THE NIGHTMARE, MELANCHOLY AND CREATIVITY

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The nightmare and melancholy have this in common: both are manifestations of a disordered imagination, and both are associated with the artist and the creative process. It seems a paradox that an imagination distorted by the nightmare or melancholy can provide a context for creativity, but intense dreams and morbid states of anxiety have always provided man with the most profound and perceptive visions. The artist, when visited by either, may be able to perceive the truth within the seeming chaos and impose an order upon the disorder.

The nightmare had three kinds of interpreters: the rational, who debunked the uncomfortable dream as merely the result of physiological disorders; the supernatural, who took the night oppressors to be physical realities; and the imaginative, who utilized the legends of the nightmare, and their own experiences, to explore the relationship between the dream world and the real world.

Our interest is in the imaginative interpreters, who employed dreams as symbols or metaphors of a transcendent creative power. Divine inspiration itself had often been linked with man's creative energy. Socrates had a spirit or demon who guided him in matters of conscience, and epic writers in the classical tradition would never begin a work without the invocation of the Muses. Inspiration also came by way of dreams and oracles. Christians understandably classified all Greek stories of gods, spirits and oracles as manifestations of the devil and his angels. Yet the Judeo-Christian tradition was plentifully supplied with accounts of divine communications by way of dreams (Abraham, Jacob, Daniel), visions (Ezekiel, Jeremiah, Paul), and demonic or angelic visitations (Sts. Anthony, Theresa, and John of the Cross).

During the Renaissance artists frequently used figures from the world of spirits to illustrate man's quest for knowledge. In Marlowe's Dr. Faustus the demonic Mephistopheles inspires Faustus and endows him with creative powers. In Macbeth witches conjure up sinister prophecies concerning future events. In The Tempest Ariel and other benevolent spirits enable Prospero to peer into the nature of things and to manipulate events. The nightmare figure itself reached prominence during the Romantic period and a major Romantic artist, Henry Fuseli, achieved fame and notoriety with his painting, "The Nightmare" in which the creature sits on the breast of a sleeping woman. The pose of the woman is erotic, but the look on her face seems to be more of terror than of ecstasy. What will she be thinking of when she awakens? Will she want to recreate the experience? Has she learned
anything from the dream? Coleridge, Keats, Shelley, Byron and Yeats asked questions of this kind and each used the figure as a metaphor of poetic inspiration.

Melancholy, broadly defined today as a state of mental depression, dejection, or morbidity, has characterized creative artists from classical times (Socrates), to the English Renaissance (Robert Burton) to the 20th century (Kafka and Ingmar Bergman). The question of why this is the case was posed during classical times in a pseudo-Aristotelian document under Problem XXX.1. The section begins: "Why is it that all those who have become eminent in philosophy or politics or poetry or the arts are clearly melancholics?" Those who suffered were distinguished men and included the heroes Heracles, Ajax, Bellerophon (Aulus Gellius called it "a disease of heroes"), and the thinkers Empedocles, Socrates and Plato, and poets. Both Plato and Democritus asserted that the true poet is touched with madness. Much later, Shakespeare's Theseus agreed: "The lunatic, the lover, and the poet / Are of imagination all compact," and John Dryden expressed the view in his couplet: "Great wits are sure to madness near all'd / And thin Partitions do their Bounds divide." Pseudo-Aristotle's problem XXX.1 states that "Many too are subject to fits of exaltation and ecstacy because this heat [from hot bile] is located near the seat of the intellect; and this is how Sibyls and soothsayers arise and all that are divinely inspired, when they become such not by illness but by natural temperament.—Marcus, the Syracusan, was actually a better poet when he was out of his mind.—Those, however, in whom the excessive heat is relaxed toward a mean, are melancholy, but they are more rational and less eccentric and in many respects superior to others either in culture in the arts or in statesmanship." The pseudo-Aristotelian section XXX remained prominent through the Renaissance when various authorities argued that melancholy allowed a state wherein the soul could gain "an absolute command upon the judgments." Such melancholic persons were more susceptible to otherworldly spiritual influences, and Robert Burton, the authority on the matter, could summarize "melancholy men are of a deep reach, excellent apprehension, judicious, wise and witty."

In the 16th and 17th centuries in England, this melancholy almost became a fashionable disease. English authors from Shakespeare to Donne and Thomas Browne popularized it. In the 18th century the so-called graveyard school of poets revelled in the decay of classical and Gothic ruins, graveyard visits, and the contemplation of past glories and death.

In the late 18th century this aspect of melancholy was intensified into what the Germans call "Welschmerz," as in Goethe's novel, The Sorrows of Young Werther, or in Thomas Gray's "Elegy." In that poem the epitaph of the author—or his alter ego—stated that "melancholy had mark'd him for her own." Gothic novelists around 1800, romantic poets, and American authors such as Charles Brockden Brown, Edgar Allan Poe, and Nathaniel Hawthorne explored through their melancholic gloom the twilight regions of the mind.

Robert Burton investigated the so-called visions of melancholic persons and lists several authors who argued that the visions were the work of the devil. Demons found that melancholy men were easily mislead. One of Burton's favorite authors, Andre Du Laurens, asserted that the melancholic person is more apt to be troubled "by the intercourse or medling of evil angels...[who] oftentimes...foretell & forge very strange things in their imaginations." The "medling of evill angels" and what one melancholic author called the generation of "only horrible spirits"
comes close to what happens in nightmares. After 1660 in England melancholy was commonly associated with dreadful things like lycanthropy, necrophilia, and madness. Melancholy, then, has always been identified as a morbid mental state in which depression is a paramount feature. It also was closely associated with dreams and nightmares. Long before Sigmund Freud defined them as "disguised fulfillments of suppressed desires," dreams and especially nightmares had inspired theories and legends that were linked to those myths which had grown up around melancholia.

The merger of the two traditions, melancholy and the nightmare, appears dramatically in the Romantic and modern periods. In the pre-Romantic period the lonely, isolated, and meditative melancholic was regarded as potentially more creative and perceptive than an ordinary person. At the same time spirits of the night and the nether world often served as symbols to make vivid man's quest for knowledge of forbidden realms. Romantic authors such as Keats, Hawthorne, and Yeats were attracted to both themes and presented melancholia as the result of a devastating revelation transmitted by a nightmare spirit or as a condition which made the artist receptive to a visit by a demon of the nightmare genre. The experience provided the artist with a transcendent vision in which a meaning and order emerge out of chaos and disorder. The vision unfortunately is always momentary and fleeting; its disappearance casts the artist back into the world of melancholy.

The motif of the otherworldly spirit does not appear more poignantly than in Keats' ballad, "La Belle Dame Sans Merci," which tells a story of a knight who has met a beautiful "lady in the meads," "a faery's child" with long hair, light foot, and wild eyes. In her strange language she tells him, "I love thee true." The knight is bewitched and the union between the two is complete: "there...[he] shut her wild, wild eyes / With kisses four." She then lulls the knight to sleep. When he awakes, the vision has dissipated, as happens frequently in fairy tales. But the memories of the inimitable vision remain forever to haunt the narrator. He will wait on the cold hill's side, "alone and palely loitering" until the La Belle Dame returns. The ballad is best interpreted as a metaphor of the artist who sees into the depth of things and then, his vision ended by a return to reality, hovers between two worlds, an outcast of both. He becomes a melancholic recluse until the time that the vision will reappear. Then he will again be able, in the act of creation, to impose an artistic order on experience.

A second example Hawthorne's Young Goodman Brown is one of several Hawthorne stories of persons who become isolated because of what they learn from the supernatural. The hero of the short story falls asleep in a forest and dreams that he is called away for an evening initiation into the devil's communion. He leaves his wife Faith and enters a dark forest accompanied by a devil. His reluctance at taking part in the ceremony is swept away when he sees that every so-called upright citizen of his New England community, including his good wife, Faith, is there to participate in the devil's communion. When he awakens and returns home, he cannot respond to the loving welcome of Faith or to any of the seemingly decent villagers whom he had seen in his dream at the devil's communion. The narrator concludes: "Alas! It was a dream of evil omen for Young Goodman Brown. A stern, a sad, a darkly meditative, a distrustful, if not a desperate man did he become from the night of that fearful dream." Upon his death, the narrator continues, "they carved no hopeful verse upon his tombstone,
for his dying hour was gloom." Like Keats' forlorn knight, Young Goodman Brown had been turned into an incurable melancholic by a nightmarish vision. Both protagonists are unlike the artist, who does have a second chance—at least as long as he has the strength to continue to search for meaning. When that strength ebbs, the artist will follow the pattern of Young Goodman Brown.

No poet can ever maintain communion with the mystic otherworld or the divine or can retain a vision of order. The result of lost vision is a plunge into melancholy—solitude and despair. But melancholy is actually the starting point as well as the end point for the creative artist. Thus the classical view that "eminent persons" are naturally predisposed to melancholy is still valid in a discussion of creativity. Melancholy played a prominent role in the works cited above and in each case—Keats' knight and a disillusioning dream—the nightmare dream serves as the focal point for the action. The protagonists in the literary works are frozen in time, and for them there is no salvation. But for the creator, the mood of melancholy may again allow the perception of truth which, in turn, inspires the act of creation. It is never possible to maintain the sublime vision of unity, and the artist must hope to recreate time and again an order from the world of disorder.

Reference Notes


*For the Du Laures quotation, see Babb, p. 49.

*John E. Mack, in Nightmares and Human Conflict, Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1970, in a chapter on "Nightmares and Creativity" (p. 93), develops the thesis that "a nightmare or other dream has furnished the source of inspiration for the creative product, if it has not actually provided the literal content of the work itself."

*Mack, p. 108, cites the research of Greenacre in pointing out that "creative activity . . . may relieve, but not solve conflicts." The cycle of melancholy, creation, and melancholy continues throughout the creative period of an artist's life.