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The Laughter of the Madman – Sudden Enlightenment & Yeatsian Happiness

During the late nineteenth century, when poet William Butler Yeats's long and illustrious career was still in its infancy, the winds of change were blowing in the science of mental illness. Yeats may have said that the way science viewed the mentally ill was experiencing its own gyre. But as with most important scientific discoveries, the science of Psychiatry first started behind book-ridden desks and in secluded labs, where the ceaseless scribbling of the pen birthed theories eager for purpose. Although the excitement of a burgeoning science was palpable within its community, the stigma of madness flourished within the minds of the public, a steadfast relic of Enlightenment rational thought. Even though Psychiatry was seeing "...triumph in the courtroom, the public reaction to such new ideas was less favourable" (Jones, 265). Fear commands a strong and relentless presence within the mind, and the eighteenth-century portrayal of the raving and seething lunatic was a difficult image to expunge. Even the prolific Victorian writer, Charles Dickens, who was known to sympathize with the atrocious treatment of the mentally ill, had difficulties in breaking the trend. In their assessment of madness within Victorian literature, Allan Beveridge and Edward Renvoize describe Dickens's depiction of madness in *The Pickwick Papers* as "...the standard Gothic attributes of maniacal laugh, superhuman strength and ability to strike "terror" in the hearts of sane men" (412). Madness's stigma still stalked around every corner and in every shadow within society and was anathema to the general populace, being perceived as animalistic and inherently devoid of rationality and human characteristics. For the average citizen, the laugh of the madman was nothing more than the

shriek of a frothing, dangerous animal. Thus, despite Psychiatry's headway toward a more humane approach to mental illness, the madman was still the antithesis of society.

This dire societal viewpoint of insanity was not always prevalent, however, and as a fervent student of Romantic thought, Yeats knew this exceedingly well. Just a few hundred years before, during the Renaissance, madness had important ties to the culture of art and religion was considered a vessel for creativity and divinity. But as the tides of prevailing thought turned towards the *Weltanschauung* of the Enlightenment, the same irrational qualities that made madness a creative catalyst now threatened the bindings that held society together; a fallacious state of being that frightened those that relished the rational mind. Despite this, Yeats and those that inspired him, the Romantics, refused to allow the perceived animality of madness to overshadow the human qualities that had once been used to enrich society. They were determined to remind society that strict rationality had not always been coveted, and that, indeed, a free-flowing mind could be the secret to a more fulfilling life.

Yeats devoured his predecessors work and developed their teachings of autonomy into his own unique spiritual and creative heuristic viewpoint of existence: "he marvelled at the extraordinary spiritual powers of the human imagination... he tried to comprehend the cosmic forces and uncontrollable mysteries..." (Schuchard, 321). Many of Yeats's poems seem to be possessed by this spirit, displaying a capricious natural force that embraces both the nature within and without. In several poems, this force is expressed as a very specific kind of laughter. He uses inexplicable laughter - the laugh of the madman - as a necessary instrument by which a character loses control and gains *satori*, or "sudden enlightenment" (Golden, 17), a state that imbues the individual with elevated levels of bliss and inspiration. Although similarly branded, Thomas Hobbes's "Sudden Glory" type of laughter, famously decried in *Leviathan* (1651) as "caused either by some sudden act of their own, that pleaseth them; or by the apprehension of some deformed thing in another" (34), is very different from

Yeats's, implying complete rational reaction and control. Yeats laughter, however, is a conscious embrace of the irrational, of madness. In the pages that follow, I suggest that Yeatsian laughter functions as a nonsensical trigger that bridges the caprice and the rational, inducing a state of mind free from societal bonds that allows the individual to embrace the power of the sub-rational. Some of Yeats's Romantic predecessors delineated madness in a similar vein, specifically as a tool for manifesting and unleashing creative and imaginative energies. Despite their emphasis on madness's link to the free-flowing mind, their dance with madness was not without a degree of caution. Like Yeats, they acknowledged that an element of cognitive control was still necessary. It was the conscious will to madness and the subsequent judgement during the brush with madness that were necessary to reap its positive qualities while holding its potentially negative ones at bay. Otherwise, as Samuel Taylor Coleridge warned, madness would take control and permanently inhibit the ability to distinguish reality from imagination.

With this concept of inexplicable laughter in mind, Yeats was accomplishing two important purposes. In one way, he was sharing important methods for reaching sudden enlightenment, and in another way, he was helping to dismantle a stigma that had permeated culture and society for nearly two-hundred years. Although Yeats may have seen the oncoming shift of Victorian age thought, he also would have also known that popular opinion on madness was still ripe with contempt and fear. As Bernice Pescosolido reminds us:

[s]tigma is a 'mark' that signals to others that an individual possesses an attribute reducing him or her from 'whole and usual' to 'tainted and discounted.' This devaluation translates into seeing the stigmatized person as 'less than fully human' (6)

Stigmas steal a human being's value, severing their connection to the divine and creative

realms. Thus, the stigmatized person's attempts at self-expression are viewed as nothing more than symptoms of a sickness. At the height of the Enlightenment in the eighteenth century, this view led to a process whereby people with mental illnesses were forcibly detained in institutions. By cleansing society of its "madness," Enlightenment thinkers probably thought society would become more rational, but they unwittingly created an inhumane stigma that neutered facets of creativity, forcing its capricious muses down the linear and limiting path of rationality. Yeats's late-nineteenth-and-early-twentieth-century poetic representations of the laugh of the madman should be viewed under this historical lens.

Renaissance thinkers such as John Keats and Samuel Taylor Coleridge understood the links between madness and divinity and the imagination. As Michel Foucault reminds us, Jesus – God incarnate – "...did not merely choose to be surrounded by lunatics; he himself chose to pass in their eyes for a madman" (80). As such, madness was not a strict stigma, but a facet of life, and one ordained by God as divine. George Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel revealed a similar connection in *Introductory Lectures on Aesthetics*, when he conjures up the mystical and divine connection between art and the spirit: "God is spirit, and in man alone does the medium, through which the divine passes, have the form of conscious and actively self-productive spirit" and that "...in art-production God is just as operative as he is in the phenomena of nature; but the Divine, as it discloses itself in the work of art, has been generated out of the spirit" (550). Thus, art, which Renaissance and Romantic thinkers alike had associated with madness, is enthusiastically proclaimed by Hegel to be undeniably linked to the human spirit - a divine channel in which God operates - making a striking connection between madness, art, and divinity. In this way, madness was just as natural to the foundation of society as were religious and artistic institutions. This is not to say madness was worshipped, but each city had its resident madmen and understood their place in society. As the influence of the Renaissance ideals began to shift, Enlightenment thinkers viewed

madness through the lens of empiricism. Thus, rather than a human state with connections to art and God, madness became a sickness. As a result, madness's role within society began to dissolve and those deemed insane were institutionalized. Records with designations such as "insane" or "demented" represented one-tenth of every criminal arrest in Paris during the eighteenth century (Foucault, 65). The asylum was established as madness's new role within society – a role that the public viewed from the outside in – and became an important instructive institution in favor of rationality. Madness was now seen as an "anti-nature," an animalistic affliction that was devoid of everything that made humanity distinct from all other life (Foucault, 77). On Sundays at Bethlem Royal Hospital in London (colloquially known as Bedlam Hospital), an institution infamous for its coarse and inhumane treatment of people with mental illnesses, a curious citizen could hand over a penny to roam the halls of the asylum and view the scourge of madness in its most extreme and irrational form. (Foucault, 68). In Henry Mackenzie's 1771 novella, *The Man of Feeling*, the overly sentimental main character, Harley, visits Bedlam. He castigates the facility's inhumane and zoo-like nature:

'I think it an inhuman practice to expose the greatest misery with which our nature is afflicted, to every idle visitant who can afford a trifling perquisite to the keeper; especially as it is a distress which the humane must see with the painful reflection, that it is not in their power to alleviate it' (23).

He instead visits the saner residents, but not without first describing what he would have experienced in the wing that housed those with "incurable madness:" "The clanking of chains, the wildness of their cries, and the imprecations which some of them uttered, formed a scene inexpressibly shocking" (23). Even for one that is unusually sentimental and sympathetic, the sight of those suffering from extreme mental illness is too much for Harley

to handle. The madness that once held a connection with divinity and creativity was now nothing more than a caged warning against the irrational. The eighteenth century had turned the laugh of the madman into the inhuman cry of a dangerous and irrational animal.

### **THE ROMANTIC VIEWPOINT**

During the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, the philosophy of Romanticism began to develop. Romantic thinkers were, in part, "...not satisfied with the cheerless conclusions and cold-blooded methods of intellectualism" and as such, they "...appealed to other phases and functions of the human soul for help in stilling the longing for certainty: truth rests upon feeling, faith, or mystical vision" (Thilly, 108). Romanticists believed that certain aspects of the Enlightenment inadvertently dampened the mysticism and power of the individual. Some believed that the rigid, mechanistic process of strict empiricism left little ability for the imagination to play any part in the creation of knowledge. The individual's natural inclination towards creativity and imagination was stifled. Romantics, such as William Wordsworth, believed that if one's thoughts were instead allowed to naturally meander and flow – devoid of complete rational control – all inhibiting boundaries would be sundered, and one could reach higher levels of imagination, truth, and knowledge. It was this idea that Wordsworth intimated in his Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*: "...good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" (237).

Inspired by Romantic ideals, Yeats expressed the concept of a free-flowing state as a sudden enlightenment. This trance-like state was simultaneously a breakdown, an escape, and an arrival of the mind, and once enlightened, the individual would be free from the bindings of societal thought. Several characters in Yeats's poetry, such as King Goll, channel this state as a madness. In the heat of battle, King Goll allows himself to succumb to a free-flowing state and henceforth wanders the wilds, maintaining a careful distance from society. It is in this eschewing of the rational mind that Yeats's sudden enlightenment becomes a kind of

madness, a madness that induces a state of bliss in its contradictory dual state. Yeats describes this strange feeling in "*Per amica silentia lunae*:" "...I am sitting in some crowded restaurant, the open book beside me, or closed, my excitement having over-brimmed the page. I look at the strangers near as if I had known them all my life, and it seems strange that I cannot speak to them" (31). For Yeats, this contradictory state of belonging and not belonging exists because he has embraced his individualism, and thus his place within the spirit of humanity, but outside of society. Hegel describes individualism as an "[i]nwardness [that] celebrates its triumphs over the external and manifests its victory in and on the external itself, whereby what is apparent to the senses alone sinks into worthlessness" (555). When one can turn their focus inward upon the caprice of nature and feeling, and allow the self that society, culture, and tradition has manufactured to dampen, one can open a dialogue with true happiness, creativity, and inspiration. In this way, true reality and knowledge starts within the individual, and it is only *within* that the mind can be unleashed. With the link between creativity and the individual in mind, Foucault makes the connection between the individual and madness when he declares "[t]here is no madness but that which is in every man, since it is man who constitutes madness in the attachment he bears for himself and by the illusions he entertains" (26). In this way, individualism, madness, and creativity are unequivocally intertwined within the mind of human nature.

Although society had caged the mentally ill, Yeats's madness was not a feral entity, but an inherently human characteristic and tool. Yeats saw controlled madness as a means of losing something to gain something more valuable. He believed that by consciously allowing oneself to enter into this trance, one could obtain a purer knowledge of reality, a blissful state that existed because it was more in harmony with nature than it was with the restrictiveness of society. In some of Yeats's poetry, the trigger necessary to transcend the boundary between sanity and madness is exhibited by inexplicable laughter, the laugh of the madman.



## THE MADNESS OF KING GOLL

The inexplicable freeing laughter and its accompanying madness is seen in Yeats's "The Madness of King Goll" (1887). By giving up the gravely contoured rule of society and embracing the ephemeral and arbitrary dance of nature, Yeats's King Goll allows madness to whisk him away from the hold of society. As the poem starts, we learn that King Goll isn't just a part of society, but that he *is* society: "My Word was law from Ith to Emain" (line 2). He has riches, loyal subjects, and power, effectively putting him as the head of society. His will causes crops to grow in abundance and livestock to flourish. He is a force that contends with nature itself, and by his account, the people say that "He drives away the Northern cold" (line 11). During the heat of battle, however, an ostensibly precarious change occurs, and King Goll succumbs to a power he had thought conquered:

In my most secret spirit grew

A whirling and wandering fire:

I stood: keen stars above me shone,

Around me shone keen eyes of men:

I **laughed** (emphasis added) aloud and hurried on

By rocky shore and rusty fen;

I **laughed** (emphasis added) because birds fluttered by,

And starlight gleamed, and clouds flew high,

And rushes waved and waters rolled.

*They will not hush, the leaves a-flutter around me, the beech leaves old.*

And now I wander in the woods (lines 27-37).

King Goll's madness announces itself with the laugh of the madman. Externally, his laugh appears as nonsense, as a clear sign that King Goll had lost his mind in the animal brutality of war, but, as Helen Cixous proclaims, vocal expulsion is an extension of the body: "she throws her trembling body forward; she lets go of herself, she flies; all of her passes into her voice... she physically materializes what she is thinking, she signifies it with her body" (881). The laugh represents the culmination of an inner turmoil and the subsequent willingness to allow the mind's paradigm to shift from the fully rational to the caprice of the moment. In other words, the laugh is the physical embodiment of the transition from rationality to the free-flowing mind that is devoid of his previous restraints.

Before the mad laughter, Goll was an entity of material things, the boons and comforts of society. His attitude changes after his mind's bifurcation and he absconds from the battlefield to wander through nature. He experiences the changing of the seasons and lives as one with wild animals: "The grey wolf knows me; by one ear / I lead along the woodland deer; / The hares run by me growing bold" (lines 45-47). Essentially, by embracing his individualism, he embraces his humanity and becomes one with nature, a stark contrast to his previous life where he attempted to control it. And as such, he avoids society, instinctively realizing his new being relies on living outside its boundaries. He sneaks through sleeping towns and takes only what will bring him pleasure, such as a drum to accompany his singing. Within society, King Goll constituted a serious demeanor and was wont to "...[sit] on cushioned otter-skin" (King Goll, line 1) and "...[drink] sweet wine" (line 13), but outside society he was able to find a happiness that had previously eluded him.

King Goll manifested his madness because of an internal battle between his role at the seat of society and the nature that stirred within him: "*They will not hush, the leaves a-flutter round me*" (line 12). Despite his comfortable and powerful role, he could not ignore the "...whirling and wandering fire..." that grew within his "...most secret spirit" (lines 27-28).

Ultimately, King Goll was able to use the laugh of the madman to reach a sudden and perpetual enlightenment and harness the madness of two minds, simultaneously willing madness while also allowing himself to succumb to its natural caprice. He was then able to see existence beyond society and gain a secret and superior happiness.

### **TO A FRIEND WHOSE WORK HAS COME TO NOTHING**

A different type of liberating laughter is seen as a simile in Yeats's "To a Friend whose Work has come to Nothing" (1914). In this short sixteen-line poem, Yeats writes to an "honour bred" (line 5) friend who has been slandered by a neighbor that is "neither shamed in his own / Nor in his neighbors' eyes" (lines 7-8). Yeats's friend is suffering from the societal repercussions of lies. The title of the poem tells us that the result of these lies is that Yeats friend's hard work amounts into nothing. As a result, the friend is likely feeling a combination of anger and helplessness. Yeats poetic advice is simple, but completely irrational by conventional standards: he tells his friend to simply separate himself from the societal rules and laws that give the slander its power. Yeats encourages his friend to:

...turn away

And like a **laughing string**

**Whereon mad fingers play** (emphasis added)

Amid a place of stone,

Be secret and exult,

Because of all things known

That is most difficult (lines 10-16).

Yeats is essentially telling his friend to harness the same madness that King Goll exhibits.

Yeats intentionally incorporates the inexplicable laughter into the simile of the string. It is not

uncommon to attribute laughter to something that is joyful, but Yeats makes the distinction clear when he emphasizes the image of “mad fingers” feverishly playing the string. Yeats uses the simile of the string to tell his friend to give in to his irrational mind, to extend beyond the constraints of society. Yeats, however, acknowledges that it is not an easy task to move beyond the rational rule-based mind: “Because of all things known / That is most difficult” (lines 15-16). Yeats, however, attempts to convey that the effort is well worth the result.

### **WHY SHOULD NOT OLD MEN BE MAD**

“Why should not Old Men be Mad?” (1935) does not mention laughter, but it describes why the freeing madness of a sudden inspiration is important and often seen in the elderly. The poem starts with the same simple question that its title asks: “Why should not Old Men be mad?” (line 1). Yeats then gives examples of the irrational paradoxes that develop within society:

Some [Old Men] have known a likely lad  
 That had a sound fly-fisher’s wrist  
 Turn to a drunken journalist;  
 A girl that knew all Dante once  
 Live to bear children to a dunce;  
 A Helen of social welfare dream  
 Climb on a wagonette to scream.  
 Some think it a matter of course that chance  
 Should starve good men and bad advance (lines 2-10).

Yeats is contrasting the irrationality of society to the objectiveness of reality. Despite society's promise of order and balance, events controlled either by chance or by choice often result in illogical or unfair results. Essentially, the flimsy facade of society is no match for the caprice of nature and chaos. If one were to try and bridge the irrationality of events with the supposed rationality of society, one would find only pain and suffering, as Yeats confirms later in the poem, "[n]o single story would they find / Of an unbroken happy mind" (lines 13-14). Happiness is found in an irrational mind, a "broken mind" free from the contradictory rules of society. Elderly individuals have lived long enough to learn this lesson and turn to an individualistic and capricious vantage point. Therefore, "old men" are mad because they have learned that a strictly rational mind does not provide natural happiness in an irrational world. Without being able to see the world through the lens of madness, as William Hazlit explains, "...stress is increased beyond its usual pitch of intensity, so as to overstrain the feelings by the violent opposition of good to bad, or of objects to our desires, it becomes the pathetic of tragical" (166).

### **SUDDEN INSPIRATION & ART**

Although Yeats's focus is on the bliss and inner peace that madness can instill, the benefits extend far beyond happiness. The realm of madness, as the minds of antiquity well knew, is complicated and nuanced and ripe with potential. As such, madness's ability to provide elevated levels of emotion and spirit also allows for a stronger connection with creativity and imagination, a connection that is still being considered and studied in modern times. A recent Stanford University study witnessed "enhanced creativity in bipolar disorder patients and found increased rates of creativity in them" (Pescosolido, 83). Although modern experiments can give us confirmation that the link exists, we only need to look back to Yeats's Romantic predecessors to understand the complexities of its applications.

John Keats, for example, often practiced a controlled mania to lose himself in his emotions and induce a special connection with creativity. He would manifest a mental paradox by establishing and maintaining a lie while believing and acting upon its implications. Much like King Goll used madness to escape from society, Keats used the duality of rationality and madness to escape from a lack of creativity, or what might colloquially be called writer's block. In a letter to his parents, Keats described this type of inspiration: "Whenever I find myself growing vapourish, I rouse myself, wash, and put on a clean shirt, brush my hair and clothes, tie my shoestrings neatly, and in fact agonize as if I were going out. Then, all clean and comfortable, I sit down to write" (Keats, 391).

Keats's madness was a simple madness, a self-deception put to good use. Foucault calls this a "[m]easureless madness, which has as many faces as the world has characters, ambitions, and necessary illusions. Even in its most extreme, this is the least extreme of madneses; it is, in the heart of every man" (Foucault, 30). Essentially, Keats is able to use his form of madness to enter into a trance-like state that allows him to channel creativity that was previously unattainable. The notoriously prolific modern writer, philosopher, poet, and screenwriter, Kannadasan, describes the excitement he feels when he experiences a similar trance: "Whenever I sit to write I don't feel I am writing. An unknown energy, force possesses me. A new sensation arises from head to foot when new words, new similes fall in. There is gooseflesh without my knowledge. Telling becomes bliss" (Somasundaram, 85). This state is very similar to how Yeats describes his sudden inspirations. And like Yeats, Kannadasan loses himself to his mind's natural inclinations. He achieves a state that bridges the mind to a plane of "openness to experience, adventuresomeness, rebelliousness, playfulness, individualism, sensitivity, persistence, curiosity, and simplicity" (Somasundaram, 85). This state is free from the complete control of the rational and rule-based mind that society, culture, and tradition conditions. In this way, when one wills a

controlled madness, the unrestrained thoughts allow imagination and creativity to flow unimpeded.

### **TOO FAR DOWN THE RABBIT HOLE**

Although many writers have delved into the vast expanse of madness and imagination, the dangerous implications of its uses were not without its cautious observers. Samuel Taylor Coleridge understood and experienced the connection between creativity and madness, but he also realized that harnessing imagination must be a controlled experience. Coleridge viewed the methodical process with the same careful consideration that a chemist would use while handling noxious and volatile chemicals. As Patricia Mavis Jenkins warns, without careful and cautious discretion, “the unrestrained, rudderless imagination can succumb to madness” (198). And for Coleridge, this was not the “sudden inspiration” or the “measureless madneses” type of madness, but the kind that threatened one’s mind and those around it; a chaos produced by one incapable of distinguishing the difference between reality and imagination. Coleridge saw that imagination unbridled – a wild embrace of madness devoid of rationality – was a step too far in a deep and dangerous ocean. So, although Coleridge believed in the power of embracing creativity, “...imagination must be coupled with conscious thought to become fully operative; this shadowy state of imagination goes astray without the aid of judgement” (Jenkins, 193). It was judgement – the most important tool of imagination - that harvested creativity’s benefits for the artist while also staving off the more injurious possibilities. In this way, Coleridge, like Yeats, advocated for a method of madness that linked one to a higher plane of consciousness, but acknowledged that it must be tempered with an element of rationality, a canary in the deep reaches of the mind.

### **CONCLUSION**

The practitioners of “sudden inspirations,” “measureless madneses,” or trances never intended to romanticize madness as a superior state of being. In fact, many of them never

even put that distinct label on their method of entering a free-flowing mind. Some, like Yeats, chose the mask of madness because it represented the act of allowing oneself to be free of the restraints and rules that society and tradition imposed. The inexplicable laughter was a motif for the necessity of releasing one's mind to embrace individuality, humanity, and happiness. The realm of imagination that Yeats's sudden inspirations could induce is echoed in Cixous's exultation of the power behind feminine writing: "...*the very possibility of change*, the space that can serve as a springboard for subversive thought, the precursory movement of a transformation of social and cultural structures" (879). Yeats understood that the "madmen" seen in places like Bethlem Royal Hospital were not animals without human qualities, but troubled or neurodivergent minds with uniquely artistic and imaginative abilities. And as in Yeats's personal experience with sudden inspirations, embracing his individualism did not disconnect him from humankind (convert him into an animal), but helped to create a stronger connection with freedom and his humanity. The process (as difficult as Yeats admitted it to be) started with the acknowledgement of his individualism – the laugh of the madman – which exhibited the conscious fulfilment of his free-flowing mind. It was the "conscious" factor that was a necessary and important component; the complementary duality of these states – madness and rationality – was where humankind's most pure and beneficial nature could be found. Coleridge's personal use and advocacy for imagination did not stop him from admonishing the danger that a full embrace of madness posed. And as such, it was in this amorphous and ubiquitous paradox, the dance between rationality and madness, that Yeats found his perfection. He realized that the playful and capricious nature of happiness and creativity does not exist under the tyranny of rationality, but he also knew that it was impossible for the sudden enlightenment to flourish without rationality. It is as if Yeats refused to force the label of distinction, realizing there was a simultaneous equilibrium and imbalance inherent within human existence, and that to consider one separate from the other



would be to ask “[h]ow can we know the dancer from the dance?” (Yeats, “Among School Children,” line 64).

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