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"Fold over Fold, Inveterately Convolv'd" Some Aspects of Mangan's Intertextuality

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My intention in this paper is to examine the significance in Mangan's work of a small number of texts by other writers, works which were evidently of great importance to him, and to which he refers so often that they are virtually part of the fabric of his own writing. The principal subjects of my discussion will be the poetry of Byron and William Godwin's novel *St. Leon*; but individual motifs and character types from other authors also crop up in the argument.

I propose to argue that in Mangan's writing there is a perpetually recurring contest between the quotidian and the transcendent, and a constant problem in effecting the necessary transactions between them. This tension is well defined in Schiller's discussions of aesthetics. In his essay entitled "Thoughts Upon the Common and Low in Art", the following passages appear:

> Everything is Common which does not address the spirit, and which excites only a sensuous interest. . . A portrait painter can treat his subject in a style both *Common* and *Great; Common*, if he sets forth the contingent as carefully as the necessary, if he neglects the great, and solicitously brings out the little; *Great*, if he knows how to discover the most interesting traits, separating the accidental from the necessary, bringing out the greater and only indicating the little. But nothing is Great, except the expression of soul in actions, features and positions. . . The *Low* stands yet one degree below the common, and is distinguished from it by the fact that it indicates not only something *negative*, not only a want of the spiritual and noble, but something *positive*—namely, rudeness of feeling, bad manners, and degraded sentiments. . . The low always indicates something coarse and clownish. . . In works of art, the low *may be apparent*, not only by selecting low objects, which a sense of fitness and propriety forbids, but also by treating *them in a low way*. . . Low incidents occur in the life of the greatest man, but only a low taste would select and portray them.[1]

What I have called the transcendent in Mangan is comparable to that which "addresses the spirit", the "Great", in Schiller. It is an imagined state of limitless power, energy and life, whose possessors are suffused with a "woundrous excess of light", and exist in a condition of grandeur and suffering. Its types in Mangan's imagination are the following. First: Byron's Childe Harold and Manfred; second, the Faustian heroes of two Gothic

novels, Godwin's *St. Leon* (published in 1799) and the Irish writer C. R. Maturin's *Melmoth the Wanderer* (published in 1820). Both St. Leon and Melmoth have contracted demonic bargains of an obscure kind, and both as a result possess immortality and the capacity to wander widely over space and time. Both are grandly tormented, glamorous and isolated souls, like Byron's Manfred, defying the spirits in "thrilling monologues" (Mangan's phrase) from his Alpine peak, and like Childe Harold, who picturesquely exhibits his existential despair against a backdrop of sublime Mediterranean scenery. A third version of the eternal and eternally grieving spirit is the Wandering Jew, whose legend Mangan found in German poetry, and reworked in two different versions, one from Schubart and one from F. V. Schlegel.[2]

I shall first examine the uses to which Mangan puts Byron, taking the tones and techniques of Byron's work as of equal importance with the subject-matter and characters of the poems. In Mangan's work, taking prose and poetry together, Byron is quoted, paraphrased or mentioned more than a score of times. The pattern of these references reveals a strong emphasis on *Childe Harold*, from which Mangan quotes at least six times, but there are also quotations from *Don Juan, Beppo, The Giaour*, and *The Vision of Judgment*, a reference to *Mazeppa*, and several mentions and an important discussion of *Manfred*.[3]

Byron's *Childe Harold* is, in the sense which has been defined by Mikhail Bakhtin, monological: it uses one kind of language, a grand lyric tone which by comparison with the wry variousness of *Don Juan* is a simple affair.[4] The narrative poems, too, though full of vigour, deal in relatively simple versions of passion and heroism, in a diction unshadowed by irony. *Don Juan, Beppo* and *The Vision of Judgment* are quite another matter, with their sardonic colloquialism and virtuoso comic rhymes. It is important to recognize that though passages of *Childe Harold* are the most obvious trace of Byronic influence in Mangan's work, in fact both Byrons had their effect on him. His lifelong supple and delightful experiments with stanza-forms and the effects of rhyme must surely have their origins in his early absorption of the quizzically comic Byron, what Bakhtin calls the "novelized" texts, which play tone against tone, and "Common" (or even "Low") against "Great" in the Schillerian sense.[5] Byron achieves his dialogical quality in various ways; I shall look at two of his methods. One is to draw attention to his medium. Here he is doing it in *Beppo*, stanza 63:

To turn—and to return;—the devil take it,
  This story slips for ever through my fingers,
Because, just as the stanza likes to make it,
  It needs must be—and so it rather lingers;
This form of verse begun, I can't well break it,
  But must keep time and tune like public singers;
But if I once get through my present measure,
I'll take another when I'm next at leisure.[6]

In this passage for a moment the reader can see, because of Byron's laughing disclaimer itself, how the leisurely, digressive narration is intimately bound up with, is indeed a product of, the "measure"; and thus the story, and by implication all poetic speech, is shown as mediated through the enabling conventions of language and metre. No absolute lyric feeling can continue to present itself as such in the presence of this genially ironic tone.

In the following stanza from *Don Juan*, we can see another of Byron's mediating touches, in the juxtaposition of the sun-chariot of Phaeton with "the York mail":

What a delightful thing's a turnpike road!
  So smooth, so level, such a mode of shaving
The earth, as scarce the eagle in the broad
  Air can accomplish, with his wide wings waving;
Had such been cut in Phaeton's time, the god
  Had told his son to satisfy his craving
With the York mail. . .
(Canto X. stanza 78)

In this stanza the transcendent, Promethean aspirations of Phaeton doubly come a cropper: the framework of the Greek legend is wrenched to accommodate the turnpike road, and on it, the York mail, or in other words, the everyday world of contemporary England. No such quotidian fact is allowed to complicate the tone in the poetic drama *Manfred*, written somewhat earlier.

As I have said, the most immediately obvious element of Byronic influence on Mangan's poetry is the figure of tormented grief and puzzlement from *Childe Harold*. Again and again Mangan quotes snatches of the third canto, which is a *locus classicus* of extreme Romantic despair. Stanza 34 alone feeds several passages of Mangan:

There is a very life in our despair,
Vitality of poison,—a quick root
Which feeds these deadly branches; for it were
As nothing did we die; but Life will suit
Itself to Sorrow's most detested fruit,
Like to the apples on the Dead Sea's shore,
All ashes to the taste: Did man compute
Existence by enjoyment, and count o'er
Such hours 'gainst years of life,—say, would he name threescore?

But in his use of this material he evinces a bewildering variety of moods. In the prose piece "A Sixty-Drop Dose of Laudanum" he solemnly employs the last two syllables of the last two lines of the stanza for one of his epigraphs, complete with full reference, giving:

> ---------- Count o'er
> ---------- threescore!
> *Childe Harold,* c. iii. st. xxxiv.[7]

This, with its very Mangan-like emphasis on the rhyme at the expense of the meaning and the syntax, would seem to make fun of the gloom in Byron's passage. On the other hand, in his English version of a poem by the German poet Ferdinand Freiligrath, the ghost of the stanza seems to appear in its original, gloomy attire:

> But no long voyagings,—oh, no more
> Of the wary East or South—no more of the Simoom—
> No apples from the Dead Sea shore—
> No fierce volcanoes,
> All fire and gloom!

—Or so, at least, it seems, until the final two lines:

> Or else, at most, sing *basso*, we implore,
> Of Orient sands, while Europe's sands monopolise thy *Sopranos*![8]

At the end of his prose piece "My Bugle, and How I Blow It" (1841), Mangan weaves stanza 60 of *Childe Harold* into a similar crisscrossing of tones. In a voice of self-mockery he sketches himself as doomed isolate, by virtue of his genius:

> But for me there is no hope; at home or abroad I tarry not. Like Schubart's *Wandering Jew*, I am "scourged by unrest through many climes". Like Coleridge's *Ancient Mariner*, "I pass like Night, from land to land" . . . A fearful voice, to all but me inaudible, for ever thunders in mine ear, "Pack up thy duds!—push along!—keep moving! I see no prospect before me but an eternity of peripateticalism—
>
> The race of Life becomes a hopeless flight
> To those that walk in darkness—on the sea
> The boldest steer but where their ports invite,
> But there are wanderers o'er eternity
> Whose bark drives on and on, and anchored ne'er shall be.
>
> Once again, Reader, farewell, but forget not—THE MAN IN THE CLOAK.

The demotic expression "pack up thy duds!" comically undercuts the grand gloom of the legendary and lyric wanderers who are also involved: an encounter is staged between the narrator of *Don Juan* or *Beppo*, and the figure of Childe Harold himself: that is, between the quotidian world, which guarantees no separation of pathetic and comic effects, and the high simplicity of cosmic disillusionment.

Turning to the influence of the Gothic novels, *Melmoth the Wanderer* and *St. Leon*, we find that Mangan's attitude to this prose material is characterized by an equivalent complexity. Melmoth is a type of Promethean, almost superhuman, power, like Goethe's *Faust*, another work often mentioned by Mangan, though he finds Byron's drama of transgressive individual will, *Manfred*, to be superior to Goethe's.[10] As is clear especially from his prose work, Mangan's passionate imaginative interest in such figures always involves a lively sense of their ridiculousness when brought into relation with modernity, and particularly with urban life. I have argued elsewhere that he shows this by choosing to translate Balzac's continuation of *Melmoth the Wanderer*, his story *Melmoth réconcilié*, which brings the Wanderer into the city and shows the buying and selling of the demonic powers, at an ever-accelerating rate, and their resultant trivialization.[11]

Insofar as this transcendent figure who has won extraordinary powers is a type of the poet, Mangan mocks him by bringing him up against the actualities of life for a writer in the magazines; as he says in his "Grand and Transcendent Ode . . . to *The Comet*", in 1833: "Magazines are ('tis said) but shifts for buttering bread".[12] Writing about fame in the teasing and relentlessly allusive "Sixty-Drop Dose of Laudanum" (1839), he links St. Leon with two other supernatural literary figures:

> Yes: fame, like Mrs Shelley's Frankenstein, is a genuine production, of the sepulchre. "The nightmare Life-in-Death is she." She springs up from the dust of him who seeks her no more, as the phoenix rises from its own ashes. "The grave-dews winnowing through the rotting clay" are distilled into an *elixir vitae* which, unlike St. Leon's, turns out no burden to its possessor".[13]

In *Anthologia Germanica* No. XIII, in 1838, he self-mockingly uses St. Leon to describe his own "capability of expatiating to eternity upon a single topic":

> Give us but one pull from St. Leon's elixir-bottle, and ages might elapse, until the grass grew over the forgotten tombs of those who shall still be unborn in the days of our grand-children, before our monotonous drawl should cease to astound and mystify mankind.[14]

The elixir appears elsewhere in a serio-comic list of marvels:

> Had we Aladdin's lamp—Gyges' ring—the wishing-cap of Fortunatus—Paganini's violin—the lyre of Orpheus—the collar of Moran—the sword of Harlequin—Prospero's wand—St. Leon's *elixir vitae*—the finger of Midas—the wings of Icarus—the talisman of Camaralzaman—the flying horse of Prince Firouz Schah. . .[15]

The collocation here of the collar of Moran and Paganini's violin with Orpheus' lyre resembles that of Phaeton and the York mail, in *Don Juan*.

And yet Mangan was evidently not immune to the grand romance of St. Leon and his dark bargain. In a poem from his nationalist phase, three years before his own death, he imagines the patriotic "Youths of Ireland" as "the

new St. Leons, who. . . conquer Time and Fate" by their sacrifice of self to the cause.[16] He footnotes this reference in the poem with a quotation from *St. Leon* itself, from the moment of crisis in the book when St. Leon actually gains knowledge of the secret:

"For me the laws of nature are suspended, the eternal wheels of the universe roll backward; I am destined to be triumphant over Fate and Time."

Much of Mangan's best work is written as if the lyric speaker in fact possessed some such powers as Melmoth's or St. Leon's. It is a discourse which puts itself outside the framework of history, if history is understood as a continuing process. Its viewpoint on the everyday doings and habitations of men is often Olympian—that of a prophet or an exile, or of the last representative of a dead caste or nation (the pair of poems called "Khidder" and "The World's Changes" use a prophet-figure; and last survivors abound, from Mac Liag, poet of Kincora, to the Ottoman student remembering his "Daunishmend"). In these poems glory has always already departed, or can at best be dreamed of (as in "A Vision of Connacht"). The setting of these poems is an elsewhere, whether of time or space—a splendid past, for the construction of which Mangan made an imaginative pillage of other periods and other cultures: the time of the Barmecides, Karaman, Connaught in the thirteenth century, twenty golden years ago, or the reign of a score of euphoniously-named sheikhs, caliphs and khans. All cultures are thus deprived of their historical particularity and reconstituted as a single one, within which men suffer identical pains and mourn the loss of identical joys. The poem called "Advice (From the Ottoman)" puts it especially clearly:

Moor, Chinese, Egyptian, Russian, Roman,
  Tread one common downhill path of doom:
Everywhere the names are Man and Woman,
  Everywhere the old sad sins find room.[17]

(At the same time, however, this poem is itself an exercise in verbal inventiveness, the first word of each stanza being a palindrome of the last, which puts theme and form in a fairly incongruous relationship).

The single realm which Mangan has by these means invented for himself becomes *the* realm of poetry, and within that realm all deeds are either heroically noble, or grandly evil, as in "The Howling Song of Al-Mohara", which begins:

My heart is as a House of Groans
  From dusky eve to dawning grey;
    Allah, Allah hu!
The glazed flesh on my staring bones
  Grows black and blacker with decay;
    Allah, Allah hu!
  Yet am I none whom Death may slay;
I am spared to suffer and to warn;
    Allah, Allah hu![18]

Life as proposed within these poems is a matter of swords and swift steeds, of the perfect good fellowship usually of a warrior group, now destroyed and departed. It is all a long way from the robust quotidian life of Dublin in the eighteen-thirties and eighteen-forties, and from Mangan's own actual life as a professional writer for a clutch of magazines of various political opinions, producing contributions for which he was paid by the line, never very flush with money, frequently drunk, drugged, or melancholic.[19] Mangan was a second-generation Romantic poet, who had perforce to renegotiate the Byronic and Shelleyan absolutes of Romantic will and feeling. His Schillerian "low" and "common" conditions of production do find their way into his writings, though one has to look fairly hard to discover them in the tidied-up Mangan of the anthologies. In spite of his fascination with the spirit of poetry and his commitment to its beautiful sad sentiments, Mangan's work is shot through with comic moments, instants of ironic self-debasement and attention to the "accidental" in Schiller's terms. If one looks, for instance, at his treatment of time, one finds not only the absolute and vanished past (Kincora, Karaman), whose date is left unstated or vague, but also more precisely indicated moments: as in the poem "Eighteen-Hundred Fifty", by Mangan's invented German alter ego "Selber"[20] or the year 1833, in "A Verye Splendidde and Ryghte Conceited Dittie of ande Concernyinge the Newe Yeare".[21]

Even in those poems which look as if they mean to remain within the privileged domain of pure lyric feeling, Mangan cannot always sustain his own power to imagine it with a straight face (or perhaps he does not sufficiently wish to). In the poems of loss and grief which form such a large proportion of his work, what the reader finds is the set of formal elements—the stanza, the refrain, the persona of a sorrowing isolate—but somehow the whole is lacking in semantic weight. In the narrative poems, many of them versions from the German—for example, "The Diver", "The Spectre-Caravan", "Alexander and the Tree"—the impetus of the tale carries the reader on and unifies the poem in the mind. But in many of the lament-poems there is a sensation of slackness; the refrain so fills out the metrical space which is set up at the start, that it can end by mesmerizing the reader. The result is the actual immobilization of the lyric persona, who becomes locked

in an attitude of grief, imprisoned like Prometheus on the cliff, like St. Leon and Melmoth in their frightful immortality, or like the Wandering Jew within his recurring visionary nightmare.

I would argue that this effect can be read as an interrogation by the poet of the adequacy of the available poetic forms, but in a way more radical and ultimately more disturbing than Byron's genial advertence to his stanza or his rhyme. In Byron the strong narrative interest carries the poems on, sufficiently distracting attention from the palpable poetic mechanism. But Mangan seems deliberately to seek to foreground the devices of his work. This mischievous quizzing of the medium can be seen easily in his evident spoofing poems, such as some of his German alter egos' *Selber*'s and *Drechsler*'s work. But one may also discover it in apparently serious pieces, such as "The Wail of the Three Khalendeers", with its relentless treble rhymes. Here is the first stanza:

> La'laha, il Allah!
> Here we meet, we three, at length,
> Amrab, Osman, Perizad,
> Shorn of all our grace and strength,
> Poor, and old, and very sad!
> We have lived, but live no more;
> Life has lost its gloss for us,
> Since the days we spent of yore
> Boating down the Bosphorus!
> La'laha, il Allah!
> The Bosphorus, the Bosphorus!
> Old Time brought home no loss for us.
> We felt full of health and heart
> Upon the foamy Bosphorus!

And so it goes on, for a further six stanzas.[23] The word "Bosphorus" quickly comes to exert a magnetic influence on the reader, all but obliterating any particularities in the earlier part of each successive stanza. It is hard not to feel that what Mangan is doing here is primarily diverting himself by the application of the resources of Walker's *Rhyming Lexicon* (a work he often mentions) to an utterly conventional kit of poetic sentiments, including wine, roses, and all the usual paraphernalia.

In his enterprise as a poet in the fourth and fifth decades of the nineteenth century, Mangan had to attempt the reconciliation of two strongly antipathetic sets of conditions. These were, on the one hand, the quotidian scenery of a provincial city under strong political tensions, experienced from a precarious social and financial position; and on the other, the grand literary inheritance of high Romanticism, with its imperatives arising from the force of the individual will and sensibility. Throughout his work Mangan is remarkable for the doubleness of his tone: at one instant he is expressing the depths of gloom and despair, at the next punning and building up crazy comic edifices by his rhyme-schemes and elaborate metrical games. This bewildering changeableness is familiar to all readers of Mangan who have got beyond the few familiar anthology pieces, and one could multiply examples of it almost endlessly. His Victorian biographer, D. J. O'Donoghue, regretted Mangan's facetiousness, and indeed did his best to remove it surgically from his edition of the poems.[24] But merely to deplore the joking and the incessant shifting of tones—irritating and arid though they may sometimes seem—is, I would argue, to miss the point of Mangan. Mangan's work is *both* "clownish", in Schiller's word, *and* intensely serious and lyrical. But he is always bifocal, never letting the reader rest for long in either mode, and it is his resolute maintenance of the tension between the two which gives his work its fullest energy. And as I have tried to show, one of the clearest ways of perceiving this doubleness is in his incessant transvaluations of the Promethean images of Romanticism, from transcendent to ridiculous and back again.

Notes

[1] *Philosophical and Aesthetic Letters and Essays* (1795), trans. J. Weiss (London: John Chapman, 1845), 266—67. Mangan thought highly of Schiller; he preferred him to Goethe, and had been translating him from the beginning of his career. He chose to begin his *Anthologia Germanica* in the *Dublin University Magazine* (henceforth *D.U.M.*), in 1835 with versions of Schiller's poems.

[2] F. V. Schlegel, "The Everlasting Jew", *D.U.M.*, XXXIII (Jan. 1849), 92—94; and Schubert, "The Wandering Jew", in J. C. Mangan, *Essays in Prose and Verse*, ed. C. Meehan (Dublin: Duffy, 1884), 269—75. Mangan presumably makes the capital "V" stand for "von".

[3] The stereotype 'Byronic' Byron, spectacularly moody representative sinner of the period, plays only a minor role in Mangan's writing. See *D.U.M.*, XII (Aug. 1838), p. 177, and, XIV (July 1839), p. 72, the only disparaging references to Byron I have found in Mangan.

[4] Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogical Imagination* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981).

[5] Ibid., pp. 6 & 33; see also the longer discussion of Pushkin.

[6] *Poetical Works of Lord Byron* (London: Frederick Warne, 1890).

[7] *D.U.M.*, XIII (March 1839), 269—78.

[8] "My Themes", *D.U.M.*, XXI (Jan. 1843), 41.

[9] "My Bugle and How I Blow It", *Belfast Vindicator*, II (March 1841).

[10] See his discussion, *D.U.M.*, VII (March 1836), 278—79.

[11] See my "The Recycling of Melmoth: 'A Very German Story' ", in *Literary Interrelations. Ireland, England and the World. Vol. III*, ed. W. Zach and H. Kosok (Tübingen: G. H. Narr, 1987).

[12] *The Comet*, III (June 1833), p. 494.

[13] Ibid.; and, "Drop 47", *D.U.M.*, XIII (March 1839).

[14] *D.U.M.*, XII (August 1838), 168.

[15] "Anthologia Germanica No. VI", *D.U.M.*, VI (May 1836), 518.

[16] "The Peal of Another Trumpet", *The Nation*, IV (May 1846), p. 457.

[17] "Advice (from the Ottoman)", J. C. Mangan, *Poems*, ed. D. J. O'Donoghue (Dublin: O'Donoghue and M. H. Gill, 1903), p. 209.

[18] *D.U.M.*, XV (April 1840), 383.

[19] See the excellent discussion of Mangan's life and circumstances by David Lloyd, *The Writings of James Clarence Mangan: A Case Study in Nationalism and Writings*, Diss. Cambridge 1982.

[20] *D.U.M.*, XXV (January 1845), 104—06.

[21] Meehan, p. 129.

[22] "The Diver", from Schiller, *D.U.M.*, V (May 1835), 590—93; "The Spectre-Caravan", from Freiligrath, *D.U.M.*, XIX (Feb. 1842), 203—05; "Alexander and the Tree", *Irish Penny Journal*, I (July 1840), p. 28.

[23] *D.U.M.*, XXIII (May 1845), 538—40.

[24] See *The Life and Writings of James Clarence Mangan* (Dublin: M. H. Gill, 1897). The most glaring example of O'Donoghue's tampering with a text is probably his silent omission of the wryly optimistic final stanza from the poem "Broken-Hearted Lay, No. I", from his edition of the poems, op. cit., 124—35.