



Hymnal Hymeneal : Keats's "The Eve Of St. Agnes"

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Abstract: *The Eve of St. Agnes is a Romantic Narrative poem of forty two Spenserian stanza. The Poem is grounded on the fact of ravishment. The poem describes a spiritual ascent, in Porphyro's Progress and the poet arrives at a mystic fusion of mortality and immortality, chastity and passion, the moonlight of perfect form and the ruddiness of intense experience. The poet based his poem on the folk belief that a girl could see her future husband in a dream if she performed certain rites on the Eve of St. Agnes; that is, she would go to bed without any supper, and transfer pins one by one from a pincushion to a sleeve while reciting the Lord's prayer. This paper aims at bringing out the rites, myths and legends followed by Keats describing the character of the poem and the poet finely ascends to the spiritual realm through the mundane one. The process of ascendance has been portrayed through a comparative study in this paper. The ritual rites through which the character passes through have been presented with utmost care in the paper.*

Key Words: Ravishment, Chastity, Ruddiness, Voluptuously, Periphery, Purple Riot, Voyeur, Unpruned Wing, for Iron.

One way in which criticism has tried to come to terms with the strong erotic element present in many of Keats's poems is by spiritualizing it. This is especially true of critical readings of "The Eve of St. Agnes" which is a poem grounded on the fact of ravishment. Earl Wasserman's response to the poem is illustrative of just this critical orientation. For Wasserman, "St. Agnes" describes a "spiritual ascent. . . in Porphyro's progress", and Keats arrives at a "mystic blending of mortality and immortality, chastity, and passion, the moonlight of perfect form and the ruddiness of intense experience".¹

At the other end of the critical spectrum are those who would deny the presence of precisely this evolutionary dynamic. Of us readers, the poet, the poem and its central personae, Marjorie Levinson has this to say :

Voyeurs ourselves, we watch another voyeur (Keats), watching another (Porphyro), watching a woman who broods voluptuously upon herself. . . The discursive action. . . does not advance from letter to spirit, surface, to depth, forepleasure to endpleasure. . . .²

Widely diversant as these critical responses

are, they are generated from a common perceptual core, one that conflates Keats and Porphyro and hence displaces Madeline from the centre of the poem's action to its periphery. Ian Haywood's position is an extreme manifestation (but by no means a unique one) of exactly this trend in the criticism of "The Eve of St. Agnes":

Although the poem is based on the lingering sexual expectations of both of them, Madeline's desire for the "honey'd middle of the night" is quickly overshadowed by the "purple riot" in Porphyro's heart. From the moment he enters the narrative his point of view dominates. We have no choice but to conspire or collaborate with his role as pleasure-seeker and voyeur. Madeline becomes an object of beauty to be literally ogled at.³

In order to correct this Porphyro-bias, We propose to begin this examen by briefly looking at a poem by William Blake, using this text as an explicatory device to arrive at a fuller understanding of Keats's poem Like Madeline, Blake's female protagonist in his poem The Book of Thel is a young virgin poised on the threshold of sexual experience. Blake's Thel is both allured by and apprehensive of



the experience of love; her fears are answered by four of the most transient but elemental forms of life on earth - a Lilly, a Cloud, a Worm, and a Clod of Clay. Asserting its own ethos of submissive sexuality, the Lilly tells the virgin Thel of the bliss it experiences upon being melted by the summer's heat. When Thel, who is a yet unborn spirit, complains that unlike the Lilly she has no physical body but is rather as insubstantial as a cloud, a Cloud descends before her and informs her that he consummates his love with the Virgin dew, and that from their union they "arise link'd in a golden band and never part/ But walk united bearing food all our tender flowers."⁴

When Thel, still unconvinced, counter-argues that if she had a material

existence she would be food for worms, a Worm rises before her, "helpless & naked, weeping".⁵ The state of the Worm encourages Thel to regard it as a reflection of herself- "none to answer, none to cherish thee."⁶ But immediately the virgin is proved wrong by a Clod of Clay which raises its meek head and avouches that fulfilment can be found only by yielding up one's body:

O beauty of the vales of Har' we live not for ourselves.
- Thou seest me the meanest thing, and So I am indeed. My bosom of itself is cold, and of itself is dark; But he, that loves the lowly, pours his oil upon my head, And kisses me, and binds his nuptial bands around my breast, And says: "Thou mother- of my children, I have loved thee

And I have given thee a crown that none can take away."⁷

Cumulatively, all these perorations rid Thel of her initial fear; and so when the Clod of Clay offers the virgin-maiden the opportunity of exploring the world of mortal love, Thel passes through the portals of existence. Her curiosity, and desire to know more is however abruptly terminated. When it becomes clear to Thel that a life of love entails sensory or physical existence, the disembodied virgin spirit flies back "with a shriek"⁸ to her original domain of pristine innocence.

Both The - Book of Thel and "The Eve of St. Agnes" configure rites of passage into realms of sexual experience, even though Thel's journey is aborted while Madeline's is triumphantly completed. Both poems also inwardly reflect a generative index on the lines of the familiar Blakean (and more generally, Romantic) paradigm of innocence, experience, and "organiz'd innocene". In so far as Thel and "St. Agnes" are concerned, this triadic taxonomy is constituted of three successive and mutually exclusive levels of operancy - first of a mind or consciousness reflecting on its own functions, second of a traumatic and alienating recognition of, and discrimination between, interiority and externality, and third of the attainment of an integrative harmony achieved through the merger or fusion of self and other. In the case of Thel, the first step or stage of this dialectical process is marked by the refusal of the virgin to acknowledge what the Cloud tells her: "Every thing that lives/Lives not alone nor for Itself"⁹. This is precisely what the maiden cannot register,- trapped as she is in a vicious circle of self-regarding. And there are clear indications in Keats's poem too - that Madeline is really immured in her own self. Early in the poem we are told, for example, that Keats's heroine was 'sole-thoughted', and a stanza later Keats clarifies that what Madeline was looking forward to were the selfish pleasures of "visions of delight/And soft adornings." ¹⁰ In the next two stanzas we are provided with the further information that Madeline "scarcely heard" and "heeded not" the music and the revelry in the great hail, that her eyes were "regardless", and perhaps most conclusively - that she was "all amot"¹¹ or dead to the world outside herself.

Psychologists relate such solipsist illusions of self-sufficiency with what Neumann calls "the [embryonic] situation of contentment and containment," and it now becomes clear that both Blake and Keats equate the states of mind of their heroines with such condition of pre-natal being. Thel's "shriek" with which Blake's poem ends is the infant's Cri du coeur at the moment of birth, and that



Madeline like Thel enacts a kind of regressive birth-in-reverse is made evident by Keats at several places in "The Eve of St. Agnes." In Stanza XXVII, having shed her clothes, Madeline enters her womb-like curtained bed. Gradually, her "soul" (by which Keats, following tradition, means "consciousness") fades away. Like an unborn infant she is "Blissfully haven'd both from joy and pain," and "clasp'd" or curled up in an embryonic sleep. The final image in the stanza communicates Keats's implication with an unambiguous clarity: "As though a rose should shut, and be a bud again."¹²

Madeline's dream-vision of Porphyro has been traditionally linked with Keats's definition of the imagination in terms of Milton's description of Adam's dream of Eve: "The Imagination may be compared to Adam's dream - he awoke and found it truth."¹³ Certainly, Milton was in Keats's mind when he addressed these words to Bailey no less than a whole year and a month of his short life before writing "The Eve of St. Agnes." But given the existent commonality of Romantic thought, it may be more rewarding to consider Madeline's dream in the light of Blake's analogous conception of Beulah. As Northrop Frye explains,

Beulah . . . is the world of contemplative thought, of the adoration of some vague mystery enveloping us. It is the world of the consolations of religion, of implicit faith and confident hope. It is the world of romance, of fairy tales and dreams. It is the protected world of the child and . . . the world which the imaginative soul enters when it is still an infant untried...¹⁴

Beulah is also the perimetrical equivalent of a "state of love" in which the "imagination is passive, contemplating and adoring." But, as Frye adds, "in such passivity there is deadly danger if it is persisted in too long. If it reposes so long in sleep as to forget on waking up again that its mistress is its own creature, an independent external world begins to separate from that imagination and it is done for."¹⁵ This, Keats shows in "The Eve of St. Agnes", is what happens to Madeline. The "vision

of her sleep", a "midnight charm/Impossible to melt as iced stream",¹⁶ had been so deep that she began to regard it as independent of the Porphyro who kneels beside her. Like its archetype in the Bible, Beulah thus affords visions that are in one sense, dangerous. In The Song of Solomon which recent criticism has recognised as having a direct bearing on "The Eve of St. Agnes," the beautiful young Shulamite who is the prototype of Keats's Madeline dreams of a nocturnal visit from her beloved. But when she rises to welcome him, she discovers to her dismay that he is no longer present:

I sleep, but my heart is awake; it is the voice of my beloved: He knocks, saying, "Open for me, my sister, my love, my dove, my perfect one; for my head is covered with dew, my locks with the drops of the night."

I have taken off my robe; how can I put it on again? I have washed my feet; how can I defile them?

My beloved put his hand by the latch of the door and my heart yearned for him.

I arose to open for my beloved, and my hands dripped with myrrh, my finger with liquid myrrh, on the handles of the lock.

I opened for my beloved, but my beloved had turned away and was gone. My heart went out to him when spoke. I sought him, but I could not find him; I called him, but he gave me no answer.

In a similar figuration in Blake's poem "The Crystal Cabinet", the narrator sees a beautiful maiden within a world of a "lovely Moony Night," tries to embrace her passionately, but succeeds only in shattering his vision and is "filled with woes."¹⁷ So, too, does Madeline wake up to the woesome reality of a "pallid, chill, and drear" Porphyro:¹⁸

How chang'd thou art: how pallid, chill, and drear; Give me that voice again, my Porphyro, Those looks immortal, those complainings dear; Oh leave me not in this eternal woe . . .¹⁹

What is common in each of these parabolic representations is the idea of a vision of a state of innocence collapsing under the strain of its own frail



immaturity. Like the sleep of the Shulamite and the vision of Blake's lover, Madeline's dream had been a self-referential fantasy, and hence Imperfect, ephemeral, and inadequate. In the venerable Beadsman in "St. Agnes" we have a parallel in a different key, for this pious old man seeks salvation through the contemplative adoration of a mystery of his own making, a mental syndrome that Keats contemptuously described in a letter to the George Keats as "the pious frauds of Religion".²⁰ But where the Beadsman (whose endless string of beads is emblematic of his own cycle of unregeneration) is unable to achieve a breakthrough and dies "For aye unsought for. . . among his ashes cold".²¹ Madeline's act of passion liberates her from the womb his of innocence as her participation with Porphyro destroys ever the shackles of selfhood which had held her so long in thrall. This, as Keats tells us, is a "Solution sweet",²² and he commemorates the liberation of his heroine from the moony Beulah state by providing a circumstantial detail: "St. Agnes' moon hath set."²³

The setting of the moon however presages the dawn of a new day and it also marks the birth of a new Madeline: As in a real birth, the experience is traumatic and painful, but Keats well knew that pain was both desirable and necessary. "Do you not see," he wrote to the George Keats, "how necessary a World of Pains and troubles is to school an Intelligence and make it a soul?"

This appears to me a faint sketch of a system of salvation which does not affront our reason and humanity.²⁴ Thus if Madeline is indeed "A dove forlorn and lost with sick unpruned wing,"²⁵ is not entirely a misfortune. "Until we are sick, we understand not," Keats had written to Reynolds a few months before writing "The Eve" and had continued: "in fine, as Byron says, 'Knowledge is Sorrow'; and I go on to say that 'Sorrow is Wisdom' - and further for aught we can know for certainty."²⁶ What Madeline gains, therefore, is Wisdom, and this is a gain far outweighing the pain she experiences, the innocence she has lost.

Like Blake in *The Book of Thel*, Keats in "The Eve of St. Agnes" associates knowledge or wisdom with sexual experience. The difference between the ravished and unravished Madeline may be better understood in the light of Keats's observation in the same letter to Reynolds The difference of high Sensations with and without knowledge appears to me this - in the latter case we are failings continually ten thousand fathoms deep and being blown up again without wings and with all [the] horror of a bare shoulders Creature - in the former case, our shoulders are fledged, and we go thro' the same air and space without fear.²⁷

The "fear" that Keats speaks of here is that of life, of the unknown and the unknowable - "The Burden of the Mystery: a thing I begin to understand a little" - as Keats explained in this letter. "The Eve of St. Agnes," far from being an example of what Byron contemptuously dismissed as Keats's "Onanism of poetry,"²⁸ his really a celebration of sensuality as the gateway to a fuller, higher, and more satisfactory comprehension of the mystery of life, it is precisely because of this that Keats in the incomparable closing stanzas of "The Eve" introduced his brilliant semiotic intermediation of the tenses, creating thereby a pulsation between present and past, storm and stasis. For through rhetorical scaffold is the achievement of the lovers set free from the trammels of time, and universalized.

We may better understand the magnitude of Keats's vision if we recall those words of Thoreau: "We need to pray for no higher heaven than the pure senses can furnish, a purely sensuous life."²⁹ or, as Norman O. Brown adds in his seminal work "Life Against Death": The Psychoanalytical Meaning of History.

"the resurrected body is the transfigured body. [with] the abolition of repression . . . the human body would become polymorphously perverse, delighting in that full life of all the body which it now fears. The consciousness strong enough to endure full life would be no longer Apollonian but Dionysian - consciousness which does not observe the limit,



but overflow; consciousness which does not negate any more."30

This is exactly the release that Madeline and Porphyro enact; for if in "Ode on a Grecian Urn" Keats sings of an unravished bride, in "The Eve of St. Agnes" he hymns a ravished one. The latter poem is truly a hymnal hymeneal.

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