
“English in expression, Irish in thought”? Displacement and Identity in the Writing of James Clarence Mangan

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James Clarence Mangan (1803-1849) has long been viewed as a key figure in the cultural nationalism that led to Ireland’s Celtic literary revival at the end of the 19th century; born into a nation that had just witnessed Wolfe Tone’s failed rebellion of 1798 and the end of an Irish parliament with the 1800 Act of Union, Mangan was writing at a darkly turbulent period in Irish history that would see Catholic emancipation of 1829, the rise and fall of the first great Catholic nationalist orator in the “gigantic personality”¹ of the pro-English language Daniel O’Connell, and, most crucially perhaps, the horror of the Great Famine of the mid 1840s which indirectly took Mangan’s own life² — a period then of political, linguistic and cultural displacements, that saw Ireland wrestling with self-definition, as the Gaelic language retreated westward.

Mangan was associated specifically with the Young Ireland movement of the 1840s which led to nationalist Ireland’s first attempts to find a common voice regardless of religion, class or origin, through English-language newspapers such as the *Nation* and the *United Irishman*. Mangan was a regular contributor, penning amply commented and annotated original poetry and translations, as well as essays and shorter fiction pieces. Although barely known outside Ireland, probably because he shunned publishing in the British press³, he has, as Mangan

¹ Theodore William Moody, “Irish history and mythology”, *Hermethena*, 124 (1978), p. 7-24, p. 7.

² Mangan died of cholera, introduced at the time of the famine in Ireland.

³ This is how Mangan’s friend John Mitchell pithily puts it: “Mangan was not only an Irishman — not only a Papist, not only an Irish papist rebel, but throughout his whole literary life he never deigned to submit to English criticism, never published a line in any English periodical, or through any English bookseller, and never seemed to be aware that there was an English public to please” Quoted in Kevin J.H. Dettmar, “Martyr without a cause: James Clarence Mangan and the ideology of Irish nationalism”, *Quarterly Journal of Ideology*, 1986 10 (3), p. 33-53, p. 34.

scholar David Lloyd asserts, “often been regarded as the one poetic genius of the movement, infused with the spirit of the nation and representing in his life the figure of a suffering Ireland”⁴.

Mangan’s gravestone in Glasnevin cemetery indeed stoutly proclaims him “Ireland’s National Poet”; after his death his poetic lineage would be further vouchsafed by two key imprimaturs, ensuing successively from Yeats — who deemed Mangan “the master of Irish song”, a “strange visionary ... who wrought ... lyrics of indescribable, vehement beauty”— and Joyce, who devoted two critical essays to Mangan, praising the “exalted lyrical music and [...] burning idealism” of “the most significant poet of the modern Celtic world”⁵. But like Yeats and Joyce too, Mangan never really mastered Gaelic. Hyperbolic parallels between a Stephen Dedalus, “soul fret[ing] in the shadow of [the English] language”⁶ and the figure of Mangan, similarly condemned to travesty his essential Irishness in the borrowed tongue of the imperial invader have been predictably forthcoming in studies of his work⁷.

Yet as Lloyd argues, literary bio-criticism on Mangan has not limited itself to reading Mangan as the quintessential-tortured-Irish-Romantic-writing-in-English: in the narrative of his emotionally wretched, poverty-stricken life haunting the seedy taverns of “Liberties” Dublin, critics have located the tragic distillation of a blighted and downtrodden nation. For Mangan’s biographer James Kilroy writing in 1976 for instance, the poet “represents Ireland and the suffering of his life can be seen as symbolizing the miseries of his country in the middle of the last century”⁸, while for cultural theorist Terry Eagleton in 1995, the poet constituted the harrowed symptom of Ireland’s troubled, lost identity, the bathetic personification of a displaced nation reeling in the wake of trauma: “the

⁴ David Lloyd. “James Clarence’s Mangan’s Oriental Translations and the Question of Origin. *Comparative Literature*, 1986 38 (1), p. 20-35, p. 20.

⁵ Quoted in Kevin J.H. Dettmar, *op. cit.*, p. 34.

⁶ “The language in which we are speaking is his before it is mine. How different are the words home, Christ, ale, master, on his lips and on mine! I cannot speak or write these words without unrest of the spirit. His language, so familiar and so foreign, will always be for me an acquired speech. I have not made or accepted its words. My voice holds them at bay. My soul frets in the shadow of language ». James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* [1916], Jeri Johnson (ed. & introd.), Oxford, Oxford UP, 2000, p. 159.

⁷ For instance, “he like Stephen Dedalus after him, prefers stasis, the frozen moment which is filled to overflowing with significance” (Robert Welch, *Irish poetry from Moore to Yeats*, Gerrards Cross, Colin Smyth, 1980, p. 102); “writing with sentiments we might attribute to Stephen Dedalus as much as to Joyce himself, he says of Mangan ‘History encloses him so straitly that even his fiery movements do not set him free from it’” (Matthew Campbell, *Lyrical Unions: Mangan, O’Hussey and Ferguson*, *Irish Studies Review*, 8 (3), Dec 2000, 325-38, p. 325.)

⁸ James Kilroy, *James Clarence Mangan*, Lewisburg, Pa: Bucknell UP. 1971, p. 9.

psychic alienation and anomie which are common to nineteenth century Ireland, most graphically figure in the person of the blanched-haired, weirdly garbed James Clarence Mangan"⁹.

And indeed in many ways, Mangan, a significant portion of whose poetry was the modern translation of Ancient Gaelic verse —albeit via literal prose versions already in English—, would readily find resonance in one of the central nationalist preoccupations of the period: the challenge of uncovering a genuine if vestigial Irish idiom, of retrieving a cultural authenticity and independence stifled by beneath centuries of English domination, of reviving the original Celtic spirit lodged within texts on the verge of being lost along with the use of the Irish language. The following extract from D. F. McCarthy's impassioned introduction to his 1846 *Book of Irish Ballads* gives a good sense of how the enterprise was viewed from the nationalist side:

To us there can be scarcely anything more interesting or more valuable than these snatches and fragments of old songs and ballads, which are *chapters of a nation's autobiography*. Without these how difficult would it be for the best disposed and most patriotic amongst us to free our minds from the *false impressions* which the study (superficial as it was) of the history of our country, as told by those who were not her children or her friends, had made upon us. Instead of the rude savage kerns that anti-Irish historians represent our forefathers to have been, forever hovering with *murderous intent round the fortresses of the Pale*, we see them; in their own ballads, away in their green valleys and inaccessible mountains, as fathers, as brothers, as lovers and as husbands, leading the old patriarchal life with their wives and children, while the air is musical with the melody of the harps and the lowing of their cattle.¹⁰

Over a hundred years later, in Robert Welch's study of nineteenth century verse, the narrative of divinely ordained emancipation has only gained in mystic fervour, with Mangan now in the role of privileged celebrant:

"Part of the excitement of [...] the translations from the Irish that Mangan did intermittently until his death in 1849, was the sense they gave that there was such a thing as an Irish poetic inheritance. [...] The literal translations he worked from were skeletons of bodies, the beautiful lineaments of which he felt he was trying to re-establish. Translation was not just a poetical work, it became a resurrection of the national imagination."¹¹

Certainly Mangan's most well-known piece, "Dark Rosaleen", showcased in McCarthy's anthology and still taught in Irish schools today, loosely based on an anonymous Irish poem, "Roisin Dubh", and published in the *Nation* in 1846, would seem to possess all the hallmarks of the genre, combining messianic zeal

⁹ Terry Eagleton, *Heathcliffe and the Great Hunger: Studies in Irish Culture*, London, Verso, 1995, p. 189.

¹⁰ D.F. McCarthy, *Book of Irish Ballads*, Dublin: J. Duffy, 1846, 24

¹¹ Robert Welch, *op. cit.*, p. 103.

and patriotic ballad in its vision of Ireland as the long yearned-for, flawless Celtic maiden:

Over dews, over sands,
 Will I fly, for your weal;
 Your holy delicate white hands
 Shall girdle me with steel.
 At home ... in your emerald bowers
 From morning's dawn till e'en,
 You'll pray for me, my flower of flowers
 My Dark Rosaleen
 My fond Rosaleen
 You'll think of me through Daylight's hours
 My virgin flower, my flower of flowers
 My Dark Rosaleen!¹²

Yet as the anthologists themselves were forced to accept, the very fact that the ballads had been translated into the colonizers' language, the language indeed of McCarthy's falsifying anti-Irish historians, fore-grounded more than anything else the paradox and limits of the recuperative manoeuvre, the impossibility then of attaining a pure and undefiled union with a sanctified Irish past. This did not stop, Edward Hayes writing in 1855, from doggedly maintaining that although "we are English in expression [...] we can be thoroughly Irish in thought"(xxxiv), and going on to praise the Irish for their appropriation and "successful cultivation" of the foreign tongue from within the bounds of its strictures¹³. The same equation is taken up by McCarthy who likewise contends, "we can be thoroughly Irish in our feelings without ceasing to be English in our speech"¹⁴.

The problem however remained as to how the essence of a genuinely Irish sentiment might be faithfully transmitted in reality. While McCarthy cautions against the superficial sprinkling of local colour—"an Irish word or an Irish phrase even appositely introduced will not be sufficient"—he can only suggest an almost equally vague and impressionistic alternative:

if they endeavour to be racy of their native soil, use their native idiom, illustrate the character of their country, treasure her legends, eternalize her traditions, people her scenery, and ennoble her superstitions, the very novelty will attract attention and secure success.¹⁵

¹² James Clarence Mangan, *Poems*, David Wheatley (ed. & introd.), Loughcrew, County Meath: Gallery Press, 2003, p. 110.

¹³ The fathers of the early church struck down paganism with weapons brought from its own armoury ...and so, also, has Ireland conquered in her captivity, by her successful cultivation of the English tongue" (xxxiv).

¹⁴ *Op. cit.*, p. 25.

¹⁵ *Loc. cit.*

Much Mangan criticism, loyal to the ideological premises put forward by McCarthy and others, has nevertheless attempted to demonstrate the ongoing and vital presence of traditional Irish bardic forms in his poetry such as the use of the ancient alliterative one line of the *filid* exemplified here in "O'Hussey's Ode to the Maguire", where poetic form figures the quickening pace of the Hugh Maguire fleeing unnamed (but presumably English) persecutors:

This sharp, sore sleet, these howling floods
Blow fiercely over and round him, and smiting sleet shower blinds ...
Should this chill, churlish night, perchance, be paralysed by frost—

— or the *caoine*, an elegy of lament sung for the death of a loved one at an Irish wake. Likewise, it has been noted how the typically eighteenth-century form of the vision poem or *aisling*, [much used by Aogan O Rathaille, the last great Irish language poet] was adopted to effect by Mangan in "Dark Rosaleen" and another of his most well-known poems "Kathleen Ny-Houlahan". Lastly, as Luke Gibbons has argued allegory, very much part and parcel of Irish cultural and political dissent in the previous two centuries would see itself indeed "enobled" in the often-veiled political consciousness of nineteenth-century romanticism that Mangan typified :

allegorical versions of identity evolved in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century cultural practices and modes of protest which explicitly contested the public sphere, and it was the carrying over of these unresolved energies [...] which was largely responsible for the 'proto-modernist' strategies of Irish romanticism¹⁶,

Mangan's poems "A Vision of Connaught in the Thirteenth Century", which pits an indictment of British power in Ireland against another time:

But lo! th sky
Showed fleckt with blood and an alien sun
Glared from the north,
And there stood on high
Amid his shorn beams, A SKELETON!¹⁷

and "Siberia", which displaces the effects of the famine onto a bleak foreign clime:

In Siberia's wastes

¹⁶ Luke Gibbons, *Transformations in Irish Culture*, Cork, Cork University Press, 1996, p. 7:

¹⁷ James Clarence Mangan, *op. cit.*, p. 114

The Ice-wind's breath
 Woundeth like the toothed steel
 Lost Siberia doth reveal
 Only blight and death¹⁸

both of which appeared in *The Nation* in 1846 when the country was in the deadly throes of the Great Hunger, would seem to exemplify such a discursive strategy.

Taken as whole however, I would argue Mangan's writing seems primarily to be concerned with distancing from the fallacies of nationalist essentialism, articulating rather the impossibility of recovering an authentic national voice, of uncovering an "organic legacy from time immemorial"¹⁹. Indeed, as T.W. Moody has argued more broadly, while the Young Ireland movement in all its missionary ardour was prey to the self-mythologizing impulse in theory, in practice it largely signalled a break from the past. Certainly modern Irish nationalism's most enchanting fables proved to be "that of an ancient Irish nation struggling for seven centuries to recover its independence from the domination of England". Young Ireland dreamed of 'a nation once again', but it was in fact to be a new creation, a self-reliant, self-respecting community in which all Irishmen [...] would have their place"²⁰

Mangan's work, in particular his translations, which constituted the vast bulk of his work, are finally more concerned with keeping the questions of origins in play than with rendering a faithful image of a certified source. The degree to which he actually mastered the languages he purported to render into English remains unclear. While for example it is generally accepted that he was at least passably fluent in a number of European languages, including German, French, Spanish and Italian, his "Gaelic" translations mentioned earlier were all fashioned indirectly from literal prose versions already available in English. The case of

¹⁸ *ibid.*, p. 108.

¹⁹ Luke Gibbons, *op.cit.*, p. 16.

²⁰ T.W. Moody, *op cit*, p. 7. The following poem Thomas Davis, leading light in the United Ireland Movement, gives a good sense of the general tenet:

What matter that at different shrines
 We pray unto one God
 What matter that at different times
 Our fathers won this sod?
 In fortune and in name we're bound
 By stronger links than steal
 And neither can be safe nor sound
 But in the other's weal

Mangan's "Literae Orientales", 120 so-called translations from Persian, Turkish and Arabic poets is more tenuous still. Some renditions are based on poems taken from Joseph von Hammer-Purgstall's German anthology of Eastern verse, *Gesichte der Osmanischen Dunchkunst*, but Mangan took generous liberties with his source texts, expanding a ten-line poem to a fantastic ninety-six line opus ['The lament of Leeah Rewann'], or ignoring all but the opening couplet of another, retained as an incipit to his own entirely original creation ['Wie seltsam ist die Welt']. In other cases, the Mangan mis-attributes his source texts, or brazenly invents a totally spurious origin, such as this "particularly genuine Persian poem", a thinly-veiled hymn of hate entitled "To the Ingleezee Khafir, Calling Hismef Djaun Bool Djenkizun":

*Thus writeth Meer Djafrit,
I hate the Djaun Bool,
Worse than Marid or Afrit
Or corpse eating Ghool.
I hate thee like Sin,
Fore thy mop-head of hair
Thy snub nose and bald chin
And they turkeycock air (1846)*

If the anti-English agenda of this spoof [or the 1844 translation of the German "Warum ruf ich" whose final stanza runs "...break the chain that binds our prostrate Fatherland"] would have been abundantly clear to contemporary readers, the predominance of impression over expression which also characterises Mangan's oriental translation implicitly undercuts the contemporary Irish nationalist ideology which measured authenticity against the benchmark of identification with the original Irish spirit. As Mangan puts it in a prose article accompanying his translations:

We do not question the qualifications of the translator for his office ... all that we mean to aver is that Oriental Poetry apparelled in western dress becomes essentially unrecognisable, forfeits its identity, ceases to be an intelligible object of apprehension to the understanding²¹

Furthermore, as David Lloyd has argued, the fifty years preceding Mangan's "Literae Orientales" had seen Orientalists and philologists give scientific credence to the notion of the Middle East as the cradle of humanity, while at about the same time a significant body of scholarly opinion had also purported to have identified

²¹ "Literae Orientales", No IV, Arabian, Persian and Turkish Poetry", *The Dublin University Magazine*, 15 (January-June 1840), p. 377.

an Oriental origin in the Irish language²². By extension then, the “‘originality’ of the Oriental or Celtic poet would lie in his closeness to the ‘origins’ of humankind and human feeling” to the very essence of humanity “stripped of the veils of inherited customs and rules”²³.

Mangan’s response to such theories is simply to deny or even invert the temporal premises on which they are predicated. Firstly in the campily theatrical persona he adopted: typically donning a blond wig, pointed hat and green spectacles, Mangan foregrounded selfhood as performance. His most famous self-appointed sobriquet, “the man in the cloak” neatly encapsulates this anti-essentialist stance that posited his cloak as his “personal identity”: “I lose my cloak and I become ... a *Nicht-ich*, a not-I, a *Non-ego*”. Rather than stripping back the veils to reveal the essence of his nation, Mangan underlined the staged, contrived nature of all identity formation. Lastly, his self-confessed strategy of what he named “anti-plagiarism” — pilfering and adulterating the work of others, claiming the copy as the rightful original—reversed the relationship between source and derivation, genuine and bogus article, throwing the passage of time in reverse, and thereby enabling, as Terry Eagleton puts it a “self-originating” form of nationalism, that at once thwarts the purist’s obdurate quest for Gaelic cultural authenticity while discursively enacting the possibility of an anti-essentialist future for his nation beyond the Union.

²² David Lloyd, *op. cit.*, p. 32.

²³ *ibid.*, p. 34.