealists, focusing his study on Canada’s “preeminent Automatist dramatist” and activist-artist Claude Gauvreau. In Gauvreau’s particular use of *folie*, madness becomes the vehicle for both revolutionary politics and aesthetics, revealing what Betts calls “the paradox of intentional irrationalism.” The theme of madness in Gauvreau’s dramas presents not only a means of undermining the conservative bedrock of society but beyond this, a “linguistically embodied irrationalism” that transcends narrative, representing nothing beyond the experience of irrationalism itself. On the notion of “playing mad,” Clarissa Hurley examines the conjunction of “erotomania” in late sixteenth, early seventeenth medical literature and the predominance of *pietra* or madness scenes performed by the professional actresses of the *commedia dell’arte*. Hurley reveals how the mad scenes performed by *commedia* actresses were appealing to audiences not only for the partial nudity these portrayals would invariably feature, which “heightened the already transgressive presence of the female body in the public space;” the metatheatrical framing of these scenes invited audiences to “diagnose” the representations of madness on stage. Hurley persuasively demonstrates the ways in which these popular performances contributed to contemporary discourses on lovesickness. Catherine Parayre assesses the multiple valences of madness and its significations in “‘Madness’ and desire: *Jane Eyre* and *Wittgenstein’s
Madness in these novels signifies a “potentially disruptive” threat, not in a politically mobilizing sense, as in Gauvreau’s dramas, but as a form of social aberrance and inadequacy to which all of the characters in these novels are susceptible, further entrenching, in turn, a hegemonic “celebration of ‘ableness.’”

Finally, complementing a selection of visual art by members of the Workman Arts Project as well as pieces by Donna Szoke and Richard Boulet is Catherine Heard’s analysis of a quilted coat made between 1948 and 1955 by a schizophrenic woman known by no other name than Myrllen. Using contemporary texts on the artistry of the mentally ill as a framework for her analysis of the work and its reception, Heard follows Hans Prinzhorn in avoiding a diagnostic analysis of the patient’s embroidery work. Instead, Heard conducts a contextual, iconographic study of the coat, challenging long-held claims that its imagery is merely autobiographical.

I am delighted that the symposium’s rich, interdisciplinary dialogue on mental health and the arts has been captured and commemorated in this issue of the Brock Review and I would like to extend my thanks to the Editor, Dr. Keri Cronin, for devoting an issue to the symposium’s themes. I would also like to express my gratitude to Dean Rosemary Hale, Dr. Jane Koustas, and the HRI Advisory Board for their support in making the symposium possible. Warmest thanks to Professor David Vivian in the Department of Dramatic Arts for all of his assistance in developing the website and promotional materials for the event, as well as to Kathryn Haynes and Maggie George, both students of the Department of Dramatic Arts, who generously volunteered their time to ensure the symposium ran smoothly.

Notes

1 These are excerpts taken from The Chant, a play written by John Gregory and part of a larger work titled Worlds Away? that was produced by the Workman Arts Project in 1992.


Bibliography
