

JAMES CLARENCE MANGAN

The Desert and the Solitude

Extracts from the Lost Autobiography
of James Clarence Mangan

INTRODUCTION

Some years ago, during research into the life of James Clarence Mangan (1803–1849), I came across a small, previously unrecorded square of paper. On one side of this paper stood a verse of Gaelic in the old script. Turning it over, I found the same verse transcribed into a fluent verse of English. At the bottom of the slip a pencilled sentence read: “*This is Mangan’s handwriting*”. This incident took place in the Gilbert Library in Dublin’s Pearse Street, and not only suggested that Mangan had been able to translate verbatim from Irish, but hinted that his story was still far from fully charted.

In spite of recent scholarly research into the life and works of Clarence Mangan, it appears that the most fascinating aspect of that work—the poet’s lost autobiography—has up to now escaped our attention. Late last summer, operating on the assumption that those manuscripts donated by Charles Gavin Duffy to the London Exhibition of 1888 would have found their way back to Dublin, I followed a trail from Pearse Street via SS Michael and John’s to a damp and draughty loft in Copper Alley where—right enough—fifteen music notebooks and countless loose leaves found in an old tea-chest held the last great unpublished work of Irish literature. My only guess as to why this treasure trove has remained undisturbed until now despite the frenetic activity of the Manganites remains the simple fact that none of them have been Dubliners, and none of them have thought of doing what any Dubliner would have done—follow his nose . . .

In the following pages, at last we are presented with one of our most searing literary documents (long before a Joyce or a Yeats, or even a Wilde had been dreamt of), set in a Dublin rapidly approaching disaster’s waterfall—the Great Famine. At times photographic, at times phantasmagoric, *The Desert and the Solitude* is above all an unequalled record of this most intensely tragic period of Irish life. Written at white heat in the two months prior to his death, it recounts the history of one whose name was “writ in sand”. It appears clear at this point that, owing to its stark and shattering vision of hell (overflowing with fresh hordes of famine cadavers), the manuscript was considered heretical by C.P. Meehan, the Catholic priest responsible for publishing the first five chapters in 1882. Indeed, Meehan’s ruse of presenting these chapters as the *only* extant part of Mangan’s autobiography has misled the scholars ever since. An inspection of the original music notebook lodged with the Royal Irish Academy reveals the poet’s handwriting filling the last line of the last page and breaking off in mid-flow. Conclusive evidence of the travesty lies

in Meehan's own *marginalis*, scribbled across the flyleaf of another notebook: "Until such time as the Lord has cleansed poor Mangan's soul of these intemperate visions, may they remain occult to all who knew him and to all those innocent readers of his poems in the time to come." It is a fitting and tragic irony that Mangan, a character given to "fathering upon other writers the offspring of his own brain" during his lifetime, should for so long after have been denied his own chilling, and soaring, autobiographical voice.

—James McCabe
Dublin, 2000

CHAPTER VI

*Facilis descensus Averno*¹

—VIRGIL

About this time, as I believe, I became acquainted with the Editors of the *Comet*, a journal which, some fifteen years back, earned and enjoyed a high degree of notoriety through Ireland. I wrote for them gratuitously, and attended at their drinking bouts, the which became increasingly more riotous the more they progressed into an evening. For my own part, I always sat at the table with a glass of water before me. They, and their hangers-on—most of whom have since gone to the _____ Angel—at length laughed me to scorn; voted me a "spoon", and would have no more to do with me. "'Tis a mad world, my masters!"

Would that this were the least of the dark humiliations of soul that I have undergone on the voyage of existence! For I have, let the Reader know, only begun as it were the unfolding of my many misfortunes. And while it can never be assailed that the *Comet* cabal were responsible for that first shift in the gradual avalanche of my disasters, it is to this same period of my history that I must, like Aeneas, look for the door down into that Underworld of despair that has been my appointed lot. They tried to corrupt me, and failed. That task I was in full measure capable of carrying out myself. For at this time it was that I began, solitary at first and detached as a mere spectator, frequenting the taverns and public-houses of Dublin, those grand tree-lined avenues into the underworld which, at their outset, reassure the simple traveller with their cool seclusion and nests of chequered light before, at their middle, thickening on a sudden into a dense, overcurtaining gloom until, by their end, he cannot even make out his own shoes and walks, as it were, in a total darkness of mind and body. It is to these illustrious purlieus—the *Royal Shades*, the *Bleeding Horse* and all their assorted groves—that I must devote my undivided attention if I am to discover

where those first innocent steps left the path of Life and led me down to a lower and darker zone.

Let it be imagined therefore that the Reader sees in his mind's eye the vision of my earlier self—bright, curious and to all the world in earnest of some capital future—sitting on a bench in the *Shades*, a book before him and a friendly, if plain, barmaid just delivering the first pot of frothy porter. Let us, the more to fully picture and experience this scene, imagine him reading Scott's *Lay of the Minstrel*, and wearing his navy cloak (then, Oh God! a thing of newness) with one of his numerous umbrellas crossways on the table before him. It is December in the year of 1831, and I have come inside to find some island of privacy and tranquillity, not to mention the rusty glow of a coal fire, before recommencing the endless and useless peregrinations of that dark city, of which my existence is composed. No, it was not the hawks or the finches of the Comet Club that first began to raven like Tityos the organs of this body, but rather the rapacious and terrible eagle of my own inward nature. Would that it were otherwise, but I could not, in the company of those with whom I was acquainted, imbibe in convivial laughter. I was the Crusoe of a different world, wrecked and marooned upon the sandbanks of my own stubborn and proud soul. I wished to observe in complete and constant distance the workings of my fellow men, and observe in equal kind and to equal degree, those of my own mind as it began to drift on its subterranean ocean of alcohol.

So, to our youthful spectator of the *Shades*. He sees before him the ways of this world—the spittings and the curses, the thoughtful meditations of the *Meerschäum* and the quick gulplings of pot and tumbler. The babble of others he hears as the sound of waves breaking on a distant shore, forever unreachable as it crashes, crashes around his ears. He has taken two—three—four pots of frothy porter and begun, *per se*, to leave behind the luggage of time and circumstance. Scott's Minstrel swims on the page whenever he casts his downward eye, the lines rilling like waves to their sandy silences. He imagines a romance with a pretty brunette, and paints in his mind the aforementioned barmaid until she resembles the Queen of Sheba—who is travelling, travelling across the endless inward desert of his solitudes to speak with him. Then, as she is about to be led down by a Marmaluke from the silken tent of her dromedary—the vision fades and vanishes on the quick as the fifth frothy pot of porter is drained to its dregs.

Such has been the start, the easy and gentle start, of my disappearance from the upper world, until finally it ceased altogether even from memory, as the soul's permanent address and I became the itinerant of darkness and drear waste. I could, no doubt, have settled *hic et nunc* never to frequent such an establishment again. Or never again to drink alone from the waters of Lethe. Or never to take in excess of the first

tumbler. Or to remain faithful and loyal to the porter, and never to touch a drop of its fire-water brother. I could even now, years before the advent of Father Mathew, have taken my own most solemn and secret pledge.² But I chose to let the sands through my loose fingers, and I chose to sit on a sandbank and watch the caravels of pretty cloudlets while the trecherous seas enrouned me. And I chose to drain the sixth and the seventh pot in search of the Queen of Sheba; and I chose to set sail on her dromedary across the desart of my days questing the Oracle of the Holy Bottle; and I chose to burnish the dangerous lamp for the Genii to blossom upwards. I chose to postpone that difficult decision, until Time had chosen to postpone me. It is to the leafy breezes of the *Royal Shades* I owe this introduction to the lower path, that gradual but imperceptible decline from oak-leaf dapplings to utter arboreal gloom. My life I lived as usual to the outward world, and only little altered in disappearances of time. My inward and real career had already begun its ultimate death-path.

It may interest the reader to recount that shortly hereafter I was the victim of a most curious and scarifying dream. I say victim, to be sure, as from this date can also be traced that long indelible line of nightmares, phantasies and other divers metaphysical rumours that have since lain a continual siege to the citadel of my most inward soul. I was, as it were, standing on Carlisle Bridge. The river, as is its wont, flew glacidly beneath me. Of a sudden I saw its waters turn a rich and extraordinary crimson, and when I turned to comment upon this wondrous change, I stood not in my own city but the vast middle of a broiling, sandy desart. I commenced to trudge through this parched and blistering wilderness, passing as I did the gigantical bones of monsters long since vanished from the earth. Ahead of me I espied what seemed a cottage or other form of habitation, upon which reaching I preceived to be the actual wreck of a skeleton ship, half-buried in sand, the timbers and sails thereof rotting piecemeal in the sun. When to my awful surprize I entered the carcase of this rotting beast by what still looked in shape to be a door, I found a congregation of the dead and dying such as would affright the devil himself. Women and babies, still living it seemed by a thread, forlornly lifted their skeleton hands at me, as if to beg the very life out of my body, as flies and locusts wantonly gathered and crawled upon their faces. It was a vision to stand "each particular hair on end", and I turned, with whatever physical strength I could muster, back to quickly depart that infernal hull. But as, it seemed to me, I began to put one leg in front of the other and commence my escape, a curious o'erpowering palsy gripped the muscles of both legs and I was left, *soi-disant*, running over the one spot of ground, try as I would to pull away from the hideous place. As if a fly in a pot of marmalade were to attempt to pull itself free, and by its evermore desperate movements bury itself the more definitively in its

sticky grave. Then, as quickly as the scene-changes of a play, I found myself once more trudging the "lone and level" sands of the desert, this time confronted with a white giant skull, in size like unto a cathedral, the sockets of which poured forth constant waterfalls of sand. And as I passed beneath the edifice of this epical structure, methought I saw a column rising out of the round in front, which as I near'd, I recognized to be Nelson atop his pillar, only the latter to be half-drown'd in sand and leaning at an angle as it would altogether tumble, and he the sad Simeon of that aborted place.

CHAPTER VII

*Das Ewig-Weibliche zieht uns hinan.*³

—GOETHE

And then, out of this inner waste of spirit and want of human companionship, the sky, it seemed, a little cleared and for a brief moment the proper life-force within me rekindled. To what or to whom did I owe this tardy rallying of the soul? Let it be now remembered that I had already, around this time, commenced upon that late and exhaustive study of the many world's tongues which has consumed the better part of whatever few leisured and temperate hours God has given me. Much I had learnt previously from Father Graham and others, but then only of the Romance tongues; and nothing of either the Teutonic or the Gaelic.⁴ It is to this inveterate habit of words I owe, in its real sense, my salvation of soul.

It was through the acquaintanceship of another scrivener, Mr Patrick Scully, and not I may add a colleague of that detestable and infernal establishment to which I was then attached, that I was introduced to that of another, and also law stationer, William Hayes. The latter lived on the South side of the city, close to Dolphin's Barn and the Circular Road. I shall never forget the moment of my first introduction to the abode, or the effect its atmosphere had on the inner shakings and sinkings of my spirit. It was a raw and twilight February evening, the sun shipwrecked like some disaster in a sky of mouldering cloud and the last little leaves of the scraggled skeleton branches detaching and driving themselves in fitful gusts before us. My friend, for even then he had so promoted me from mere acquaintance, had petitioned me to visit his family home so that all protestations aside, and I have never taken fluently to social introduction, I could do nothing but please him. *Reheboth* was the name of this residence, and it is one burned into the book and volume of my brain. The name, it appears, stemmed from the Hebrew tongue, connoting "There Is Room"; and I could not, given a graveyard of dead dictionaries, construe a finer. Already, as my friend shewed me up the stone stairway, I felt a recog-

nition and a remembrance as of a dreamt dream.

Aboriginally, the house had, it seemed, belonged to a man with twenty four children—and still it surely held space for more. Its present occupiers had but two, one of whom, William, had just led me hither. On this occasion I can remember only a Mrs Hayes, the man of the house being a busy lawyer, and presumably still involved in the city. She was of a most refined aspect, pleasing and friendly to an unusual degree, and had no doubt, to judge from her physical appearance, broken hearts like chinaware in her time. I can remember sitting on the edge of a divan, richly embroidered and strewn with large turquoise coloured cushions, when Catherine entered the room.

The first view of this, the younger sibling and sister of William, will always rank as one of the hill-top ornaments in a life of unusually deep troughs and valleys. Words, in any language, fail to suggest the full bloom of youth, the awakening inner beauty, of that spectral creature. The Queen of Sheba herself had, in the sober daylight, chosen to reveal herself. With eyes of a fiery nut brown and her gathered curls of chestnut locks, she had momentarily stolen the key from my soul's tabernacle. In the long interval of our first glancing, and what felt for me like a century of staring after the endless homeless millennia of my previous and past life, William started his introduction. "James, please to meet my darling sister Catherine," he began. The reader will note that I was at this early time still known to my friends by the appellation of my Christian name, not having as yet struck upon my own adopted Clarence, the which more anon. "I am delighted to see you," said the girl, adding inquisitively, "William tells me you are in your spare moments, a tutor for the German?" And thus, if it please, my curious and ceaseless hunger for tongues had caught the attention of this escaped angel. Let me take the opportunity to tell of it.

As my linguistic training had up to this point only bordered on the outskirts of the German and Gaelic empires, I had taken what little spare allotment of time still available to me to acquire a deep and lasting foundation in each. We admit of no distinction whatsoever, properly speaking, between the lexicons of one tongue and another. They are merely alternate musical orchestras for what is in effect the one and same earthly reality. Never have I been given to that propensity which proclaims "Thou art Turkish" therefore "Thou shalt speak, and only, the Turkish." To be limited to the one set of grammar and vocabulary has always to me seemed as imbecile as spending one's life in the one suit of clothes. Pentecost, not Babel, should be our proper pole star; and hereupon I commenced tutoring Catherine, again after her brother's earnest petitioning, what small amounts of the Teuton's speech I had garnered to that date.

I say tutoring, but it was more in the mode of an exchange of intellectual capital, the girl having already a precocious knowledge of the

French tongue, which was far in advance of my own facility and which, as it were, I was in a position to barter for with what shards of German I had acquired. In either case, her perceptions were of such a curious bent and tangent to the world, and her animal spirits of such originality, that had she never perused a single scroll or tome in her existence, her listener would nevertheless be in a advantageous position to learn much that was mere shadowy arcanum before. She had, certes, an immediate knowledge and grasp of phrenology—the which up until now I had only trifled to entertain. Astrology she was somewhat further gone in, as well as the rare and secret science of Numerology. She had even, upon many occasions, touched on the subject of re-incarnation with me, citing passages from the Gospels and the Talmud to prove its indisputable existence. “There are,” she would say, “more things in heaven and earth,” and I sitting there, her philosophical and doubting Horatio.

It was during the leisure moments of the spring and summer of that year that these deliberations took place, all the while my heart held and drawn as by a big rope towards *Reheboth*, that New Jerusalem on my horizon. Still my daily grinding tasks remained, but now I felt released into an inner garden of spirit that was not subject to the Saturnine taxes of this world. My family continued to present a face of unrivalled hardship and misery, but I learned to countenance it with unbothered equanimity, even for a time to let the continuous stream of obscenities and blasphemies that emanated from my father wash, as from a duck, off my back. But in this zone of growth and spiritual acknowledgement termed Life we are not always, or long, left to extemporize in such arbors of repose.

The world had, for a time, grown breathable to me, and I had begun to make out the shapes of possible beauty within its visible darkness when, at the close of August—as the whole of summer held its breath for one last spell of glory—death crept silently into the garden at night. My good brother John was most tragically taken by an accident on the Liverpool packet, when he had fallen between a ladder and the wharf, and drown’d before anyone might reach assistance.⁵ He had wanted to gain employment in England, seeking mostly to escape the vicious gravity of the Mangan household, and had found instead only the sands of that Zahara beneath the sea. And I found myself for the first time in the littered fields of Prospect Cemetery, a ground that would grow in me throughout the years, burrowing and tunnelling its graves into my soul. Catherine Hayes I had not seen these many weeks back, after having journeyed with her family to holiday in Westport. My poor mother now began, it seemed to me, to shatter under the weight of grief while I, for my part, felt the sharp scissors of an ever vigilant Fate clipping the Wings of my late and bereaved happiness.

CHAPTER VIII

*Clarence is come: false, fleeting, perjur'd Clarence...**—Richard III*

I must now pause in the midst of my sad narrative to consider what changes the world has wreaked on me these fifteen years. *Eloi! Eloi! Lema Sabactani?* Why was I permitted to look upon the heavenly gulistan and its hundred-leafed Rose? My thin candle gutters now in its death-throes, in this forsaken cellar on Bride Street, and I can hear outside the rollicking, ricketing death-cart as it collects the newest cadavers of this skeleton city. Those I write about are vanished as though they never were, and myself am almost unrecognizable. Animal sustenance for this body I have had none these three days. The same emptiness of stomach, moreover, to which Novalis traces the origin of his own extraordinary activity of brain, appears to have aided the genius of my imagination in calling forth the gorgeous visions of the past from out the consummate darkness of this dungeon.

It was shortly after the terrible drowning and death of John, I began to suffer violent retchings and pullings of the stomach. My earlier plagues and leprosies I had so far succeeded in o'ermastering or surviving; and I had until now thought my physical frame capable, as it had proved itself, of the harshest punishments. But I have never met anybody of such a strongly-marked nervous temperament as myself. I am in this respect quite a phenomenon: I am literally all nerves and no muscles. In accordance with such a temperament Providence has endowed me with marvellous tenacity of life. I have survived casualties that would have killed thousands—casualties of all kinds—illnesses, falls, wounds, bruises, wet clothes, no clothes at all, and nights at the round table. Yet even this tenacious clinging is now nearing its limits of exhaustion, and it is to the present moment in my history I ascribe that first grand clarion call to doom. My secret drinkings, although terrible in their release of inward despair, had not yet begun to shake the edifice of my outward existence. My native hypochondriasis now allied itself to a bout of persistent insomnia instigated by my poor brother's death, to produce this volcanic disturbance of the stomach. None of my usual remedies provided a cure; the Bishop's Tar Water only exacerbated the symptoms, lying on the stomach until a very vomiting. In utter desperation I turned to laudanum. Let me assure the compassionate reader with a most solemn statement—that I Clarence am not an opium-eater. I never swallowed a grain of opium in my life, and only on this one occasion took—and then as a medicine—laudanum.⁶ The report with respect to my supposed opium-eating propensities, originated from the lips of William Carleton, who for some or no pur-

pose thought proper to spread it.

Having dissolved three or four grains in brandy, I administered the medicine to myself and felt an immediate muscular relaxation. I thence passed into an utter sleep, lasting I believe some thirty six hours. At intervals I remember surfacing, helpless, to view my books and papers on the nearby desk, with the Dublin Library's copy of *Richard III* open on it, before collapsing back into unconsciousness as a drowning man might, for an instant, turn and face the sunlight dancing on the upper surface before turning back to face the cold and complete black of the nether depths. I had been reading in the aforementioned book about the nightmare premonitions of the Duke of Clarence, and his visitation to the Underworld; and this combined with the effects of the tincture now produced a singular dream. It was in the carriage of the steam-train out to Kingstown and I sat opposite by Catherine, who as we rocked along the tracks through Monkstown, was pointing over the bay to the Hill of Howth. As I turned to consider this prospect, the further promontory was instantly blocked from view by the sails of an enormous schooner, which as I looked closely, had John sitting on one of its uppermost crossbeams. But as we both waved to him and he began to wave back, he straight away dropt from his airy prominence on top of the sails and sank into the ocean. And now the very train in which until now we seemed to move, instead of stopping at the Kingstown station, continued to plow directly on and plunge itself into the harbour waters. It was now I heard the lines from Shakespeare's Duke of Clarence:

O Lord! Methought what pain it was to drown:
 What dreadful noise of waters in my ears;
 What sights of ugly death within my eyes!
 Methoughts I saw a thousand fearful wrecks;
 Ten thousand men that fishes gnaw'd upon...

The carriage in which we had sat was now thrown into the likes of a fish's bowl, and all things jostled and swam before my eyes—hats and parasols, and a parrakeet in its cage; newspapers and umbrellas; spectacles and poodles, bottles, walking sticks and petticoats—saving any further sight of my dear Catherine, and I floated in that unreal atmosphere towards the little yellow door to get it open, whereupon I found myself at the back of a boat, itself being rowed across the ocean floor by six hooded black figures. A seventh cowed shade sat at the prow, examining the distance closely through an eyeglass. As I clambered over the planks, and made my way past the rowing shapes, glimpselike I saw into each black hood that it housed a human skull, only some had completely lost their masks of faces and one or two still clung to the rags of what was once a visage. Upon reaching the prow of that un-

earthly boat, the seventh figure turned to view me, revealing himself as the cadaver of my dead brother and only just in the way of rotting. But as I commenced speaking, the flesh and eyes withered up immediately as they were autumn leaves, and an underwater current blew them as dust away, all the while as the white teeth spoke to me, saying "Clarence is come; false, fleeting Clarence."

Hereupon I started up in a sweat and a throbbing, the words of that horrendous phantom still living in my ears. It was through the marked effect of this very incubus that I began thereafter to attach the name Clarence, firstly to any of my literary undertakings as were then being printed, and thence to my person in its waking life. I became from this moment on convinced of my ultimate fate as one whose name is writ in sand. Outwardly, I seemed indeed recovered from the troublous stomach attacks which had, for a time, necessitated a break in my working and my place again being supplied by William. But I now returned to No. 6 Fitzwilliam Square full of an inner foreboding, as of a man who has been vouchsafed a vision of his own inevitable last end.

How like an angel then Miss Hayes seemed when next I saw her! I had almost at one time entertained thoughts of proposal. It was not the discrepancy in age which stood in my path, she being then sixteen years of age and I only twenty-seven. Nor indeed was it her obviously superior standing in society. Rather it was the sense I held within me that I had blasted my own *arbor vitae*, and that asking now for Catherine's hand would merely be to pull another headlong down into the abyss which yawned daily beneath me. And so in our meetings at *Reheboth*, upon Catherine's return from Connaught, I chose rather to observe than partake in that gorgeous company, and wondered from a distance what in another lifetime might have been the roles Fate offered. Catherine Hayes became the Bride of my Imagination, and in it she has ever dwelt as the hundred-leafed rose, the proof among so much evidence of evil that goodness and God exist, that when we most despair we are closest to our guardian spirits. May God make bright the memory I have of those evening visits, and preserve the record of our talk! Where we are going, we shall need such comforting . . .

NOTES

¹ Easy is the descent to Hell.

² "Would that Mangan had exercised such strength of soul!" Meehan's note.

³ The eternal Female lifts us up.

⁴ "The exact extent of Mangan's dominion over the world's languages living and dead, will remain forever a mystery." Meehan's note.

⁵ "This occurrence is complete conjecture on Mangan's part, his brother living for many years after the aforesaid time. Already we observe the unsettling of his mind, no doubt the result of intemperance." Meehan's note.

⁶ "Alas, it is to this infernal medicine we owe the destruction of the poet's imagination! Let this confession stand as testament." Meehan's note. Mangan's confused denial here reflects linguistic practice of the day, where opium "eating" for recreation is distinguished from the medicinal application of laudanum—opium dissolved in alcohol. Editor.