Lucifer

Mihai Eminescu

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2,285 words

Nineteenth-century Romanian poet and editorialist Mihai Eminescu (1850-1889) studied in Bismarck’s Prussia, where he immersed himself in Schopenhauer and studied under Eugen Dühring. His essays attack liberalism, usury, immigration, and the prospect of Jewish civil rights in Romania. The tone of his philosophically-driven poems, which are modeled after the golden age of German Romantic poetry, ranges from endearing to brutal. Adored in Romania, but without much of a reputation outside of his own country, he was killed by medical malpractice at the age of 39. The 1883 poem “Luceafărul,” alternately translated as “Lucifer” or “Evening Star,” is considered his masterpiece. This translation by Corneliu M. Popescu is probably the best of them as poetry, if not necessarily the most accurate. — Amory Stern

LUCIFER

Once on a time, as poets sing

High tales with fancy laden,

Born of a very noble king

There lived a wondrous maiden.

An only child, her kinsfolk boon,

So fair, imagination faints;

As though amidst the stars the moon,

Or Mary amidst the saints.

From ‘neath the castle’s dark retreat,

Her silent way she wended

Each evening to the window-seat

Where Lucifer attended.

And secretly, with never fail,

She watched his double race,

Where vessels drew their pathless trail

Across the ocean’s face.

And as intent she drank his light,

Desire was quickly there;

While he who saw her every night

Soon fell in love with her.

And sitting thus with rested head,

Her elbows on the sill,

Her heart by youthful fancy led

Did with deep longing fill.

While he, a brilliant shining spark,

Glowed always yet more clear

Towards the castle tall and dark

Where she would soon appear.

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Until one night with shower of rays

He slips into her room,

As though a strange and silver haze

Did round about her loom.

And when at last the child to rest

Upon her sofa lies,

He lays her arms across her breast

And closes her soft eyes.

While where his ray on mirror lands

And is upon her couch red rifted,

It falls upon her throat and hands

And on her face uplifted.

A smile is on her lips it seems;

He in the mirror trembles,

For smooth his ray glides midst her dreams

And round her soul assembles.

And while she is in slumber gone

She murmurs through her sighs:

“Come down to me beloved one,

Fair prince of the clear skies.

Come down, good Lucifer and kind,

O lord of my aspire,

And flood my chamber and my mind

With your sweetest fire!”

And Lucifer beams still more bright

To hear her word’s emotion;

Then like a comet in its flight

Dives down into the ocean.

And where his bolt is lost to view

The sea in whirlpool surges,

Till out of the unfathomed blue

A handsome youth emerges,

Who, leaping off the fretful wave,

Lightly through her casement passes;

And in his hand he holds a stave

Crowned with a wreath of grasses.

A prince indeed of royal stock,

With heavy hanging golden hair;

A purple winding-sheet his smock,

Hung round his shoulders bare.

A starry glow shines from his eyes,

His cheeks are deathly white;

A lifeless thing in living guise,

A youth born of the night.

“Down from the spheres do I come

Though dreadful the commotion,

My father is the vaulted dome,

My mother is the ocean.

For I have left my realm to keep

Obedience to your command;

Born of the zenith and the deep

Here I before you stand.

O come, fair child of royal birth,

Cast this your world aside,

For Lucifer has flown to earth

To claim you as his bride.

And you will live till time is done

In castles built of sky,

And all the fish will be your own,

And all the birds that fly”.

“O, beautiful you are, good Sire,

As but an angel prince could be,

But to the course that you desire

I never shall agree.

Strange, as your voice and vesture show,

I live while you are dead;

Your eyes gleam with an icy glow

Which fills my soul with dread.”

One day went past, and went past-two,

Then o’er the castle dark,

Fair Lucifer again to view

Shone forth his lustrous spark.

And scarce his beam waved bright above,

Her dreams to him were borne,

Her heart again by aching love

And cruel longing torn.

“Come down, good Lucifer and kind,

O lord of my aspire,

And flood my chamber and my mind

With your sweetest fire!”

Now, as he heard her tender cry

With pain he faded out,

And lightning flew about the sky,

Which wheeled and rocked about;

Around the earth a lurid glow

Poured like a torrent race,

Till out of its chaotic flow

There grew a human face;

About the head dark wisps of hair

Girt with a crown of flame,

And through the sun-illumined air

Borne up by truth he came.

His arms of rounded marble sheen

Did ‘neath a cloak of raven show,

And sad and thoughtful was his mien

And pallid was his brow.

Bright eyes he had that seemed to tell

Of strange chimerical bonds;

And deep they were as passion’s spell,

And dark as moonlit ponds.

“Down from the spheres have I flown,

Though terrible my flight;

My father wears Apollo’s crown,

My mother is the night.

O come, fair child of royal birth,

Cast this your world aside,

For Lucifer has flown to earth

To claim you as his bride.

A starry halo from the skies

About your hair will fall,

And you among the spheres will rise

The proudest of them all.”

“O, beautiful you are, good Sire,

As but a demon prince could be,

But to the course of your desire

I never shall agree.

You wound me with your crude behest;

I dread what you extol;

Your heavy eyes, as though possessed,

Gleam down into my soul.”

“But why should I descend to thee?

Far better what I give;

My days are all eternity,

While you but one hour live.”

“I would not chosen phrases seek,

Nor carefully my words arrange,

But though with human mouth you speak,

Your speech to me is strange.

Yet if you wish to prove your worth,

That I betroth myself to you,

Well, then come down to me on earth

And be a mortal too.”

You ask my endless, life above

To barter for a kiss.

Aye, I will show how my love,

How deep my longing is.

My birthright I will fling aside

To be reborn of sin, and I

Who to all rolling time am tied,

Will that great knot untie.”

At which he turned and went away

Midst a cloud of sombre pearl,

To renounce his birthright from that day

For the love of a mortal girl.

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About this time young Cãtãlin

Was a page boy of that house,

Who filled the festive cups with wine

At feast and royal carouse.

And carried high the regal train;

A foundling, brought by chance,

Born of a humble unknown strain,

Though roguish in his glance,

Round-cheeked, like rose-apples red,

Mischievous, bright-eyed,

A slipped with quick yet stealthy tread

To Cãtãlina’s side.

Upon my soul, Queen of romance!

Was such a darling ever?

Come Cãtãlin, quick try your chance,

For now’s your time or never.

At which he round her waist did twine

His arm in sudden wooing.

“Behave, you rascal Cãtãlin,

Whatever are you doing?”

“By sorrow brooding all the while

You would your heart assuage,

But better you would turn and smile

And kiss just once your page.”

“I know not what your wishes are,

Leave me alone, you knave.

Ah me! The longing for that star

Will drive me to the grave.”

“If you don’t know, and you would learn

How love is set about,

Don’t recklessly my teaching spurn,

First fairly hear me out.

As trappers deftly birds pursue

With nets among the tree,

When I stretch out my arm to you,

Slip your arm thus round me.

Your eyes into my eyes must glow,

Nor turn away, nor close

And when I lift you softly, so,

Rise gently on your toes.

And when my face is downwards bent

Your face turned up will stay,

That we may gaze with sweet intent

For ever and a day.

While should you wish at last to learn

The measure of love’s bliss,

When hot my lips on yours do burn

Give back again my kiss.”

Amused, yet with a girl’s surprise

At what the youth acclaimed,

She blushed and turned away her eyes,

Half willing, half ashamed.

“A chatterbox you were since small

With overmuch to tell,

Yet I had felt, in spite of all,

We’d suit each other well”.

But Lucifer’s slow sailing spark

Crept up out of the sea

Over the horizon’s arc,

Prince of eternity.

And now my wretched heart does bleed,

With tears my eyes grow dim,

When e’er I watch the waves that speed

Across the sea to him.

While he looms with adoring ray

My grief to overthrow,

Yet ever climbs to heights away

Where mortals cannot go.

His silver beams that space defy

Sadly my watchers are

And I shall love him till I die,

Yet he be ever far.

And thus it is the days to me

Are drear as desert sand,

The nights filled with a mystery

I dare not understand . . .”

“How childish is the way you speak.

Come on! Come, lets run away,

That all the world for us shall seek

Though no one finds the way.

And we shall nothing of this life regret

But joyous live and sprightly,

Till soon your parents you’ll forget,

Nor dream your longings nightly.”

\*

Lucifer set out and o’er

The sky his wings extended,

And million years flew past before

As many moments ended.

A sky of stars above his way,

A sky of stars below;

As lightning flash midst them astray

In one continuous flow.

Till round his primal chaos hurled

When out of causeless night

The first, up flaming dawn unfurled

Its miracle of light.

Still further flew he ere the start

Of things of form devoid,

Spurred by the yearning of his heart,

Far back into the void.

Yet where he reach’s is not the bourn

Nor yet where eye can see;

Beyond where struggling time was torn

Out of eternity.

Around him there was naught. And still,

Strange yearning there was yet,

A yearning that all space did fill,

As when the blind forget.

“O, Father God, this knot untie

Of my celestial birth,

And praised you will be on high

And on the rolling earth.

The price you ask is little count,

Give fate another course,

For you are of fair life the fount

And of calm death the source.

Take back this halo from my head,

Take back my starry lower,

And give to me, o God, instead

Of human love one hour.

Out of the chaos was I wrought,

In chaos would I be dispersed,

Out of the empty darkness brought,

For darkness do I thirst…”

“Hyperion, o child divine,

Don’t thus your state disclaim,

Nor ask for miracle, nor sign

That has nor sense nor name.

You wish to be a man of son,

To be a star you scorn;

But men quick perish every one,

And men each day are born.

Yet stars burn on with even glow,

And it is fate’s intending

That they nor time, nor place shall know,

Unfettered and unending.

Out of eternal yesterday

Into tomorrow’s grave,

Even the sun will pass way

That other sun’s shall lave;

The sun that every morn does rise

At last it’s spirit gives,

For each thing lives because it dies,

And dies because it lives.

But you, Hyperion, never wane,

Night’s miracle sublime,

But in the sky your place retain,

The wonder of all time.

So what strange fancy holds your mind

What dreaming thus berates you?

Return to earth and there you’ll find

The awakening that awaits you.”

\*

Hyperion did straightway go

To where through ages gone

His gleam upon the earth below

Nightly he had shone.

And it was evening when he came,

Night’s darkness slow assembled,

And rose the moon a frozen flame

That in the water trembled,

And filled the forest’s twilight clime

With a silver starry mist,

Where ‘neath a tall and spreading lime

Two fair-haired children kissed.

“O, let me lay in lover’s wise

My head upon your breast,

Beneath the wonder of your eyes,

In soft and fragrant rest.

In mystery’s enchanted light

Pervade me with your charm,

And flood my soul through passion’s night

With time’s eternal calm.

O, quench my longing’s eager thirst,

My aching doubts overcast,

For you to me are love the first,

And of my dreams the last.”

Hyperion gazed down and knew

The fire their souls possessed;

For scarce the boy her nearer drew,

She clasped him to her breast.

A rain of petals in the air

That softly did enfold

Two fervent children strangely fair,

With locks of plated gold.

She, lost in love’s enraptured flight,

To heaven turned her eyes,

Saw Lucifer’s down shining light

And whispered through her sighs:

“Come down, good Lucifer and kind,

O lord of my aspire.

And fill the forest and my mind

With your sweetest fire!”

And Lucifer, alone in space,

Her tender summons heard,

A planet o’er the ocean’s face

That trembled at her word,

But did not plunge as in former day,

And in his heart did cry:

“O, what care you, fair face of clay,

If it be he or I?

Still earth shall only earth remain,

Let luck its course unfold,

And I in my own kingdom reign

Immutable and cold.”