Endymion: The Daemonic Sway

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Oh, for an age so sheltered from annoy
That I may never know how change the moons,
Or hear the voice of busy common-sense!
(Keats, Ode on Indolence, IV, 8-10)

I

Chaucer thought of Nature as a kindly Queen-motherly Dame. Since the mid-nineteenth century (and maybe more so since Hiroshima) we have come to think of Nature as a cruel and dangerously explosible force. The orthodox Elizabethans, for the most part, are nearer to the Chaucerian view. For us Nature is a source of raw power which we can use.¹

It is not only the humanistic reference to the misfortune which befell to the one of the meccas of the pacifistic people for abolishing the weapons of the nuclear warfares which goes back to the darkest memories of the local holocausts that makes the statement most impressive; the words of John F. Danby from his elaborate work of analysis of nature in King Lear come up to our expectations when the 'malignant nature'² in the masterpiece is put in contrast with the 'benevolent nature'³ the love of which the protagonist tragically cherishes to his last. Though, speaking exactly, it is not 'by nature' that nature is either malignant or benevolent but our empathy that determines the designations of her changing appearances, a similar form of the dualism finds their parallel in the supernatural also which most of Keats's major works can hardly do without. The parallel element which is likely to be seen thriving when nature is seen waning is most properly designated as the 'daemonic' as against the 'demonic' by Charles I. Patterson, Jr., in his work of great erudition, the Daemonic in the Poetry of John Keats.⁴

It says in the Oxford English Dictionary that the word 'demonic' means 'of, belonging to, or of the nature of, a demon or evil spirit; demoniacal, devilish', and this word, when spelt out 'd-a-e-m-o-n-i-c' for distinction, also means 'of, relating to, or of the nature of, supernatural power or genius'. Therefore, a 'demon' is a devilish being with whom a man's dealings in any way infallibly result in troubles or mishaps or, when worst, tragedies, for is there anything
he does to others he does not do out of malice? A ‘daemon’, then, is an actor belonging to a company of agents for the supernatural: unlike a ‘demon’, whose raison d’être is only for the unhappiness of all the others but himself and his god, he has no personal idea of doing any harm to any human being. So, if an unfavourable affair or a sort of mishap or tragedy occurs on the side of humanity as the result of a man’s dealings with him, it will be a mere result and in no way what the ‘daemon’ wishes to bring about. This reminds us of two of Keats’s major works.

II

Perhaps nothing can surpass in its naivety the motive on the side of Lamia of murdering Lycius. Coming from Greek mythology, the monster of the narrative poem deprived Lycius of his life; what was natural in Lycius, whether it was his pulse or breath, had to cease horribly when the monster gave up her hope that they would be mated as an earthly couple, to be united elsewhere and otherwise. In spite of the apparent fact that she caused Lycius’s death, Lamia’s acts, though so monstrous, by means of which the poet very finely contrives to depict her character, are in no respect that of a demon. Even though Lamia’s blinded lust let her lover’s life end in a horrifying way, it was far from being her aim but only a result which her innocent nature very naturally brought about, for had it not been for ‘the sage, old Apollonius’ (Lamia, II, 222), they should have lived happily ever after. Yet, Lamia was not the first lady to appear daemon-like in Keats’s poetry; we find one of her obvious predecessors in the elfin lady with no mercy in the famous ballad.

Before they were witnessed by the knight-at-arms, with ‘their starved lips in the gloam / With horrid warning gapèd wide’ (La Belle Dame Sans Merci, XI, 1-2), the victims who were brought home to the lady’s, must have satiated her elfin lust, when alive, as often as they had been guests doomed to perish in the grot of bliss of which, as finally they came to know with horror, she was the hostess. Those females which are to fall in love with other beings we are not to call ‘demons’; they are unmistakably different from evil spirits, giving harm as they do to nobody from malice, doing anything for themselves alone, with no agency to be working for. So the fate of those dead in the darkness of the grot, lying half visible except for the hollow mouths, you might as well call ‘daemonic’ as otherwise, in spite of the mystery and horror of the lot, in that they had been loved fervently by the lady to death; whether they thought their very lot to be their own felicity or mystery would by no means be the lady’s concern. Her concern was only feeling exclusively her own desire to love grossly satiated for itself; and death was their fate. Their fate, however, could not be called demoniac, so long as
their death was not what she had solely been wishing for; far from being so, her nature was otherwise, as long as their destruction was 'by nature' never what she really wished for. Even though her burning desire saw the horrifying effect, it was not that it saw any malice lurking in itself and the malice resulted in the horror in the grot.

Another predecessor of Lamia and La Belle Dame we will find in *Endymion*, but how, in the whole course of the dramatic evolution of the story told in the long poem, does the daemonic first appear?

III

In Keats's ballad in the world where we find the 'knight-at-arms, / Alone and palely loitering' (*La Belle Dame Sans Merci*, I, 1-2), 'The squirrel's granary is full, / And the harvest's done' (*La Belle Dame Sans Merci*, II, 3-4). At such a time of the year, it would be impossible to find a world of flowers of which to make a garland to adorn one's love's head, bracelets too, and a fragrant zone; we are told, however, the knight could do it. That he could do it means to us that a daemonic time had begun in nature. I remember I said in my last essay but two, "Since 'There blossomed suddenly a magic bed / Of sacred dittany and poppies red' (*Endymion*, I, 554-555), supernatural phenomena have not been unusual in *Endymion*." By Keats's lines which I quoted the readers of the poem are told, the sudden blossoming of the bed of flowers having been brought about but in one night, that in *Endymion*, at this very spot and moment, the supernatural first invades the natural, though in fact it is a little later that the protagonist comes to know the real — as it seems to him — meaning of the phenomenon.

After 'There blossomed suddenly a magic bed / Of sacred dittany and poppies red', sitting down close by the 'flowery spell' (*Endymion*, I, 557), he 'began to muse / What it might mean' (*Endymion*, I, 559); then, musing he fell asleep and had a dream; and in the dream he saw a being of 'completed form of all completeness' (*Endymion*, I, 606), of 'high perfection of all sweetness' (*Endymion*, I, 607), 'blushing,waning, willing, and afraid' (*Endymion*, I, 635) come towards him like a very maid, to press him by the hand.

Though a dream, and summed up very awkwardly by the present writer, such was the shepherd prince's account of his own first meeting with Cynthia he gave to Peona to lessen her anxiety about her dear brother looking unusually worried. Putting aside the lute she had been playing to clear his looks, she questioned him earnestly about the causes of his 'cankering venom that had riven / His fainting recollections' (*Endymion*, I, 396-397), hidden in the folds in the depths of his heart. Endymion's long reply, as summed up in the last paragraph, was made to a couple of her questions following the expostulation:
‘Brother, 'tis vain to hide
That thou dost know of things mysterious,
Immortal, starry; such alone could thus
Weigh down thy nature.’

(Endymion, I, 505-508)

Successively two more meetings came true after the dream. Considering, therefore, that the ‘venom’ was caused not only by the first in dream but also the second and the third ones following the first in reality (which I dare not call ‘the actual’), Endymion’s state of mind in ‘daemonic pre-possession’, as Patterson says, ‘at the conclusion of the hymn to Pan’ can be soley regarded as coming from his uncertainty whether a fourth or a fifth or further more meetings with her would come true or not. As long as we read all along the books of the poem, the earliest symptom of the daemonic is the pre-possessed air of the protagonist towards the end of the famous hymn, but in the final analysis the pre-possession proves to be derived from his first three meetings with the goddess preceding it, just after the sudden blossoming of the bed of ditamy and red poppies.

In Endymion, then, what does the daemonic appear for?

IV

Today it is a fact universally acknowledged that the gravity of the moon influences things of the earth; so we may well be talking about the gravity of our planet affecting in turn things of the smaller planet, nearest to ours. Thinking exclusively, however, in terms of the myth of what happens between Cynthia and Endymion, we may not be talking about Endymion doing anything to Cynthia, when we may well be talking about the beautiful goddess doing as much as she likes to the handsome young man. Yet, in Keats’s work, we see the lover doing anything he wishes to do to his love, though the meetings are neither so long nor frequent that we will possibly doubt the virgin goddess safely preserves her peculiar quality of honour. That is the point on which the one is widely different from the other; the story of Endymion need not be quite the same both in the myth and the poem. Understandably the poem also is something to do with the myth in that the moon evidently is influential on the mind and body of the protagonist all the time from the very beginning of the invasion to the end of its sway. Once the supernatural begins to work on nature, to the denouement the moon does what she does through the sway, and he does what he does under the sway.

‘Even from the first our attention is not drawn to the love interludes for their own sake but for their part in the whole cycle of Endymion’s visionary experience — of which the union
with Cynthia is the culminating moment, but nevertheless only a part,' says Stuart M. Sperry in *Keats the Poet*. True that the poem, as he says, is in a sense a story of a cycle of the protagonist’s ‘visionary experience’ and to the scholar, as Patterson says, may well seem to be ‘a search’ for it, but in truth the shepherd is making a search for it neither for nor of himself; it is nothing but the daemonic as an agent that actually seduces him into the search for the visionary, turning out a great number of characters and phenomena as helping hands to work in the seduction, at times even the principal herself personally included in the number; she seems to have talked in person to the Olympian agency about how to get in touch with the young man for whom she became arbitrarily lovesick. Frankly speaking, therefore, even though anyone is making a search for visionary experiences either in or through the poem, it is not the protagonist but the poet who is actually doing so; as it was, the visionary was necessary to the goddess only for her seduction of the protagonist; it was nothing but the lure with which she was to make him ‘free of space’ (*Endymion*, I, 780) at the most proper spot and moment.

Where in the end is the most proper spot, and when the moment?

V

In the tragedies of Shakespeare, the protagonists — Andronicus, Brutus, Coriolanus, Hamlet, Lear, Macbeth, Othello, Romeo, and Timon — are all so doomed as to die as Melpomene orders their fatal threads to be spun and cut by the Weird Sisters. It reminds us in like manner that the corpse of Lycius lies ‘On the high couch’ (*Lamia*, II, 309) with his limbs all empty of life, a surest proof that the narrative poem ends unmistakably in a tragedy. In another cycle of his plays, commonly called ‘dark comedies’, the protagonists’ consciousness widely awaked in time barely sustains the otherwise overwhelming temptation and unrecov-erable fortune of wreck. The plays end in the protagonists leaving their problem unsolved. This is also the feeling we have just after reading the forty-eight lines of Keats’s famous ballad, when ‘the sedge is withered from the lake, / And no birds sing’ (*La Belle Dame Sans Merci*, XII, 3-4). Luckily the knight could be the only exception that dodged the alluring fatal blow at the last moment after all the others had fallen preys to the hedonistic desire deep rooted in those natures, either human or daemoniac, but his loitering steps show that he has never thoroughly done with the siren call.

At the denouement of our long poem, however, in spite of Peona’s surprise to have lost sight of her dear brother and her going-to-be sister all at once, it would be as easy to find the feeling of satisfaction as at the end of most Shakespearian comedies, when all the problems
have been solved and the people are feeling happy, when we never hear a sexton ringing the bell of dole for any newly departed soul. We might as well think of the denouement of Lamia as being so comical as speak of it as being so tragical, only if we were not to see Lycius all lifeless lying on the couch ; so we might as well be talking about the happy ending of Endymion as about Peona's surprise at the couple's sudden disappearance in her presence.

Even though Endymion leaves behind him no proof of either life or death, the comical ending is obvious, because what happens to Cynthia and Endymion is wholly beyond Peona's practical understanding. So the laughter of happiness would hardly be heard from any being of humanity but from deity. That is inevitable, because the poem ends with the culmination of the supernatural, though most comedies may end with the natural sway of happiness. All this does not mean, however, that our protagonist found no problem in life ; as is the case with the protagonists in most comedies, he had his own to solve at all cost.

VI

We could not be too particular about our own analysis of the poet's motivation of the shepherd prince going on a pilgrimage, first diving into the earth and then moving under the sea, finally floating in the air, in an earnest search of a being which he adores. The implication of the last ten words of my preceding statement would never be a proper analysis ; the seeming of the verisimilitude of the pastoral philosophy of life embodied in a sort of happiness scale ascending to 'the chief intensity' (Endymion, I, 800) is too obvious for us not to be aware of the impropriety. The grand scale marked with the gradations of happiness by an alchemist of a godhead is much more a prescription to the young man for his etherealization than a record of an obsession stemming from the protagonist's dissatisfaction that he must abate the drive of his youthful carnal desire. I have not the least idea of reviewing the crude analysis I made in the last essay but two of the young man's apparently consecutive reasoning about wherein lies happiness, better known as the Pleasure Thermometer. If you are to be happy in life, you may do as it preaches through the medium of the scale with gradations, only to know that its idle preachings have no reality. Who will listen with all his care to the foolish murmur of an idiot that knows the real initiator is laughing up her sleeve? The gradations of the scale come to have any meaning at all as a ladder for ascension to heaven, only when used by the godhead as a tool for seducing the shepherd up into heaven ; it comes to have any independent value and meaning at all, only in so far as the shepherd's real wish is not his carnal union with the moon.

The lack of independency is not contradictory to the dramatic validity of the almost monological lines. The preachings, though seemingly idle, really are a diligent flow of water
in which a fish floats to a waiting hook. The fish, when caught by the hook, is quite at the mercy of the line in the hand of the angler. If the line were not hold in the hand of a common angler, as is often the case with the actual, but were attached to a magic wand in an uncommon hand of an angler, it might happen that the holder would intoxicate the fish out of the unbearable pain of the hook. It would be one of the more possible cases in which the visionary might be helpful in taking us out of the actual.

I concluded the fourth chapter of the present essay with the assumption that the visionary is the lure necessary to the goddess for seducing the protagonist into leaving the actual for the daemonic in a sort of intoxication. In Endymion the visionary is working for the daemonic, and the daemonic through the visionary. If we were to share the heavenly laughter of the gracious deity with Cynthia, we would have to join the principal being in watching carefully the daemonic agent and the visionary medium working hand in hand in invading the mind and body as well as the mere sight of the objective shepherd. What the principal trusts to the agent is the seduction of the shepherd. The best way of the seduction is to intoxicate him, and it may be done most easily if the agent can induce the objective into ascending the gradations of life experience to the top, letting him enjoy the 'fellowship' (Endymion I, 778 or 779) with each 'essence' (Endymion, I, 779) at each gradation. In terms of the natural law of things, to 'shine, / Full alchemized, and free of space' (Endymion, I, 779-780) is impossible by merely ascending to the top. The fact, however, is that he is thinking in terms of the supernatural law of things, and that is why actually he thinks of his infallibility of etherealization. For Endymion solving the actual problem means his carnal union with Cynthia, when the goddess of chastity has every good reason to be rid of it on account of the virtue peculiar to her godhead. Although the grand scale of the thermometer bewilders us by its grandeur, it is none the greater for it, since the protagonist's climbing up the ladder to the top does not mean his actual problem has been solved.

VII

Just as a fish ought to swim for life or pleasure catching by instinct in his throat, instead of being caught by the hook in the throat, every minute particle of floating food he can come across, so ought to have gone on living the shepherd either in the daemonic or in the actual as the legendary potency of his fertilization led him on day and night. But he had good reason to be caught easily by the moon, and once caught by the hook the moon with the visionary baited, he could not escape from the supernatural (or from the daemonic, as we should say). He had to change as the goddess wished him to; he was to live as the supernatural induced
him to. Yet Endymion’s problem, as it ought to have been, was how to be carnally united with
the moon. Prior to our talk, therefore, about his inability to escape, we should have talked
about his state of mind before the daemonic began to work on him.

There is a time even in an everyman’s lifetime when he would as hungrily be free as by
instinct from the mundane world closing in upon him on every side. At such a time of life it is
that he is most likely to be subjected to the supernatural invasion. As it is a wise angler who
knows a fish which is hungry every minute for the minutest particle of food afloat, so was it a
wise daemon who knew a being which was ever hungry for the smallest piece of wonder of
which through the medium he was to be transplanted from the mundane closing him in on
every side to the daemonic world of wonders. Cynthia might as well have changed into the
wise huntress as a common fisherwoman when she had the luck to find the ideal game in the
woodland prince to alight on his rare beauty, for ever had he been pining as hungrily for a time
‘so sheltered from annoy’ that he might never know the change of the moons as a fish for any
food is following its nose, its fins and tail all alight with joy.

‘Peona, ever have I longed to slake
My thirst for the world’s praises; nothing base,
No merely slumberous phantasm, could unlace
The stubborn canvas for my voyage prepared —
Though now ‘tis tattered, leaving my bark bared
And sullenly drifting; yet my higher hope
Is of too wide, too rainbow-large a scope,
To fret at myriads of earthly wrecks.’

(Endymion, I, 769-776)

The poorest hunter may trap a hungry game more easily than one which is not.

In the fourth chapter of the present essay humbly I said that the story of Endymion need
not be quite the same both in the myth and the poem. If my humble saying is correct, an
alchemist the goddess may as well be as a wise huntress. The grand scale of the Pleasure
Thermometer is the prescription by means of which the moon brings about the wonders of her
alchemy.

‘Wherein lies happiness? In that which beck
Our ready minds to fellowship divine,
A fellowship with essence, till we shine
Full alchemized, and free of space.’  

Only in order to be applauded, a magician may conjure up in no time spirits or visions or anything in the presence of the biggest audience, but an alchemist will take most of all time enough to make sure that the prescription is made up correctly before he sees any substantial change occur. Besides, he will do his job in almost no public; he may abhor having the smallest number of lookers, to say nothing of being applauded. We have to wait, therefore, with patience before we see any wondrous change come true after the protagonist for himself has made up the prescription of the principal goddess’s own daemonical making out, authorized by the said agency. It refers to the education of the protagonist\(\text{II}\) : the shepherd, as it seemed to the godhead, needed some change in mind and body to be transplanted from the poem back to the myth, with his peculiar drive for fertilization more abated.

\[\text{VIII}\]

Just as the numerous figures from the world of deity are gathered in the constellation to form a new world, so will our protagonist be transplanted back into the myth from the world of humanity of our poem. If he were never to change, and the poem were to end with his carnal union with the moon, he should be staying as long as he would like to in the actual world of humanity; nevertheless, so long as the lunatic union is hopeless on account of her peculiar virtue of chastity, our poem shall end with his making up of the prescription of the goddess’s own writing out: he must change as the goddess wishes him to.

Now that new nuptials are heavenly rumoured after the last thing he had to do to make up the prescription the goddess had made out, namely the salvation of the sea-drowned, all has been done for alchemizing our shepherd; she has only to wait for the chance to make the finishing stroke, but does she not have to invent a new one? The alchemist would never of herself ask for an audience to be in her presence; then, who would return to tell what about Peona’s missing brother? His own flesh and blood from the \textit{dramatis personae} may be the best choice for the one, but would her sight not be dazed, the maid quickly veiling her eyes and face at the first sight of the ‘bright something’ \(\text{Endymion, I, 602}\) ? Further to say, might Diana not as well be an actress as a huntress and alchemist? The Indian Maid was the last thing the moon put on to put up a good show; and well she might. For, if she were to be applauded only by the watching trees and hills and wild animals, none could return to tell how their lord departed on a wondrous journey of no return. It was a clever actress who could think of enjoying being disguised as a seemingly earthly female in whose charming presence
the simplest maiden could keep her own presence of innocent mind. The moon saw no need of blinding the sister by the dazzling bright beauty; and thus the actress could find in the flesh and blood the only spectator in whose presence she could act in the last scene of her earthly comedy.

(Not to add unnecessary chapters any more, the present shall be the last, for, as is every year the truly happy case with my mid-April in this crescent eastern country, have I begun to hear the voice of busy common sense.)

Notes

2. Ibid., p. 31.
3. Ibid., p. 20.
6. Patterson, *op. cit.*, p. 27.
9. See my monograph, pp. 35-36.
10. See my monograph, p. 39.

Note on the Text


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