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# 'MAD AS BIRDS': INSANITY, DICTION, AND OBSCURITY IN THE POETRY OF DYLAN THOMAS

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**Abstract**

*Dylan Thomas is widely regarded as a 'difficult' poet. The present paper attempts to explain how the obscurity in some of his poems is related to a certain type of poetic insanity which Thomas discussed in his 1933 South Wales Evening Post essay, 'Genius and Madness Akin in the World of Art'. This paper traces this insanity in his poems 'Love in the Asylum', 'Especially When the October Wind', and 'Sometimes the Sky's too Bright', and explores how it influences his diction in these poems, thereby making them difficult to understand. The paper will also discuss the purpose of incorporating insanity in the diction and imagery of these poems--the breaking down of the 'barriers' constructed by 'common-sensibility'. The paper reveals how Thomas's poetic personas in each of these poems suffers from some type of madness (and is sometimes nourished by it), and therefore, quite naturally, what he speaks and how he speaks it is bound to seem incomprehensible to 'rational' minds at first glance. The paper also discusses how the interplay of madness and diction is designed to ensure an emotional response from the readers.*

**Keywords:** Dylan Thomas, Diction, Madness, Obscurity, Imagery, Asylum, Overstimulation, Liberation.

Dylan Thomas is widely regarded as a "difficult" poet, and other critical terms applied to his work, such as "surrealist" and "modernist" stem from this inherent difficulty surfacing in most of his poems. Occasionally, the difficulty itself stems from his diction, the bold and sometimes bizarre ways in which he fashions his words and crafts his poems. In the foreword to *Dylan Thomas: A Centenary Celebration*, Terry Jones comments on the connection between Thomas's love for words with the obscurity in his poetry:

> …they (Thomas's poems) had an impact on me that no other poetry could have had. The earlier poems I found obscure but they thrilled me. No one was doing with words what Dylan Thomas was doing. He wrote: 'I should say I wanted to write poetry in the beginning because I had fallen in love with words…The words alone. What the words stood for was of a very secondary importance…' Maybe that explains the obscurity of the early poems. (Jones viii)

For Jones, Thomas's poetry is about a "festival of words for their own sake" (Jones viii). Yet this distortion of the usual function of signifiers and signifieds is brought on by a certain kind of poetic madness, which Thomas discussed in his 1933 *South Wales Evening Post* essay, 'Genius and Madness Akin in the World of Art'. Thomas stated in this essay, "the borderline of insanity is more difficult to trace than the majority of people, comparatively safe within the barriers of their own common-sensibility, can realize" (qtd. in "Dylan Marlais Thomas"). This paper attempts to trace this "borderline of insanity" in his poems 'Love in the Asylum', 'Especially When the October Wind', and 'Sometimes the Sky's too Bright', and explores how it influenced his diction in these poems which is indeed quite obscure at times. The paper will also discuss the purpose of incorporating insanity in the diction and imagery of these poems, which, as we shall see, is the breaking down of the "barriers" constructed by "common-sensibility". Thomas's poetic persona in each of these poems, as the paper shall reveal, suffers from some type of madness (and is sometimes nourished by it), and therefore, quite naturally, what he speaks and how he speaks it is bound to seem incomprehensible to 'rational' minds at first glance. However, if these poems are approached keeping in mind the madness of the persona in them, it becomes possible to develop an empathetic, emotional response to them, which is probably better than arriving at mere understandings of them.

'Love in the Asylum', as the title itself suggests, is a poem of desire in an abnormal setting. The first stanza fixes the tone and the setting of the poem: "A stranger has come / To share my room in the house not right in the head, / A girl mad as birds" (Thomas lines 1-3). The second line is of utmost importance as it establishes what the rest of the poem is going to be like. Notably, it is not only the persona living in the asylum who is not right in his head; the house suffers from a mental imbalance as well. A physical, inanimate object is hereby given not only a human quality (the quality of having a "head"—a psyche) but this quality is also judged critically (a house's psyche can apparently be either 'right' or 'not right'—and in this case, the house is unequivocally "not right in the head"). This amalgamation of the physical with what may be called the metaphysical will occur repeatedly in the poem. The first and third lines, on the other hand, describe the intrusion which sets the poem in motion and which urges the persona caught in the asylum to speak. A girl has come to the asylum, and her madness is compared with birds. This simile ("a girl mad as birds") conjures an image of flight, and hence, liberation. It indicates the purpose of setting the poem in an asylum—finding liberation by breaking free from it. This liberation shall emerge out of the tension between the persona's entrapment in a madhouse and his coming into contact with the rule-shattering, reality-disorienting mad-girl.

The bird image continues to the second stanza as the girl handles the door of the asylum with her arm which is also said to be her plume: "Bolting the night of the door with her arm her plume. / Strait in the mazed bed / She deludes the heaven-proof house with entering clouds" (Thomas 4-6).Yet it is noticeable that what the girl handles is not a physical thing at all, but a metaphysical thing--"night". It can be argued that "door of the night" would

have been a more comprehensible phrase, rational, almost, in a poem. But the reversal Thomas brings in here suits more the madness—how the metaphysical night can be of the physical door of the asylum lies beyond the grasp of rationality. It should also be noticed that there is a role-reversal in the character of the girl—she deludes, becoming the source of delusion and madness from the sufferer (if she ever was a sufferer). The house is "heaven-proof" because it still serves the rational purpose of sheltering the asylum patients from the sky overhead. But now the stability of the asylum is threatened by the intrusion of the girl. She deludes the psyche of the house which was already insane, and therefore, the physical structure of it is also threatened by "entering clouds". Even if the clouds are just a hallucination in the eyes of the persona, their destabilizing impact remains the same—for the house loses its "heaven proof" status in his eyes.

The diction in the next two stanzas of the poem continues to baffle as the words continue to describe the delusive intrusion of the girl:

> Yet she deludes with walking the nightmarish room,
> At large as the dead,
> Or rides the imagined oceans of the male wards.
> She has come possessed
> Who admits the delusive light through the bouncing wall,
> Possessed by the skies (Thomas 7-12)

The girl can apparently delude "with walking the nightmarish room". The room is nightmarish because it has "bouncing walls", yet through these disturbing walls the girl admits a delusive light, counterbalancing the insanity, this time, with her own crazy method—light must stand as a symbol for hope (of liberation from insanity and entrapment). Simply by walking in the cell where Thomas's insane persona is trapped, she begins the process of liberating him from its confines. Therefore she becomes a centre of power and a centre of desire—she seems to be "at large as the dead", and "possessed by the skies". Once again, Thomas's diction fittingly baffles rational attempts at reading—the dead are not really "at large" in the rational world, they are either buried or burnt. But the suggested hauntings of the dead through the phrase "at large as the dead" is appropriate in the mouth of a person who inhabits an asylum and who wishes to describe the all-consuming, widespread power the mad-girl possesses. Similarly, the girl who deludes the "heaven-proof house" is herself "possessed by the skies". Perhaps this is an indication that the condition of being "heaven-proof" was not a good condition at all--it only refused the entering of light and clouds, the Divine touch that sustains all life. Being possessed by skies therefore must not be taken as a hint towards something demonic—it might as well be a reference to Divine inspiration that brings about the demolition of the imprisoning asylum, and lets in the light and clouds.

The empowerment of the mad-girl continues in the penultimate stanza: "She sleeps in the narrow trough yet she walks the dust / Yet raves at her will / On the madhouse boards

worn thin by my walking tears" (Thomas 13-15). By her delusive power, she can sleep and walk at the same time. Yet it is controlled somnambulism, and whatever she raves during her sleepwalking is determined by her will. The last line of this stanza once again hints at the ominous repressiveness of the asylum. Only the intense grief of the persona caught in its walls has corroded them, his tears have worn away the madhouse boards. By now, it is possible to trace the binary oppositions at play in the poem—sanity / insanity and shelter / exposure. The intrusion of the mad-girl and her inclusion within the system of the asylum reverses these hierarchical oppositions and in each case shows the latter part of the opposition to be superior, something to long for. Thus insanity gets importance over and above sanity, and exposure is related with freedom while shelter becomes prison. Thus the use of 'madness' in the form of the mad-girl in the poem is not only methodical, it deconstructs the basic assumption an unsuspecting reader might make before beginning to read the poem--that the asylum is a safe place for the mentally imbalanced. Thomas's asylum is a symbol for such "safe places" constructed by the society which seem to be nothing more than imprisoning, debilitating systems.

The break down of the asylum's machinery happens at the hand of love, as the persona's desire for this mad girl turns upside down the world he has known—the world of entrapment and inhibition—for a very long time: "And taken by light in her arms at long and dear last / I may without fail / Suffer the first vision that set fire to the stars" (Thomas 16-18). The expansion of the persona's psyche by love here attains a cosmic depth—it not only goes beyond the four walls, but becomes greater than the world itself. By embracing her, Thomas's persona finds the light that the bouncing walls have failed to ward off, and this sudden exposure to the light of life is painful and exhilarating and godlike. What the mad-girl brings to the persona is close to what the Biblical God had brought to his dark creation when He had said, "Let there be light"—thus the light in her arms goes back to the origin of cosmic light. Here it must be noted that Thomas had once said that his poetry was about "the record of my individual struggle from darkness toward some measure of light" (qtd. in Pratt 291). The fact that Thomas allows his persona in 'Love in the Asylum' to ultimately experience a vision of cosmic light therefore indicates a measure of poetic fulfillment.

Madness, thus, pervades Dylan Thomas's diction in 'Love in the Asylum', and it is the diction which makes the poem relatable for a reader who may not identify with Dylan Thomas's personal life, which, according to Ralph Maud, is behind the genesis of the poem:

> The poem as a whole, and the last line especially, is a tribute to Caitlin as the poet's muse, the bringer of vision. The implication is that her 'madness' is an essential ingredient of his working life, no matter that it may seem from the outside to impede it. People might think she has taken him into a madhouse, but he knows she has opened up the madhouse that he was trapped in before he met her. (Maud 180-181)

While Thomas's personal experiences might have indeed forced him to pen 'Love in the Asylum', the above discussion shows how his diction makes its underlying concerns, expressed through the binaries of sanity / insanity and shelter / exposure, universal in nature.

While 'Love in the Asylum' is quite directly about madness, 'Especially When the October Wind' is less apparently so. At first glance it appears to be a poem of desire in bleak winter:

> Especially when the October wind
> With frosty fingers punishes my hair,
> .....
> My busy heart who shudders as she talks
> Sheds the syllabic blood and drains her words. (Thomas 1-2, 7-8)

The centre of desire in this poem too raves much like the mad-girl in 'Love in the Asylum'. Her babbling inspires poetic energy ("syllabic blood") once more. So in the very first stanza Thomas has prioritized irrational babbling over rational conversations, which in turn once again highlights the importance of insanity over sanity. The need for delusion becomes apparent in the second stanza: "Shut, too, in a tower of words, I mark / On the horizon walking like the trees / The wordy shapes of women…" (Thomas 9-11). Even shedding the syllabic blood is not a liberating experience, and this time both the persona and his love are imprisoned (as hinted by the word "too") in "a tower of words". This brings the necessity of hallucinating—wordy shapes of women are seen to be moving like the trees. This hallucinatory image works because it makes kinetic the traditionally static image of trees. This witchery of walking trees, with echoes of Shakespeare, prepares us for the conjuring of the lover's imago in the speaker's mind:

> Some let me make you of the vowelled beeches,
> Some of the oaken voices, from the roots
> Of many a thorny shire tell you notes,
> Some let me make you of the water's speeches. (Thomas 13-16)

Ralph Maud recognizes the absurdity of the diction in the above lines:

> 'Some let me make you of' is a strange construction. Even if you turn it around, and say, 'Let me make you some of…', it still is not quite right. We have to add a word: 'Some *poetry* let me make you of the vowelled beeches.' Words are made of the thing. 'Of the vowelled beeches let me make you some poetry.' (Maud 88)

Yet here Thomas's persona is not only making some poetry for his beloved, he is making her by his poem. To make sure his beloved is exactly as he wants her, the persona conjures her through imagination; and the image of walking trees expands into beeches, oaks, thorns, roots, and water. He makes his beloved with the diction of forestry, and the obscurity

of the lines like "Some let me make you of the water's speeches" result from this mad, hallucinatory (and of course visionary) mental game--the soothing sounds of water (water's speeches), the heart-shuddering words spoken by the beloved, the walking trees—all combine into a curious cacophony of auditary images. The difficulty of the poem is a result of this cacophony.

The incomprehension resulting from the madness is not unknown to the speaker, and he says in the penultimate stanza of the poem: "…the neural meaning / Flies on the shafted disk, declaims the morning…" (Thomas 18-19). The shafted disk belongs to the persona's clock, and his madness frowns upon the constraints of time and place. By insanity only can one declaim the morning, refuse to begin all over again the monotonous routines of trapped human existence that a morning might signify. Thus empowered, the speaker tells his beloved: "Some let me tell you of the raven's sins" (Thomas 24). This is baffling once again—the concept of sinning is limited to the human world—to connect it with ravens is incomprehensible. Yet ravens have been traditionally seen in literature as symbols of evil; and the image of the raven is at one with the previous auditory images in the poem that have been discussed above—for the harsh sounds only a raven can make. Such sounds must make the raven important in the speaker's mind; hence he wants to tell the raving girl about the raven's "sins". This also implies that the persona has some knowledge regarding the raven's way of life, otherwise he would not know whether the raven had sinned or not. Perhaps the persona has been able to obtain this knowledge about the raven—which is a bird—because he himself is "mad as birds", just like the mad-girl in 'Love in the Asylum'.

Words, and the binary opposition of comprehension / incomprehension they always carry within (because the listener may either understand or not understand them), are an important theme of this poem. By connecting incomprehension and madness, Thomas shows them both to be superiorly poetic in nature. This poetic device helps Thomas cross the limitations of having to mean something. The process of arriving at this liberating experience unlocks the fury in his heart and once again connects him and his readers with birds: "The heart is drained that, spelling in the scurry / Of chemic blood, warned of the coming fury. / By the sea's side hear the dark-vowelled birds" (Thomas 30-32).

'Sometimes The Sky's Too Bright' contains enough textual evidence to suggest that Thomas's persona in this poem suffers from overstimulation (a perception altering ailment which makes things appear too bright, too loud, etc) which may result from some kind of mental illness. The opening lines of the poem reveal the painful experience of the persona:

Sometimes the sky's too bright,
Or has too many clouds or birds,
And far away's too sharp a sun
To nourish thinking of him.
Why is my hand too blunt
To cut in front of me

My horrid images for me… (Thomas 1-7)

It is quite clear that the persona is struggling to perceive images and there is certainly something wrong with his sensory systems. The sky, the sun, the birds and the clouds all pose a problem for him and he wishes to physically tear away these "horrid images" in front of him. Instead of nourishing thoughtful creativity, this disorder, this chaos of images has blocked up all creative thinking—everything is "too sharp" to "nourish thinking".

Perhaps this disorder has emerged out of the persona's exhaustion with fake relationships, out of "… over-fruitful smiles, / The weightless touching of the lip…" (Thomas 8-9). The disillusionment of Thomas's persona with his beloved causes him a lot of pain, and he sees his beloved as a cruel angel who condemns him to physical agony:

The creature with the angel's face
Who tells me hurt,
And sees my body go
Down into misery? (Thomas 12-15)

In this context, Thomas's use of the phrase "creature with the angel's face" is very interesting. It suggests that the angel is not really an angel but only has the face of an angel. The angel, in reality, is a "creature"—a word that arguably denies the persona's beloved even a human status. Is the persona hallucinating in this poem too? Is the "creature" a schizophrenic perception of some non-existent, demonic incarnation? It is quite possible, for the almost sadistic way in which the "creature" is said to stand and look at the misery (the use of the words "Down into" adds a certain infernal quality to the misery, as well) of the persona is probably beyond a normal human being. Therefore, we see that in this poem also the diction comes from the persona's disillusionment and the resulting insanity from it.

This theme of hallucination and violence continues into the second and final stanza of the poem. In it the persona first criticizes the cruel heart of a woman, and then he sees himself tearing her flesh apart and finding the blood that flows from her is his own:

Sometimes a woman's heart has salt,
Or too much blood;
I tear her breast,
And see the blood is mine,
Flowing from her, but mine, (Thomas 20-24)

Here we should take into account that physical violence inflicted on others by mentally imbalanced people is not uncommon. The violence in the above lines may be the result of the persona's insane idea that the woman's heart has too much blood and salt, which pushes the persona to tear her breasts apart.

Once Thomas's persona commits himself to violent thoughts, he finds the root of his problem of being overstimulated: "And then I think / Perhaps the sky's too bright" (Thomas 25-26). The phrase "And then I think" is important because it explains how the persona arrived at his notion of the sky being too bright for him. It indicates that only after he experienced disillusionment and rage did he begin to think that the sky was too bright. Thus we see once again how in the diction of Dylan Thomas lies the key of unlocking the concepts in his poems. The final lines in the poem reveal the persona's own way of combating overstimulation:

> And watch my hand,
> But do not follow it,
> And feel the pain it gives,
> But do not ache. (Thomas 27-30)

This conclusion may confuse the reader initially, yet if these lines are approached keeping in mind the persona's insanity, their meaning becomes clear. In these lines the persona finds a solution of his problem. He adopts a kind of sensory numbness, which will allow him to ignore all pain and frustration. To escape from pain, to ensure that he no longer aches, Thomas's persona lets go of all types of sensory perceptions. Sensory numbness is his answer to sensory overstimulation. That is why he no longer follows his own hand, and while he can imagine its ability of inflicting pain, he himself no longer feels any pain. This solution is hardly the best one, yet in this bleak poem it is the only one the persona can arrive at.

Insanity is naturally baffling. Sometimes it distorts "reality" and bends it to suit the mad notions of the mentally imbalanced, posing problems for those who have to interact with such people. Insanity can result from many things, and being involved with creative processes or being too intensely bonded by desire may sometimes lead to it. Insanity disrupts interactions and perceptions, thereby alienating the insane from the rest of the world. Yet for some creative people the world may seem to be too much with them, and they may unwittingly prefer insanity as a solution—a way of breaking free. In the poems discussed above insanity performs similar poetic functions. As we have seen, insanity and diction are interrelated in the above poems and this interrelationship has sometimes led to bafflement for the reader and to a certain degree of obscurity in the poems. Thomas's preference for words for their own sake, his intimate understanding of the borderline of insanity, his poetic rebellion to undermine common-sensibility and rationality, have all posed a challenge to sanity, or the normal ways of looking at things and finding solutions to problems. Obviously, his readers must undertake this challenge too, and approach his poems with an empathetic open mindedness, which will enable them to understand the obscurity in the poems.

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