A Frantic Assemblage of Words

Truly, English is the most versatile, most expressive of languages, particularly in conveying nuanced meanings, subtle shades of difference and emotional moods. Consider the many word-choices in expressing the feelings, perhaps tinged with anger, experienced by an anxiety-ridden, manic individual.

The word frenzy comes to mind. This noun is usually defined as someone exhibiting wild excitement, visible agitation, even excessive spiritual enthusiasm. The word stems directly from the Latin, phrenesis which comes from a Greek word, phreneticus, meaning inflammation of the brain. The English terms, frenetic and frantic, are both derived, via the French [frenétique], from the same source. Medical terms such as phrenitis [an obsolete word for encephalitis], phrenology and schizophrenia also descend from this word. The phrenic nerve is from a more primitive and less defined Greek root [phren-] variously meaning mind, heart or diaphragm. On the other hand, the English word, fervent, meaning warmth or intensity of spirit, comes from the Latin, fervere, meaning to seethe or boil. Analogous words include fervency, effervescence and ferment.

Amok, sometimes spelled amuck, is a Malaysian word describing overwhelming agitation allegedly leading to homicide. W. Somerset Maugham wrote a short tale about the emotional state of amok, describing it as though it were a tropical pestilence, a jungle madness and, much like malaria, capable of affecting anyone. Stefan Zweig authored a novella called Amok.

Berserk is defined as one who is a homicidal maniac, violently frenzied in behavior. The word is of Scandinavian origin and was likely the name of an ancient, legendary Norse warrior. Berserk! is also the name of a Joan Crawford 1968 movie of eminently forgettable content.

Delirium, an acute pathologic state of febrile excitement sometimes associated with delusions. It stems from the Latin, delirare, meaning to turn aside from the furrow. From this agronomic meaning eventually came the metaphorical sense of being cast to one side, of being deviant, eccentric, even deranged.

Deranged, a hybrid word from the Latin, dis-, meaning apart or asunder, and the French verb, rager, meaning to put into line thus yielding a word now meaning to push away from conventional sanity, to make insane.

Manic [and mania as well as words ending with –manic as such as necromancy] are taken from the Greek, manichos meaning from the mind or insane.

Enthusiasm, meaning filled with zeal and fervor, is derived from the Greek, theos [meaning god] and thus had yielded an earlier meaning of being divinely inspired.

— Stanley M. Aronson, MD