Gwyneth Lewis - That Way Lies Madness: Poets, Power, Health

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[The speaker was introduced by the Vice Chancellor, Professor Louise Richardson. Introduction not included in this podcast]

Thank you for the chance to come back to Oxford, where I paid my dues as a D Phil student in the mid- to late nineteen eighties. For any graduate students among you, I'd like to say that, in my experience, few things in life are more challenging than navigating the isolation and uncertainty of this stage of study, while having to construct a book-length argument, each sentence of which has to be defended. It toughens you up. This is even more daunting if you experience mental illness or addiction during that period, as I did.

All good education should cause what feels like an intellectual nervous breakdown in the student. Otherwise, the institution isn't doing its job of challenging them to abandon old ideas and to grow. For the vast majority of students, this is a benign crisis, somewhat stressful, but which can, nevertheless, can be negotiated. What you don't want is an actual breakdown. Then it is the duty of the university and the NHS to catch the bodies as they fall.

Due to poor life choices, addiction and a tendency to depression, I found myself in Oxford, mid-thesis, in such emotional pain that I referred myself to the University counselling service. There I was seen for four sessions by a perceptive woman in a sky-blue polo-neck sweater and we worked out the terms of my difficulties. However, this wasn't enough. I was lucky enough to have as my GP the excellent late Dr Anne Macpherson, who referred me for therapy to the Warneford Hospital. There I was enrolled – not entirely willingly – in group therapy, which I found exquisitely painful but which gave me the impetus to move out of the baffling and destructive situation in which I found myself.

This was already a vast improvement on the mental health provision when I was an undergraduate at Cambridge, where a crisis in my second year led to a diagnosis of 'anxiety' from a GP and two weeks in the college sick-bay. There, I was allowed to chain-smoke, shake and hyperventilate to my heart's content. I'll be forever grateful for those who argued that I should be allowed a holding space for the worst of my panic to die down and for it to become clear what steps I needed to take in order to recover. I decided to take the rest of the year off. This was called 'degrading', a label which didn't help my spirits as I sat on the train pulling out of Cambridge. After a period away, working in the Men's Clothing Department of Marks and Spencer, among other things – deeply

therapeutic! - I returned the following academic year and very happily finished my degree. What helped me in both cases was the humanity of those in who cared for me and, who helped me to devise the best way possible for me to tackle the issues that had, temporarily, but with terrifying consequences, paralysed me.

Both crises occurred before the advent of SSRI anti-depressants and today's burgeoning of counsellors and therapists. When I returned to live in Wales, I was referred to a psychiatrist who was also a qualified psychotherapist, as rare as hens' teeth. This was a piece of miraculous good luck, especially as Dr Scorer was a serious reader of poetry. I was able to see him on the NHS for over a decade, first weekly, then fortnightly and then when the need arose. Even in pre-austerity days, this shouldn't have happened; it did because a compassionate individual took it upon himself to hold a conversation with me of a quality that enabled me to change the grammar of my life. It was a rescue from the dysfunctional monologue in my head, out into the sunlight of dialogue. This exchange takes work and commitment and requires great precision of language.

I've gone into this history at some length because the lack of mental health provision for young people has been in the news so much recently. Even though I'm as out as it's possible to be about my experience of mental illness, having written a book about it – *Sunbathing in the Rain: A Cheerful Book about Depression*, I'm aware of the shame I feel about my condition. This, I believe, is one of the symptoms of the illness. I feel that Professor Steve West, vice-chancellor of the University of the West of England's suggestion that students should declare mental health problems as they apply for a place is problematic. I understand that the desire is to support students, but a) when I applied for my own place from school, I didn't even know what my issues were and b) even if I had, and even if confidentiality were guaranteed, I would find it very hard to believe that it wouldn't reduce my chances of being accepted.

What ties the art of poetry with the promotion of mental health is the commitment to conversation, rather than soliloquy. The talking therapies have always been at the forefront of treatments for depression; they have been shown to be at least as effective as medication. This must depend, in part, on the quality of that exchange. I fear that Cognitive Behavioural Therapy, or CBT, is too often used as a cut-price form of therapy, though it does have its uses as a reframing device for minor- to mild- depressive issues. I also have my doubts about the current fashion for Mindfulness as a panacea for mental distress. As research shows, the technique can be very effective but it needs highly-skilled teachers, which can't be provided in sufficient numbers by the current general roll-out.

The whole point of the technique is to teach the subject to pay less attention to the babblings of the ego-consciousness: mindlessness, if you like. It's very easy to do the opposite, to become even more enmeshed in that destructive patter, and that will get us nowhere.

Much is made of the therapeutic properties of poetry these days, with arts organizations offering the habits of art – both for the reader and the practitioner – as a way of improving health outcomes. I believe passionately that the act of participating in good art is essential for personal and social well-being and that to make access harder to it is to make us lesser beings, both in terms of our personal mental health and in the vigour of our ability to think critically about important decisions we make socially and politically. I think of art as a vaccine that helps protect our collective immune systems from the worst that we can do, to ourselves and to others. It's fashionable at the moment for those who advocate for the arts to argue that, in some situations, it should be prescribed on the National Health. If we're going to do that – even rhetorically, then we have to ask the question Who, like NICE, is going to ensure good practice? But, if poetry, therefore, is a therapy, then it follows logically that it must be able to harm the poet/patient. I've seen arts bodies arguing for money from public health budgets to put into art interventions. If art is considered as therapeutic, then isn't honest to ask if it can injure, as well as heal? So, what are the poisons which are associated with the art of poetry?

Language is what makes us social beings. The Russian poet and Nobel Laureate, Joseph Brodksy – who sentenced to hard labour in the USSR - claimed that poetry shows human evolution happening at the sharp end. Hardly surprising, then, that poets, who practise language under the most extreme formal and syntactical constraints, should know a little about costs and benefits of deploying the forces of eloquence.

Often, a writers' work comes before his or her family, health, financial well-being, anything, so it would have more effect than anything else. This is because refusing the vocation feels more frightening to the artist than material disaster. Dostoevsky spent four years in the gulag (where he wasn't able to write). On his release, he was terrified that he wouldn't be able to start again. In a letter to his brother he speculated:

> How many forms, still alive and created by men anew,
>
> will perish, extinguished in my brain or dissolved like poison in my

bloodstream. Yes, if it's impossible to write I will die. Better

fifteen years' imprisonment with pen in hand!

Notice here the image of poison in the blood. Dostoevsky can't have known that the blood chemistry of depressives is compromised, so not writing is here identified with the writer's destruction.

In the last four years, I've been working with Rowan Williams on a translation of the Welsh-language Taliesin poetry into English. The historical Taliesin was a follower of several war lords during the sixth century. A contemporary of Aneirin, who wrote the Gododdin, the earliest poem in Welsh, when the language was spoken as far north as Edinburgh. This Taliesin left wonderful poems evoking the glamour of warfare and material richness of court life. However, later, medieval poets, turned the actual poet Taliesin into a character in a myth and then wrote poems which they ascribed to that character. That work can be very obscure, but it gloriously imaginative. For example:

I was in many forms
Before my release:
I was a slim enchanted sword,
I believe in its play.
I was a drop in air,
The sparkling of stars,
A word inscribed,
A book in priest's hands,
A lantern shining
For a year and a half.
A bridge for crossing
Over threescore abers[1].
I was path, I was eagle,
I was a coracle at sea.
I was bubbles in beer,
I was raindrop in a shower.
I was a sword in the hand
I was a shield in battle.
I was a harp string,
Enchanted nine years

[1] Estuaries.

In water, foaming,

I was tinder in fire,

I was a forest ablaze. (ll. 1-23)

this shape-shifting shows how volatile a poet's sense of self can be – sometimes I feel that I leave my body so often while using my imagination that I'm in danger of never finding it again. The American poet Marianne Moore, who was a destructive reviser of her own poems, confessed to Grace Shulman: "I aspire to have a taproot, but I don't have one.'

The Ystoria Taliesin, The Story of Taliesin is, a bardic or quasi-bardic creation myth. It links the bard to a number of widespread folkloric themes and locates him firmly in the West and North Wales of the sixth century. The fullest and most influential version, the *Ystoria Taliesin* of Elis Gruffydd, written in the 1520's or 1530's, Ceridwen ('woman of the cauldron') is the wife of Tegid Voel ('the Bald'). The location of the story is the neighbourhood of Llyn Tegid, Bala Lake in North Wales) and the mother of Morfran Afagddu (''pitch-black sea-raven', i.e. 'cormorant'). In order to compensate Morfran for his ugly appearance, Ceridwen prepares a magical brew designed to endow her son with poetic inspiration. She employs Gwion Bach (Little Gwion) to feed the fire under the cauldron, as the potion has to simmer for a year and a day; but just as it is ready for drinking, three drops from the cauldron fly out and scald Gwion's hand. He puts it his mouth and so receives the inspiration meant for Morfran. He is pursued by the furious Ceridwen through a protracted shape-shifting context, in which Gwion turns himself into a hare and she pursues him as a greyhound, he becomes a fish and she an otter, he transforms into a bird and she into a hawk. It ends when Gwion as a grain of wheat is swallowed by Ceridwen as a hen. She subsequently gives birth to him and abandons the child to the river in a leather bag; rescued and renamed 'Taliesin', 'shining brow' by Elphin, son of Gwyddno, the child grows into a uniquely skilful poet.

It's worth going back in the story for a moment to the source of poetic ability. I won't trouble you with the recipe for creativity here, though I've taken note of it myself, but whoever drank the first three drops of it would be "knowledgeable in the different varieties of poetry and full of the spirit of prophecy." The writer goes on:

A hefyd yhi a welai y byddai gwbwl o sudd y llyssiau hynn,

oddieithyr y tri dafn a dreuthir yn y blaen, yn wenwyn kadarna a'r

a allai vod yn y byd o gydernid, yr hwnn y torrai y pair yn

ddrylliau i illwng y gwenwyn am benn y ddaiar.

(And she also saw that all the juice of these herbs, excepting

the three drops that led the way, was the strongest poison which

could be strong in the world, and which would break the cauldron

into pieces, to spill the poison on top of the earth.

It can't be unreasonable to speculate that some of the poison might have inhered to the first three 'poetic' drops, especially when it's been speculated that the name Gwion itself might mean "the Little Prototypic Poison." So, cooking and poetry are closer allies than you might have expected!

A few years ago, we celebrated the centenary of Dylan Thomas's work. I took the opportunity, with the wonderful new edition and criticism published from Professor John Goodby of Swansea University, to re-read Thomas's work very closely. That convinced me that Thomas was a far greater genius than I or many critics have given him credit for. Generally, though, people seem to be more interested in Thomas as a representative of the cursed artist than in his writing. Elizabeth Bishop, who met him shortly before his untimely death – due, note, not to alcohol poisoning but to a medical error. In a letter to a friend, fearing for Thomas, she wishes that

poets should have self-doubts left out of their systems completely

– as one can see most of the surviving ones seem to have. But

look at poor Cal [Robert Lowell] - and Marianne, who hangs on just

by the skin of her teeth and the most elaborate paranoia I've

ever heard of.

As his life became more chaotic, and after his first prodigious years, Thomas was finding it increasingly difficult to write. We know that before his death, he was planning to write a long poem in the character of Taliesin, the early and medieval poet of shamanic mysticism. In notes he wrote, Thomas was planning to adopt the persona of

the godhead, the author, the first cause, architect,

lamp-lighter, the beginning word, the anthropomorphic

bawler-out and black-baller, the quintessence, scapegoat,

martyr, maker – He, on top of a hill in Heaven.

Thomas is more than a shape-shifter here, he was planning to speak as God himself, a risky position, especially when combined with a logocentric religious tradition and a word-based artistic genre. At other times, Thomas seems to regard words themselves as divinity:

[such sand storms p 22 Quantum P]

In this passage, Thomas seems to have replaced God with language. That's all very well but what happens to a poet who can't write anymore, who feels that he's been rejected by the language/god? It's not difficult to see how this might drive one to despair. This is romantic only for people who haven't experienced it.

I find that if I'm not writing, I inevitably fall ill. But don't think for a second that the Muse is a compliant force. Here's what I wrote in *Sunbathing in the Rain*:

> Poetry has acquired a fluffy image, which is totally at
> odds with its real nature. It's not pastel colours, but blood-
> red and black. If you don't obey it as a force in your life,
> it will tear you to pieces.

Such a drive may mean that writing is a powerful displacement activity. But I would suggest that this danger is mitigated by how the art turns us, inevitably, out from the self and towards communication with the rest of human society. My case for the resilience of poets relies on a certain view of the collective nature of language. It's not the creation of an individual ego – covofee anybody? – but the result of centuries of disputation, conflict and reconciliation. When a poet speaks, every word she uses rings with the echo of that word placed in other poems but her forebears. For example, when I'm describing a bird, my ear's memory also hears this medieval lyric: (a musket in this context is a male sparrow hawk). The Latin refrain means 'Fear of death undoes me.'

In what estate so ever I be
Timor mortis conturbat me.

As I went on a merry morning,
I heard a bird both weep and sing.
This was the tenor of her talking:
"Timor mortis conturbat me."

I asked that bird what she meant.
"I am a musket both fair and gent;
For dread of death I am all shent.:
Timor mortis conturbat me.

"When I shall die, I know no day;
What country or place I cannot say;
Wherefore this song sing I may:
Timor mortis conturbat me.

"Jesu Christ, when he should die,
To his Father he gan say,

"Father,' he said, "in Trinity,
Timor mortis conturbat me.'

"All Christian people, behold and see:
This world is but a vanity
And replete with necessity.
Timor mortis conturbat me.

"Wake I or sleep, eate or drink,
When I on my last end do think,
For greate fear my soul do shrink:
Timor mortis conturbat me.

"God grant us grace him for to serve,
And be at our end when we sterve,
And from the fiend he us preserve.
Timor mortis conturbat me."

Not only is this a dialogue between a bird and poet, its etymological range covers two cultures – classical and early modern – and all the culture between. This speech act is a bridge between periods, rather than a moat separating nations from each other. If the fear of death undoes the speaker, then its expression in the poem builds him or her up again. When we're writing, we're not talking to ourselves but to language itself and everybody who speaks it. And answers come back, a feedback loop created by form. The willingness to listen to this is what makes a writer great.

Fyodor Dostoevsky, the great novelist, wrote:

> A man who lies to himself, and believes his own lies becomes unable
>
> to recognize truth, either in himself or in anyone else, and he ends up
>
> losing respect for himself and for others. When he has no respect
>
> for anyone, he can no longer love, and, in order to divert himself, having no love in him, he yields to his impulses, indulges in the lowest forms of pleasure, and behaves in the end like an animal. And it all comes from lying - lying to others and to yourself.

It's hard not to think here of the fake communication made easy by the social media and those, like President Trump and Vladimir Putin who are committed to its practice. Dostoevsky was talking about great art, but it's striking to me how these politicians exhibit some artistic qualities. Trump is a performance artist of genius. He knows how to harness strong emotions to a few words; how to project an imaginative scenario with total conviction and how to ensure an audience to suspend its disbelief. As we know, he plays fast and loose with the truth, furthering his own aims by creating confusion, rather than clarity. Here I remember that Stalin was a poet and Hitler a failed painter.

Vladimir Putin, I notice, has a way of using words with a surface truthfulness to conceal – but not hide – his actual strategies. A tiny example of this comes from the time when the submarine Kursk sank with all hands. His response to an American TV host's question is both a literal truth and betrays a breath-taking callousness:

'What happened to the submarine?'

'It sank.'

I believe that you can see this in many of his public pronouncements. Ursula Le Guin, poet and fantasy writer, calls these 'mirror words' — 'each of which reflects the truth and none of which leads anywhere. I wasn't in the least surprised to see that not one poet took part in Trump's inauguration. The two types of discourse aren't compatible. The literary critic Northrup Fry warned: 'There is only one way to degrade mankind permanently and that is to destroy language.'

Even though poetry's repeatedly called a dying art, it neglects to die. This is because it uses language at its most resilient. Some of the broadsheets this week ran censorious articles criticising advertising for 'corrupting' the English language. Examples are: 'Find your happy,' Eat more amazing' or the new slogan of the Wales Tourist Board, 'Find your epic.' This instantly made me want to use this kind of language in a poem, as an experiment, rather than joining in with the condemnation. For a poet, this kind of innovation is an opportunity not to be missed, if it can be used in the service of form and beauty, rather than simply selling you a car or a holiday, though you should go to Wales, it's worth a visit! Let me be clear; I'm not talking here about language that is wilfully misused to disguise meaning and frustrate communication between equals.

In her book about manic depression, *Touched with Fire*, Kay Redfield Jamieson, attempted to create meaningful statistics by extrapolating figures for mental illness from the writings and lives of dead poets. Her conclusion is that poets are forty times more likely to be manic-depressive than the rest of the population and eight times more likely to commit suicide. However, the statistics can go both ways. A meta-study – reviewing other studies - in 1998 found that, of 29 studies considered, 15 found no link between creativity and mental illness, 9 found a link and 5 were agnostic. The American Wallace Stevens called the poet's work "the stronger life," an emphasis that I share. Poets' work is generally ignored, extremely badly paid (if at all) and socially isolated. It requires self-questioning, rumination on difficult issues and large stretches of time when you have no idea of what you're doing or whether it will be of any value at all. In this situation, I'd say that, far from being casualties, writers are the SAS of the written word. In his poem Resolution and Independence Wordsworth asserted: 'We

poets in our youth begin in gladness/ But thereof in the end come despondency and madness.' John Berryman, the great American religious poet, killed himself in 1972. In her memoir *Poets in their Youth* Eileen Simpson, John Berryman's widow, noted that his father had killed himself aged 40, and argued that her husband's writing had given him 17 more years than would otherwise have been the case.

So, what is good speech, virtuous speech, in the original medical sense of bringing strong benefit to the user? When my husband was diagnosed with Stage IV Lymphoma over a decade ago – he's still in remission, I should add – I set a long poem in a hospital. This made me think about how my own writing fitted into the whole process of healing him. This was my updating of the classical invocation to the gods:

[excerpt from Hospital Odyssey p 59]

The real expert on mindfulness is the Buddha, who declared: Words have the power to both destroy and heal. When words are both true and kind, they can change our world.'

[excerpt from Hospital Odyssey p 144]

My experience of writing poetry since I was aged 7 is that it is the best took I have for working out what the truth of any situation is, though therapy and prayer are both fundamental in my life. When I teach university students, what strikes me is how baffled they are by their own poor language skills. These not the fault of the university but of schools, many of which haven't taught the students how to use language to find out what they mean. This involves labour, failure, obsessive redrafting – and who in their right mind wants to do that? Well, precisely those people who know that they're mad, that they're not well, only pain drives you hard enough to brave these confusions and to move forward towards the clarity which is the only thing that can save us. And a conversation with others which, more than pills, exercise, is the most potent tool we have in our personal and collective armoury. The great Welsh-language poet, Bobi Jones goes even further. He says:

> Angau, rwt ti'n fy ofni i
>
> Am fy mod i'n fardd.
>
> Death, you are afraid of me
>
> Because I'm a poet.

Now there's a reason for writing away from ill health, the abuse of power and towards an extravagant sanity.

Thank you for listening to me.

[Question and Answer session not recorded]

Dan Holloway – Vote of thanks

As someone whose favourite poetry publication is called Drops from a Cauldron I found that absolutely delightful. Vice Chancellor, Catherine, the Carolines, gentlefolk, all, thank you.

Five years ago I curated a pop-up installation at Modern Art Oxford about mental health. I called it What There is Instead of Rainbows, and I asked people to send me something about the time when they were at their lowest point. One of the pieces I was sent was a photo journal documenting a teenage road trip the artist had taken with her best friend, who would be dead just two years later. Their story showed perfectly the way that at our lowest point we still find connection with art, with others, and even, however fleetingly, in those connections, with joy. And when I knew Gwyneth was coming to give this wonderful talk t was those things and that piece to which I was instantly sent back. The piece was called We were Making Fairytales, and that title is one that I shamelessly purloined.

We were making fairytales.
We were knights of rhyme so high
Our mics made bitemarks in the belly of the sky.
We married hope and disappointment and anointed pages with them;
We took notes of rage and fear and motes of tenderness and made their dreams our stage with them;
We took shamans and at pen point made them summon every poet to make wagers for our soul with them.

We were making fairytales. We were Bonnie and Clyde. We were Jekyll and Hyde.
We were the moon and tide.
We were a skin that only had one side. Damn it, we were Park and Ride.

We were making fairytales while they were getting by:
All the people at their nine to fives,
The morning swarm performing caffeinated rituals in their concrete hives;
Burnt-out minds still leaking empty lines,
Echoes of the decades where their lives were left behind;
White lightning veins ablaze through days of mediocrity

And nights of getting high
And mornings coming down and never getting dry

But we were making fairytales.
We trailed gingerbread rhymes and threads of twine through labyrinthine minefields in our minds.
We folded syllables into origami cranes
And poems into paper planes
And flew into the sun like speeding guitars
Repeating the fastest bars of every riff the Pistols ever played
And scratched our names inside the eyelids of its flames.
Your anger was so raw
And your stanzas were so pure
And the heavens were so sure
That every drop of agony was true
The mermaids sang in stereo for you.

We were making fairytales
But now I'm looking in
At shadows that are slowly getting thin
Through windows that are slowly filling in,
And there's silence instead of once upon a time,
And there's silence stealing lines from rhymes
And times from memories and melodies from all our tunes,
And there's silence healing all our sacred wounds
And
there's