

Poetry and Madness : A Theoretical Study

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ABSTRACT

This paper tackles the relationship between madness and poetry. It traces madness back to past eras. It is divided into three sections. The first section explains the nature of madness and its definitions from psychological and religious points of view. It tackles the role of madness in the classical poetry especially in Aeschylus' Agamemnon and in some of Solon's poems. It also alludes to this phenomenon in Shakespeare's A Midsummer Night's Dream. The second section tackles the process of composing poetry and its sources in William Blake's poems and how it is attributed to some aspects which are close to madness. The last section takes the French poet Rimbaud as an example of a poet who has led an-unusual life and who has looked for the "unknown". The present study classifies him under the term "outsider" which is not far from the realm of madness. It also deals with the term "alienation" in Hussein Mardan's poetry which is also looked at as a sort of madness.

Introduction

Theories of causation of madness, since the ancient age till modern times, have been legion: theoretical and demonological visitations, the influence of heavenly bodies, atmospheric changes, the result of occult forces and witchcraft, the effect of sin and self-indulgence, bodily dearrangements and even the assent to certain political and economic doctrines. However, the inevitable question here is what is poetic madness or what is the relationship between poetry and madness? Before that one should know what is madness? It is a universal term used pejoratively to describe someone who has lost 'his sense' or 'becomes out of his mind'¹.

As an abstract concept the meaning of madness is based on personal judgment and thus it is open to different interpretations. According to the **Oxford English dictionary**, madness is characterized by a state of insanity, of having a disordered dysfunctional mind². Since the early times of man's existence, there was a belief that there is a close relationship between madness and prophecy. Which have been used to be uttered in the form of poetry. Hence there has been an indirect relationship between madness and poetry.

Different points of view of different periods will be shown in this research to clarify this idea. Anyway, madness has a different story with poetry, art and other processes of creation. An artist enters the circle of madness and abnormality during the periods of

creativity, but he knows his way back to his society³. Madness could cause profound turmoil which in some cases is reflected on the artist's behaviour in the society, but this turmoil can be an enriching and renewing experience, deepening one's emotional existence.

In Judaism, in the time before the exile, during the 10th century B.C the utterance of a prophecy is accomplished by frenzy. The description of king Saul's case, when he went to Rama to fetch David (died in 962 B.C) indicates the close relationship between prophecy and madness:

***And he also stripped of his clothes
and he also prophesied before Samuel,
and lay down naked all that day
and all that night⁴.***

The above story, however, can be attributed to what is called a prophetic frenzy in religious terms. This frenzy was also frequent in classical religions which was thought to be resulted from possession. Cassandra in Aeschylus' Agamemnon (525-456 B.C) uttered prophecies in poetic form as his wife Clytmnestra killed him. These prophecies resulted from the possession of "Apollo" whose name was uttered before these abnormal states of mind⁵.

In ancient Greece, poetry was connected with madness in addition to its religious function. It was something familiar to see madmen singing their poems or others in streets. Solon, a Greek poet from the 6th century B.C, had made full use of this

phenomenon and went on circulating his poems through which he tried to remind his citizens of their loss of Salamis, (a main city in Cyprus), that the Athenians at a war with Megara, (one of the ancient colonies in Greece), had been obliged to give up since any attempt to renew hostilities was forbidden and every one who tried to do so should have been sentenced to death, Solon had dressed in a fantastic custom and went on singing his poem which begins:

***I came as a herald from friendly Salamis
to sing you a song by way of speak⁶.***

In Plato's **Dialogues** (428?-347? B.C) madness is regarded as a source of poetry. A person who has no touch of the Muses' madness in his soul cannot compose good poems:

***The third kind of madness is found in
those who are possessed by the Muses,
this enters into a delicate and virgin
soul.... And awakens lyrical and other
numbers....⁷.***

He goes on to conclude that:

***He who, having no touch of Muses'
madness in his soul, comes to the door
and think that he will get into the temple
by the help of art-he I say, and his poetry
are not admitted, the same man is no***

***where at all when he enters into rivalry
with the madman⁸.***

In the process of composing poetry, poets without madness cannot compose their poems in a proper way.

In **A Midsummer Night's Dream** (V.I) Shakespeare compares the poet with the lover and a madman in their view to things. These three persons have almost a similar state of mind which is definitely different from those of ordinary men:

***The lunatic, the lover, and the poet
Art of imagination all compact⁹.***

And again in the same play he says:

***The poet's eye in the fine frenzy rolling
Doth glance from heaven to earth, from
earth to heaven¹⁰.***

The poet's look seems like that of a madman; his eyes are in constant range looking from bizarre images and thoughts.

Nevertheless, sometimes this madness becomes a necessity without which a soul cannot indulge in its desirable experience. G.F Hegel (1770-1831 A.D.) sees insanity as inherent in the soul's nature, "having a psychological necessity and providing the soul with an experience that cannot be gained in another manner"¹¹. To look at this matter from other corners, madness can also be a curse. This depends on the degree, severity and duration of symptoms. It

can lead to the loss of social role and identity, social withdrawal, exclusion and personal distress.

1.1 Vision, Mysticism and Sharp Imagination as Aspects of Madness:

The romantic poets find in their imagination a new way to express their feelings. Through imagination poets talk about things which cannot be seen or reached by ordinary people. When a poet delves into imagination he will enter a world full of dreams, visions and more fantastic things.

The poet reaches the highest peak of his poetic creation in the moment of vision, the moment reached through imagination. In other words, when he divorces the essence of truth embodied in the visible world:

*To see a world in a grain of sand And
heaven in a wild flower Hold infinity in
the palm of your hand And eternity in an
hour¹².*

The way in which William Blake's mind works made of him different from ordinary people. Blake lived in relative poverty and he was considered an eccentric by his generation. From his early years, he claimed to practise spiritual visions. When he was nine years old, for example, he told his mother that he had seen "a

tree filled with angels" and not longer after in a field of workers gathering hay he saw a vision of "angelic figures walking". An etcher, painter and poet, Blake's tastes ran contrary to the inclination of his time. While philosophers and writers of the eighteenth century set store by rationalism and science, Blake valued imagination. He says "I will not reason and comparing business to create"¹³. And he wrote "I must create a system or be enslaved by another"¹⁴. In his early writings, he tried his best to follow his transcendental system in writing like Shakespeare, but he could create his own system and he found himself in vision.

Hence, he found in visions - which were almost religious - an inexhaustible source for his poetic creation. These visions helped him reach a transcendental state through which he was able to create new living world at the expense of outer reality. For him the visible world became the passage to what lies behind the material world¹⁵.

Blake believed that a poet is a mystic visionary whose inspiration arises from within¹⁶. Thus Blake is a mystic poet for most of his visions are religious. He claims he saw God, prophets and dead persons. Sometimes his visions move him to a state beyond the border of mysticism and expose him not only a mystic striving darkly and laboursly towards God but a visionary who could say of himself:

*I'm in God's presence night and day,
And He never turns his face away¹⁷..*

Furthermore, Blake completely believed in his visions and voices. He asserted that other people failed to see his visions because they were blinded by love of money. As a result, he could distinguish his visions and voices from real things. He often says he sees things "in his brain" or in this imagination. In a letter to one of his friend, Blake says:

***I am not ashamed, afraid to tell you what
ought to be told, that I am under the
direction of messengers from heaven
daily and nightly¹⁸.***

From what has been mentioned, one can say that Blake is a poet of visions, a poet who can look through his insight. However, his mental stability is doubted by some of his contemporaries. Most of them recognized that he was delusional and that the visions" and "voices" he always described were just hallucination¹⁹.

A chapter in the first biography of Blake, published in 1868 is entitled "Mad or Not Mad", William Wordsworth wrote that Blake's "Songs of Innocence and of Experience" were "undoubtedly the production of insane genius" and yet, "there is something of madness in this man which interests me more than the sanity of Lord Byron and Walter Scott. Besides, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, another contemporary poet doubted Blake's mental balance, but he also called him "a man of genius"²⁰.

What he calls "visions" however; were perhaps hallucination, an experience that he prefers to guide his life. It was these which gave him such a strong and uncompromising belief in his own artistic direction, but led others to call him eccentric or even mad²¹. Evus, a professor at university of Rochester says: "My personal opinion is that Blake suffered from a kind of schizophrenia"²².

Moreover, Blake's hallucination usually occurred in clear consciousness. This is an unusual phenomenon unless it is a kind of schizophrenia and intoxication. However, solitude, drowsiness and emotion seem to have helped Blake's visions appear, as schizophrenia, the visions often rose from things about which Blake had been thinking²³.

Now, it is quite obvious that Blake is an idealistic example of the concept of madness and its relation to poetry. He probably had "memory hallucination" or a schizophrenic delusion which are somehow related to madness.

1.2. New Directions of Madness

In 19th – 20th Centuries, new terms were introduced and added to explain more clearly the meaning of madness through terms .like "outsider" and "alienated" which were quite familiar in these centuries. An outsider means someone who is excluded from

or is not a member of a group²⁴. Under this term Arthur Rimbaud comes as one of the greatest poets in French literature.

Rimbaud, as his biography tells, frequently ran away from home and may have briefly joined Parisian Commune of 1871, which he portrayed in his poem "Lorgie Parisienne ou Paris se Repeuple". "The Parisian Orgy" or Paris Repopulates". He had become an anarchist, started drinking and amused himself by shocking the local bourgeoisie with his shabby dress and long hair²⁵. He had sent some of his poems to the eminent symbolist poet Paul Verlaine, and in 1871 the older poet invited him to Paris. The Parisian literati rejected him as an arrogant and boorish drunk²⁶. But Verlaine, who was married, fell in love with him. They became lovers and led a wild, vagabond like life spiced by absinth and hashish. They scandalized the Parisian literary coterie on account of the outrageous behaviour of Rimbaud, the archetypical enfant terrible, who throughout this period continued to write strikingly visionary verse²⁷. Their difficult relationship continued sporadically over two years and was a source of the great spiritual disillusionment that formed the core of "A Season in Hell". It was also during the same period Rimbaud wrote "The Spiritual Hunt", a poem that Verlaine called his masterpiece.

In his attempts to communicate his visions to the reader, Rimbaud became one of the first modern poets to shatter the constraints of traditional metric forms and these rules of

versification that he had already mastered so brilliantly. He decided to let his visions determine the form of his poems:

"If the visions were formless, then so would be the poem"²⁸. He wanted to steal from the heart of "the unknown" the quintessence of words and things.

Rimbaud wanted passionately to be a prophet, a visionary - or, as he put it, a voyant ("seer"). He believed in a universal life force that underlies all matter, which he referred to simply as "l'inconnu" ("the unknown"), and thought it could be sensed only by a chosen few. Rimbaud set himself the task of striving to "see" this spiritual unknown, so that his individual consciousness might be taken over and used by it as a mere instrument. He felt he would then be able to transmit (by means of poetry) this music of the universe to his fellow men, awakening them spiritually and leading them forward to social progress. Rimbaud intended to systematically undermine the normal functioning of his senses so that he could attain visions of the "unknown"²⁹.

"While "Alienation" means: estrangement from other people, society... etc. Psychiatrists consider "alienation" a blocking or dissociation of a person's feeling. To Sigmund Freud, "alienation" is self-estrangement caused by self split between the conscious and parts of unconscious mind³⁰. The term "Alienation" can be touched in Hussein Mardan, one of the Iraqi Renaissance movement poets.

Hussein Mardan (the Prince of Vagabonds) as many critics used to call him, is a man of principles, from his childhood, he was brilliant and talented. His life seems to be strange from the beginning, exactly when his mother hits him with a plow because he composed some lines of poetry. After that he deserted his city (Baa'kuba) when he was seventeen years and he reached Baghdad bankrupt and homeless to Baghdad. His dreams were not financial but literary. He wanted to get (as he said) "literary climax" and to be one of the towering figures in Iraqi poetry at that time like Al-Jawahry and Abd Al-Wahab Al-Bayaty.

Although, Mardan did not finish his study, he was an educated person; he acquired his wide knowledge from wide reading and from his personal experiments which were unusual³¹.

In Baghdad, he did not receive what he expected from his society. He suffered from unemployment, starving and prison. Imprisonment gave him so many things and experiences which later would influence his poetic style, but rebellion remained effective to the end of his life. At first, he believed in "existentialism", its touches are clear in his poetry, then he turned to be a "Surrealist"³².

He produced a new enterprise in writing poetry in order to find himself a room among other famous poets. His new enterprise depends on telling things as they are. He attacked morality, tradition and people as he mentions in the introduction of his divan: قصائد
(عارية)

"ثق انك لست أفضل مني على الرغم من قذارتي إلا بشيء واحد... هو أنني أحيأ عاريا
بينما تحيا ساترا نفسك بألف قناع"³³.

And when he was presented to persecute because of his divan, he defended it. When the judge asked him about the reason behind his divan's title and why he named his divan "قصائد عارية" he answered:

"إن الشاعر يجب أن يكون صريحا في التعبير عما في نفسه، ولم أتوخ في قصائدي إلا
إظهار الحقائق عارية ليتبينها الناس"³⁴.

Although he did not marry and fall in love with any women, he considered woman his permanent anxiety.

In some other images, he intended to portray the poet in a depressed and confused image in order to make the reader cast the blame of this depression on the society in which the poet lives. This depression led him to pessimistic view towards his life and the world around him. In his poem (براكين) for instance, he says that his existence in this world is like a dark spot in time:

يا ليالي لم أكن غير خط
أسود اللون في جبين الدهور³⁵

In these lines, he wants to taste his torments in his life and wishes to ruin himself. He expresses his deepest alienation through this visual image which indirectly indicates contrast and difference.

In spite of all the hardships he faced through his life, he did not stop being creative. He insisted on writing various literary

works, because he was excited by his language which he considered an outlet, through which he depicted his afflictions and hopes. He says:

لا لن أتوب: وهل يتوب مفكر
حر على قول الحقيقة مجبر
همني سجن فلسفت أول ثائر
يرمي بأعماق السجون ويقبر
إنني لألعن من يعيش ببلاد
يعلو الغبي بها ولا يتفجر³⁶

Like Blake, people did not understand Hussein Mardan, he expresses that in one of his poems.

التراب وحده يفهمني
وسادتي صخر
وفراشي جاذب قنفذ³⁷

In other words, Mardan wants to show his disappointment towards his society and the world in general. He wants to say that there is no one who can understand his words in a proper way. So, he feels that he is ignored and rejected by others.

Alienation deepens further when Mardan describes the world as an ugly place where its inhabitants are but silly and terrorists:

كَيْفَ لَا أَضْيقُ بِهِ ذَا
العالم نصفه من المراهقين
والآخر لا يجيد غير صناعة الرصاص
إنه لعالم مخيف³⁸

In many occasions Mardan declares that he does not belong to this world which is full of pain and suffering. His alienation and pessimistic view may also be due to a woman though he does not love and believe in love, but the only woman whom he admires has fled away:

"لم أؤمن بالحب ولكن هذه الفتاة لست أدري لم لا أستطيع نسيانها، لقد ذهبت وقد لا أراها ثانية ولكن نظرتها ستظل تمشي في عظامي إلى الأبد"³⁹.

This woman may be imaginary whose image the poet created, but she, like the others, finds no serenity in this world. She denies him her ideal look which he cannot forget.

Conclusion

Poetry is an inexplicable phenomenon and its sources are various. One of these sources is madness which plays a vital role in the history of poetics. Since some sorts of madness have been sacred particularly in religions during uttering prophecies, madness becomes a fashion in poetry as well. It is not an abnormal or unusual phenomenon to see or hear some poets who behave strangely in general and especially during the act of composing poetry. All the sources of their behaviour are attributed to madness which is frequently related to genius. But when science is in progress especially psychology, this phenomenon is attributed to other factors; some of them are still inexplicable. However, new notions have been introduced like hallucination, schizophrenia and alienation which all have a touch of madness.

Notes

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- 11-"Nature of Madness", Page 2 of 2.
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الملخص

تعالج هذه الدراسة العلاقة بين الجنون والشعر وتقوم بتتبع هذه الظاهرة منذ نشأتها في عصور قديمة، وتقسم إلى ثلاثة مباحث، يعرض المبحث الأول طبيعة الجنون وتحديداته من وجهة نظر دينية ونفسانية، إذ يعرض دور الجنون في العصر الكلاسيكي الإغريقي خصوصا في مسرحية اسخيلوس "أجاممنون" وبعض قصائد "صولون" كما أنه يلمح إلى ما جاء في مسرحية شكسبير "حلم منتصف ليلة صيف" بشأن العلاقة بين الجنون والشعر. أما المبحث الثاني فيحاول أن يبين العلاقة بين هاتين الظاهرتين في شعر وليم بليك ويبحث الأخير في مصطلحات جديدة كاللائتماء والاعترا ب كما يتمظهران في قصائد الشاعر الفرنسي رامبو والشاعر العراقي حسين مردان والتي لا تخلو من لمساة الجنون.