MANFRED AND *ALASTOR*

Two letters of Shelley to Ollier, written in 1817, perhaps indicate a sequel to Byron's indebtedness to Thomas Taylor:

> Be so good as to send me "Tasso's Lament" a Poem just published; & Taylors Translation of Pausanias. You will oblige me by sending them without delay, as I have immediate need for them. –[1]

> Do you know is Taylors Pausanias to be procured & at what price. –[2]

It has been suggested[3] that Taylor's work on the later neo-Platonist Proclus may form one subtext to *Prometheus Unbound*, which Shelley did not start until September 1818, but which contains several lines corresponding to, and answering ideas from, *Manfred*.[4] This is apt, for it seems clear that *Manfred* had been, in addition to everything else, a creative riposte to *Alastor*.

No-one as far as I know has ever wondered why Byron chose to put *Manfred* into dramatic form, or what themes were in his mind, which demanded the sort of objectification which the shifting perspectives of drama could provide, and for which narrative verse was less well equipped.

On June 8 1816 Polidori wrote in his diary:

> Up at 9; went to Geneva on horseback, and then to Diodati to see Shelley; back; dined; into the new boat – Shelley's, – and talked, till the ladies' brains whizzed with giddiness, about idealism. Back; rain, puffs of wind; mistake.[5]

The following day he wrote:

> Up by 1: breakfasted. Read Lucian. Dined. Did the same: tea'd. Went to Hentsch: came home. Looked at the moon, and ordered packing-up.[6]

Are we to understand from the first entry that it had been a mistake to take the boat out in the rain, or a mistake to talk about idealism? Was it merely the ladies' brains that whizzed, or did Polidori's get a bit disorientated too? Did he look at the moon as an idealistically necessary prelude to packing up, or did he pack up in order to escape from the idealist associations of the moon? Like Lucian – to whom Polidori may have turned as a relief from all the idealism – Byron would seem to have been an instinctive foe to transcendentalist thought of most kinds, and to have been interested above all in fleshing out its abstractions with a view to bringing them down to earth: that is to say, to devaluing the very notion of transcendentalism itself. Most of his early epistolary references to Plato, for example, use the philosopher's name simply as a synonym for sex[7] or for the avoidance of sex[8] and some of his later poetical references are couched in similar terms – either of ignorance or scepticism: see *Don Juan* I

1: July 24th 1817: L PBS I 548.
2: P.S. to a letter of August 3rd 1817 (L PBS I 549).
3: Carl Grabo, *"Prometheus Unbound": an Interpretation*, Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1935, quoted Robinson, *The Snake and Eagle Wreathed In Flight*, Johns Hopkins 1976, p. 258 n15.
4: See Robinson, *Snake and Eagle*, pp. 125-134 and nn.
5: *Diary*, ed. Rossetti, Elkin Matthews 1911 p. 121.
6: Ibid p. 121.
7: BLJ IV 135.
8: BLJ III 136.

Stanza 116, or XIV Stanza 92. His admission at *Don Juan* IX Stanza 76, that "The noblest kind of Love is Love Platonical" is, in the context of the court of Catherine the Great, just another way of expressing doubt about the whole idea.

However, when in a boat with Shelley in June 1816, one would have temporarily to take Platonism – or idealism, at any rate – seriously, for one of the only two major poems of Shelley then in print was the deeply idealistic *Alastor,* published earlier in the year. Byron never refers to it (few of his references to Shelley's poems are more than glancing) but it is hard to believe that Shelley didn't show him it, that he didn't read it, and that it was not on his mind during the writing of *Manfred*. Drama and idealism make poor bedfellows, for drama is unhappy with the purely abstract. When, at I ii 27-36, Manfred sees an eagle passing, he speaks thus to it:

> ... I have ceased
> To justify my deeds unto myself -
> The last infirmity of evil. *[an Eagle passes.*
> Aye,
> Thou winged and cloud-cleaving minister,
> Whose happy flight is highest into heaven,
> Well may'st thou swoop so near me - I should be
> Thy prey, and gorge thine Eaglets; thou art gone
> Where the eye cannot follow thee; but thine
> Yet pierces downward, onward, or above
> With a pervading vision ...

The eagle might at first glance appear open to an idealist interpretation, an emblem of the clear-sighted perfection beyond; and it is natural to compare the passage with the Poet's address to the swan (seen "upon the lone Chorasmian shore") at *Alastor*, 280-91:

> "Thou hast a home,
> Beautiful bird; thou voyagest to thine home,
> Where thy sweet mate will twine her downy neck
> With thine, and welcome thy return with eyes
> Bright in the lustre of her own fond joy.
> And what am I that I should linger here,
> With voice far sweeter than thy dying notes,
> Spirit more vast than thine, frame more attuned
> To beauty, wasting these surpassing powers
> In the deaf air, to the blind earth, and heaven
> That echoes not my thoughts?" A gloomy smile
> Of desperate hope wrinkled his quivering lips.

The contrast, however, is striking. Manfred feels himself altogether inferior to the eagle. In the *Prometheus Bound* of Aeschylus[9] the protagonist is warned by Hermes that he will become the prey of eagles, and Manfred would welcome the same fate; where Shelley's Poet sees the swan as a reminder of his own wasted genius, Manfred sees the eagle as a reminder of his own insignificance and mortality. Byron's bird is ornithologically (and thus dramatically) convincing, in that it is only interested in food for its young; the "luster" in the eyes of Shelley's bird is anthropomorphic: it is not a bird, but a poetic convenience. Byron would have felt birds to have an independent being which poetry should honour. He had in his time shot an eagle and decapitated a goose, and experienced guilt (at least over the first).

9: 1020-5.

When in II i (90-2) the Chamois Hunter sees Manfred on the mountain, about to kill himself, the first thought that occurs to him (he being a realistically-dramatised Alpine inhabitant) is a practical one:

> I must approach him cautiously; if near,
> A sudden step will startle him, and he
> Seems tottering already.

Compare *Alastor*, 257-62:

> The mountaineer,
> Encountering on some dizzy precipice
> That spectral form, deemed that the Spirit of wind
> With lightning eyes, and eager breath, and feet
> Disturbing not the drifted snow, had paused
> In its career ...

Byron's "mountaineer" is guilty of no such misapprehension, and would not think in terms of "the Spirit of wind" anyway.

As with birds and mountaineers, so with geography. There are editors who would compute the precise direction of Shelley's Poet's wanderings:

> The Poet flees from Kashmir to the northwest into what is now Afghanistan and then into the central Asian areas that in classical times (whose geographical terms Shelley employs) were Persian provinces; some of these areas are now parts of the U.S.S.R.[10]

Even Shelley might have been surprised by such flattery of his apparent intention: but one can imagine Byron wondering how the Poet travelled, how he kept warm at nights, how many of the local "savage men" really looked upon and heard his "sweet voice and eyes" with sufficient favour to feed him (lines 81-2). Manfred moves around a relatively small area of Europe which Byron had recently got to know well. Taking his cue, perhaps, from Goethe, who carefully places his drunken orgy in the historical Auerbach's Cellar in Leipzig (where he had studied) and his Walpurgisnacht on the Harz, Byron not only names his mountains precisely, but attempts, via notes, to convince us that, for example, the rainbow, out of which Manfred conjures the Witch of the Alps at the start of II ii, was one he had seen. It is a rhetorical device, for although we know Byron went and inspected the rainbow[11] we do not know that he conjured a witch from out of it; but he imposes a convincing local habitation, and thus a convincing modesty, on his airy nothings, which Shelley would eschew.

The figure of Astarte shows Byron learning most clearly from the example of Alastor. Shelley's Poet has two women, one "real", in the adoring Arab maiden at 129-39, the other "ideal", in that of the Veiled Maiden of whom the Poet dreams at 151-91. Their close juxtaposition has obvious implications for Shelley's theme of wilful and doomed isolation, for the Poet ignores the one, and the other exists only in his dreams – a fact which ultimately destroys his happiness and his life. In creating Astarte, once living, but now dead, and, though her spirit may still be approached, almost inaccessibly cryptic, Byron economically combines the reality of the Arab maiden with the dream-quality of the Veiled Maiden – giving the whole creation a characteristically Byronic aura of guilt and horror which would be equally out of place in *Alastor*. Byron's piece being dramatic, we are also invited empathetically to imagine Manfred in Astarte's critical perspective, and their entire relationship, fleetingly, via a third

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10: *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, ed. Reiman and Powers, Norton 1977 p. 76n.
11: BLJ V 101.

party's perspective, in the interrupted words of Manuel at III iii 43-7: whereas Shelley's depiction of the two maidens in *Alastor* remains open to the criticism that neither is really seen in much of a perspective at all, certainly not one critical of the Poet. This may be part of Shelley's intention; but Byron would have seen in it a lesson about what to avoid.

Shelley's Poet, we find from lines 121-8, possesses an enviable capacity to learn via simple, ecstatic contemplation:

> He lingered, poring on memorials
> Of the world's youth, through the long burning day
> Gazed on those speechless shapes, nor, when the moon
> Filled the mysterious halls with floating shades
> Suspended he that task, but ever gazed
> And gazed, till meaning on his vacant mind
> Flashed like strong inspiration, and he saw
> The thrilling secrets of the birth of time.

Really? what were they? we may imagine Byron asking eagerly, but with no hope of an answer, for Shelley doesn't say. The secrets do his protagonist no good, at any rate, for he continues his flight to greater and greater loneliness and death despite knowing them. Manfred has to work much harder to obtain his secrets:

> ... then I dived,
> In my lone wanderings, to the caves of death,
> Searching its cause in its effect; and drew
> From withered bones, and skulls, and heaped up dust,
> Conclusions most forbidden. Then I passed
> The nights of years in sciences untaught,
> Save in the old time; and with time and toil,
> And weary vigils, and unbroken fasts,
> And terrible ordeal, and such penance
> As in itself has power upon the air,
> And spirits that do compass air and earth,
> Space, and the peopled infinite, I made
> Mine eyes familiar with Eternity,
> Such as before me did the Magi, and
> He who from out their fountain dwellings raised
> Eros and Anteros at Gadara,
> As I do thee; – and with my knowledge grew
> The thirst of knowledge, and the power and joy
> Of this most bright intelligence, until –
>
> (II ii 79-97, including a new line 86)

Some self-denial, hard work and suffering is involved in the acquisition of most knowledge, and Manfred clearly had his fair share of it, where Shelley's Poet seems to have been vouchsafed infinite and incommunicable wisdom after a few days' gazing. It is true that Manfred is no less dead by the end of his poem than the Poet is by the end of his: but he at least has something to show for his life of isolation and guilt (some self-knowledge, real power over spirits, a human beloved who has, no matter what the consequences, returned his love, and a reputation locally which causes those who know him to grieve for him) where Shelley's Poet has nothing. He hasn't even written any poetry.

Shelley initially felt very confident about *Alastor*; on March 7th 1816 he wrote to Southey, presenting him with a copy:

> I cannot refrain from presenting you with a little poem, the product of a few serene hours of the last beautiful autumn ... regarding you with admiration as a poet, and with respect as a man, I send you, as an intimation of those sentiments, my first serious attempt to interest the best feelings of the human heart ...[12]

But by December 8th 1818 he was writing to Leigh Hunt:

> ... I do not say that I am unjustly neglected, the oblivion which overtook my little attempt of Alastor I am ready to acknowledge was sufficiently merited in itself; but then it was not accorded in the correct proportion considering the success of the most contemptible drivellings. I am undec[e]ived in the belief that I have powers deeply to interest, or substantially to improve, mankind.[13]

The cause of his despondency may have lain partly in the failure of *Alastor* to stir any impulse of praise in either Byron or Southey, partly in the creative use – and the implicitly critical use – to which Byron had put *Alastor* in *Manfred*. In his three references to Byron's play[14] he makes no allusion to any borrowing or critique (contrast Goethe's instantaneous assumption of plagiarism from *Faust*, quoted below) but it is hard to imagine him being blind to it. When, in 1821, reading *Don Juan* III Stanza 98[15] he found

> He wishes for "a boat" to sail the deeps –
> Of Ocean? No, of Air, and then he makes
> Another outcry for "a little boat",
> And drivels Seas to set it well afloat. –

... and (just conceivably) remembered the boat in which he, Byron, Polidori and the ladies had discussed idealism until their heads whizzed, might he not have felt a slight twinge as he reflected, in addition, that the second phrase which Byron advertises in inverted commas was not merely from Wordsworth's *Peter Bell*, but that it occurred twice (lines 344 and 363) in *Alastor?*

12: L PBS I 461-2.
13: L PBS I 517.
14: Letters to Byron of July 9th and September 24th 1817, and April 16th 1821: L PBS I 546-7 and 557; II 283.
15: See L PBS II 332, 357-8.