book it would be irresponsible of any national government to believe that it can adopt a *laissez-faire* policy concerning alcohol. This book is published to coincide with WHO's Alcohol Action Plan in Europe.

Despite the presence of 17 authors the work flows interestingly and readably under skilled editorship. The first section sets the scene with reviews of global trends in alcohol consumption, followed by a chapter on drinking and individual risk. This topic is of crucial interest in the UK where guidelines for sensible drinking are being reconsidered. The book acknowledges that for adults "we now have evidence for the potential health benefits from drinking in small amounts". This, however, is balanced by the evidence that "entirely risk free drinking exists only as fantasy". The drinker's dilemma persists but he or she is now better informed.

The evidence remains strong that aggregate consumption is related to the level of overall alcohol-related harm experienced by the community. This is particularly true of chronic physical harm, whereas in predicting social consequences, the pattern and context of drinking needs to be carefully specified.

The efficacy of various prevention strategies is ably reviewed in a series of chapters addressing: pricing and taxation policy; access and availability; public safety and drinking in particular contexts; and the merits of various education endeavours. Finally, in one of the briefest chapters, the authors examine individually directed interventions as an element of the public health response. This emphasises the benefits of focused brief advice given within primary health care.

The final chapter focuses on the policy options presented by the existing evidence. It is reassuring to read that the majority of the policies that were recommended by the College in *Alcohol: our favourite drug* (1986) remain valid. The book has not addressed the growing and important fields of genetics or the neurophysiology of alcohol. Neither does it consider the mythic qualities of alcohol and the anthropologist's perspective. It is unfortunate that Mediterranean, Eastern European and Third World countries have produced no contributors to this work.

This is an excellent book and needs to be read by all who advise on public policy. I suspect that few policy makers themselves will have the time or experience to read this work and the responsibility will rest with their advisers to ensure that its elements are suitably distilled.

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Muse in Torment. By Alex Mezey. Lewes: The Book Guild. 1994. Pp 328+xiii. £12.95

The genius–madness hypothesis is one that has reappeared regularly since the time of Aristotle, on the anecdotal basis of unstable or melancholic individuals who were artists or writers. In the last few years, though, information has begun to be collected more systematically, perhaps provoked more by the suicide of the writer Sylvia Plath than by any other single case. Certainly, the output of Plathiana shows no sign of easing off, and this story figures prominently in Dr Mezey's work, which he subtitles 'The psychopathology of creative writing'. Having lived in several European countries, he has the advantage of multilingual fluency, and many passages here are translated by himself; our word-power though, is tested at times with terms like 'divagation' and 'ephebe'. He sites this work strategically, "at the intersection of biography, abnormal psychology, and literary history."

Making diagnostic assessments of those, however famous, who lived centuries ago is usually hazardous. It has to try and make allowance, as Mezey says, for "changes in the cultural and moral climate, such as the changed importance of religion, attitudes to children, expectation of life, etc." However, to say that "Religious dogma regarded sexual love as a necessary, if regrettable part of destiny" is to generalise unjustifiably from Christianity to other major faiths. Historical eyebrows, also, are likely to be raised by the finding of an "increase in the rate of suicide during periods which emphasize individualism, detachment from or conflict with society". How on earth can one say which these were, and how much agreement would there be about the choice? There is believed to have been an epidemic of

suicide following the Nazi occupation of Vienna, but otherwise, the link is almost as difficult to prove epidemiologically as in terms of cultural history.

This is not to deny that suicide seems to have occurred among major writers much more often than would be expected on the basis of chance, Mezey lists 33 of these in the last 200 years. In this group, 13 had experienced the early death of a parent, but taking a much longer period, 81 are listed who lost one or both parents early in life. Of course, before the modern period, parents – and particularly mothers – not uncommonly died fairly young, but even allowing for this, the numbers are striking. One consequence, it is suggested here, of many male writers experiencing the death or absence of their father when young has been difficulty in acquiring masculine sexual identity. Illustrating another ill-effect, Jonathan Swift had neither a father nor any consistent maternal affection: "thrown on his own resources in an indifferent and often hostile world (he) grew up to be without warmth himself". Similarly with Strindberg, "having been rebuffed in his love for his mother, he came to feel that he could not be loved" – as seems clear in his writings.

On the whole, both schizophrenia and the addictions have had destructive effects on writers' creativity; Mezey attributes the latter primarily to "the need to escape inner conflict – to silence the voice of fear or self-disgust". Why so many writers should apparently suffer these feelings, though, remains largely unexplained; Freud interpreted art as neurotic wish-fulfilment, but made no distinction in this between good art and bad. In the case of Rousseau, "His brilliance as a writer is nowhere greater than in the books he wrote during the years when he was undeniably mad", but there seem to be few other cases of which that could be said to be true.

However, affective disorder is another matter – not only frequent among those who continued to produce great work, but often starting very early.

Virginia Woolf had her first attack at the age of 13 and Samuel Johnson his at the age of 20 – "I inherited a vile melancholy from my father". But would suppression of the mood disorder also suppress the creativity? Mezey's view is that the action of lithium is variable from this point of view. He accepts that some psychiatric abnormality can have a positive effect on creativity, for instance, by "infusing work with the dejection of melancholia". On the other hand, and this is a principal message of the book, knowledge of a writer's psychopathology "cannot explain the nature and origin of poetic gifts".

Mezey gives an extensive bibliography, but there are some surprising omissions. His account of T. E. Lawrence does not mention the outstanding biography by Mack (also a psychiatrist), although two others are listed, and I was unable to find any reference to Kay Jamison's *Touched with Fire*. Published in 1993, this is certainly the standard work on the relationship between manic–depressive illness and the artistic temperament. Too late for inclusion, though, was Felix Post's study of creativity and psychopathology in 291 world-famous men; among the writers, he records 46% as having severe psychopathology, 42% marked, and 10% mild. The proportions with severe and marked disorder were higher than in any of the other categories (scientists, composers, politicians, artists, and thinkers). A recent paper by Wintersgill (1994) has examined the relationship between affective disorder and creativity in 11 composers; the most favourable time for composition seems to have been immediately after a depressive phase, so that mood swings might perhaps be advantageous to a creative artist. In this small series, though, Handel, Schumann, and Mozart are combined with such minor figures as Jeremiah Clarke and Peter Warlock. Statistical analyses are likely to need purer samples than that, but in the case of many creative artists, getting agreement on their correct category may prove elusive. Although not dealing generally with composers, Mezey records that Rossini wrote 38 operas by the age of 20, and then nothing during a depressive phase which lasted 25 years – perhaps the longest mood swing on record.

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