MANFRED and ZOROASTRIANISM

We may guess, from the numerous parallels between the text of the play and the Alpine Journal, that parts of Acts I and II of *Manfred* date from just after the mountain tour, which Byron undertook with Hobhouse between September 17th and 29th 1816 (having received his copy of Taylor's Pausanias, and having jettisoned Polidori). But it is not clear that all of Act II was drafted in Switzerland; and it is possible that the idea of bringing in the Zoroastrian Arimanes, "on his throne, a globe of fire, surrounded by spirits" emerged later. Arimanes does not appear until II iv, which contains no mountain imagery: one immediate source for depicting him thus throned is Beckford's *Vathek* (see sections below, on *Vathek* and *Faust*); but a more important source may have been Byron's revived interest in Zoroastrianism.

There are semi-facetious references to Zoroaster and Zoroastrianism in letters to Hobhouse and Hodgson in 1810 and 1811;[1] but in later years Byron looked more closely at the ancient Persian religion. He was to use it covertly in *Cain* (see II ii 403-405) and appears finally to reject it at *Don Juan* XIII, 41, 325-6. A more detailed interest in it may date from his reading of Sir John Malcolm's *History of Persia*, which Murray sent him in manuscript in July 1814[2] and which was in that part of his library auctioned off in 1816.[3] It was from these volumes that he may have derived some (though not all) of his information about the eighteenth-century tyrant Nadir Shah, whom he mentions at *Don Juan* IX Stanza 33. Malcolm has a section on Zoroaster, which starts with the following:

> In giving a short abstract of the religion of Zoroaster, which has been very fully treated by several European authors, I shall pass over the dreams of Daghda which foretold the greatness of Zoroaster, while yet in the womb; as well as the journey of the prophet to heaven, where he received, from Hormuzd, the holy volume of the Zend-a-vesta, and the sacred fire; and his visit to hell, where he beheld Ahriman, or the evil spirit, release a man in whom he perceived some good, and threaten Satan, in his own regions, with shame and ignominy: nor shall I dwell upon his retirement to the mountain of Elburz, and his solitary devotion in a deep cave, adorned by mystical figures of the elements, the seasons, and the celestial bodies: nor upon the various miracles which he performed to establish the truth of his religion ...
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> God, he taught, existed from all eternity, and was like infinity of time and space. There were, he averred, two principles in the universe, – good and evil: the one was termed Hormuzd, which denoted the presiding agent of all that was good; and the other, Ahriman, the lord of evil. Each of these had power of creation; but that power was exercised with opposite designs; and it was from their coaction that an admixture of good and evil was found in every created thing. The angels of Hormuzd, or the good principle, sought to preserve the elements, the seasons, and the human race, which the infernal agents of Ahriman desired to destroy; but the source of good alone, the great Hormuzd, was eternal; and must, therefore, ultimately prevail. Light was the type of the good, darkness of the evil spirit; and God had said unto Zoroaster, "My light is concealed under all that shines." Hence, the disciple of that prophet, when he performs his devotions in a temple, turns towards the sacred fire that burns upon its altar; and when in the open air, towards the sun, as the noblest of all lights, and that by which God sheds his divine influence over the whole earth, and perpetuates the works of his creation.
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> ... in directing his disciples to turn to the sun, when they offered up their prayers, he accorded with the national belief, and that was also flattered by the great veneration in which he held the elements.[4]

1: BLJ II 26 and 89.

2: BLJ 147-8 and nn.

3: CMP 243

4: Malcolm, *The History of Persia*, I 193 ... 198.

Several ideas in *Manfred* – even in its first act – can be interpreted as Zoroastrian. One of the most bold and radical passages in the play is in the speech of the Seventh Spirit, at I i 110-31:

> The Star which rules thy destiny,
> Was ruled, ere earth began, by me:
> It was a world as fresh and fair
> As e'er revolved round Sun in air;
> Its course was free and regular,
> Space bosomed not a lovelier Star.
> The hour arrived – and it became
> A wandering mass of shapeless flame,
> A pathless comet, and a curse,
> The menace of the universe;
> Still rolling on with innate force,
> Without a sphere, without a course,
> A bright deformity on high,
> The monster of the upper Sky!
> And thou, beneath its influence born –
> Thou worm, whom I obey and scorn,
> Forced by a power (which is not thine,
> And lent thee, but to make thee mine)
> For this brief moment to descend,
> Where these weak Spirits round thee bend
> And parly with a thing like thee –
> What would'st thou, Child of Clay, with me? –

The originality of Byron's concept here, whereby a planet or star might be influenced by the advent of some cursed yet powerful being about to be born beneath it, rather than, as is usual in astrology, the reverse, is not often commented on. In his 1958 essay *Byron's Manfred and Zoroastrianism*, M.J.Quinlan attempts to analyse the problem (which, in the way that he states it, he does not quite face) thus:

> Planets, meteors and comets ... were regarded as evil instruments operating under the direction of Arimanes, since they disturbed the order of the universe ... It is perhaps, significant that Manfred, himself so much a compound of good and evil, was fated to be born under a star which, though now a malignant force, had once occupied a place among the blessed sphere of the firmament.[5]

Modern research would bear him out to a degree. Originally the Zoroastrians saw all the five known planets as malign: however, contact with the Babylonian astronomers (Byron's "Chaldean Shepherds": III ii 13) caused them to think again, and to see only Saturn and Mars as inauspicious.[6] Comets and shooting stars were, in the books of the *Zend-Avesta* (the sacred Zoroastrian texts) included among the female demons, or Pairikas – evil types of Djinn or Peri, who used their seductive beauty to turn men away from true religious observance: they, like the planets, constituted one of the minor imperfections which Angrya Mainu (Ahriman) introduced into the otherwise perfect universe, created by Ahura Mazda (Oromuzd).[7]

However, it is not clear that Byron would had a detailed enough understanding of Zoroastrian cosmology to have made such a point (Quinlan offers only twentieth-century sources as his evidence) or that, if he had, that he would have derived from Zoroastrianism the idea of inverting it in the way he does. We have no evidence that he read the translations of

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5: Maurice J. Quinlan, *Byron's Manfred and Zoroastrianism*, J.E.G.P., 1958, pp. 133-4.
6: See R.C.Zaehner, *The Rise and Fall of Zoroastrianism*, Weidenfeld and Nicholson 1961, p. 238
7: See P.A.Wadia, *Introduction to the Avesta*, Bombay 1921, p. 210.

the *Zend-Avesta* made by the eighteenth-century French scholar Anquetil DuPerron, who travelled to Bombay as a soldier in the French Army to obtain access to the originals. Even if Byron had read them, he might have suspected, via information from several sources, that they were of doubtful value. Here, firstly, is the judgement of Sir William Jones (who also wrote a life of Nadir Shah, and whose expertise Byron recommends in a letter to Murray of November 1813)[8] in his *Lettre à Monsieur A*** Du P***:*

> ... vous avez traduit ces malheureux livres Zendes, avec le secours de ce Guèbre, qui ne les entendait probablement lui-même que très-imperfaitement.[9]

Next, that of L.Langlès, editor of *Voyages en Perse*, by the seventeenth-century traveller Sir John Chardin, a set of which Byron sold in 1816:[10]

> ... nous ne pouvont douter maintenant que les ouvrages du réformateur Zérâdocht [Zoroaster] ne soient *perdues*; ils ont été remplacés par une compilation rècente, fruit de l'imposture et des rêveries d'un Destour [priest], qui vivoit dans la Guzarate, il y a deux ou trois cent ans; c'est cette miserable, ridicule et sur-tout ennuyeuse rapsodie, que les Guèbres du Guzarate ont eu l'impudeur de vendre et d'expliquer à M. Anquetil du Perron, comme le code de leur immortel législateur. Peut-être s'y trouve-t-il, en effet, quelques-unes de ses traditions, mais si complètement défigurés, qu'il n'est aucun moyen d'y reconnoître le cachet du grand homme.[11]

Thirdly, another respected British Orientalist, John Richardson, of whose *Dissertation on the Languages, Literatures and Manners of Eastern Nations* (1777) Byron also sold his copy in 1816,[12] dismisses Du Perron's *Zend* translations as revealing "uncommon stupidity ... jejune puerilities" and "frivolous superstition".[13]

Despite selling so many of his books on Persia, and despite (perhaps because of) the fact that he knew none of the original texts, Byron clearly remembered some Zoroastrian ideas while writing *Manfred*, and either elaborated on them – as with the idea, seen above, of Manfred's natal star – or used them in a more straightforward way. There are references to a light / dark complementarity in Manfred's words at I i 29-30 ("Ye spirits of the immortal universe! / Whom I have sought in darkness and in light") and in the speech of the Sixth Spirit at I i 108-9 ("My dwelling is the Shadow of the Night – / Why doth thy magic torture me with light?").

Most interestingly, the passage in Malcolm's *History* would enable Byron to make a distinction between Arimanes, who appears in Act II, and Satan, who, as I shall argue in the next section, may or may not be the Spirit who appears in Act III.

Manfred is himself conceived partly in Zoroastrian terms: he, like the prophet (see Malcolm's paraphrase, above) visits hell (in II iv) and beholds Ahriman, who in turn regards him with favour; he is familiar with caves (II ii 80) and mountains (II ii 62-5); he honours the elements (II ii 62-75), "mystical figures" of which he appears to have, not in a cave, but in his gallery (I i 35-6). References to the fact that he was born under "a Star condemned" (I i 44) or "A wandering mass of shapeless flame, / A pathless comet" (I i 117) place him – whether or not his birth ruined the star in turn – as one deriving his being from Ahriman, who was deemed creator and commander of such bodies.

8: BLJ III 164.

9: Sir William Jones, *Works*, 1807, Vol. X p. 439.

10: CMP 233.

11: Chardin, *Voyages en Perse*, Paris 1811, IV pp. 259-60n: this edition has, at pp. 364-7 of volume VIII, another version of the Ahriman-Oromuzd theology, from which Byron may have learned

12: CMP 241.

13: Richardson, *Dissertation on the Languages, Literatures and Manners of Eastern Nations* (1777), pp. 14-15 and n

However, his self-comparison with the Magi at II ii 92 would, contrariwise, place him as a worshipper of Hormuzd, for "Magi" was commonly used by classical writers as a synonym for "Zoroastrian seers": Herodotus, Xenophon, Cicero, and Pliny the Elder, for example, all use the word in this way – as does Plutarch, whose Isis and Osiris contains a summary of Zoroastrian belief very similar to that of Malcolm: see *Moralia*, 370.[14] At II iv 31, the Second Spirit refers to Manfred as a "Magian", as does the Spirit who comes to claim him, at III iv 105. Another book which Byron recommends to Murray in the letter of November 1813 is d'Herbelot's Bibliothèque Orientale (for whose entry for *Zoroastre*, see *Zerdascht ou Zaradacht*). d'Herbelot offers this definition:

> MAGIUS & MAGIUSI, Mage, Magiusiah, le Magisme, c'est-à-dire la Religion de Zoroastre, qui pose deux principes éternels de toutes choses, savoir, la lumière & les ténebres; le bien & le mal; un bon & un mauvais Dieu ou Démon.[15]

Shelley, who was with Byron for much of 1816, also knew of Ahriman – or Arimanes – in part through his friendship with Peacock, who started but did not finished a poem named after the god. He uses the name in a letter to Peacock of July 22nd 1816[16] written after viewing Mont Blanc and the Vale of Chamounix; and continues from it with a description of the deity's power which anticipates the Hymn to Arimanes at *Manfred* II iv I-16: proof of how closely the two poets worked, and of how many thoughts they shared:

> Do you who assert the supremacy of Ahriman imagine him throned among these desolating snows, among these palaces of death & frost, sculptured in this their terrible magnificence by the unsparing hand of necessity, & that he casts round him as the first assays of his final usurpation avalanches, torrents, rocks & thunders – and above all, these deadly glaciers at once the proofs & symbols of his reign.[17]

But Byron's reading in d'Herbelot, Malcolm, Jones, Richardson, and Chardin, and his conversations with Shelley, are only two possible sources for the figure of Arimanes. By November 1816, in Venice, he has started his Armenian studies at the monastery of San Lazzarro. After an early visit, on December 5th, he writes to Moore (soon to publish, in the Fire-Worshippers section of *Lalla Rookh*, an important pseudo-Zoroastrian work):

> There are some very curious MSS. in the monastery, as well as books; translations also from Greek originals, now lost, and from Persian and Syriac, &c.; beside works of their own people.[18]

By the first days of January 1817 he is sufficiently involved with Father Pascal Aucher, his tutor on San Lazzarro, to be helping him with two books: a grammar from which Armenians can learn English, and "... an M.S. grammar for the English acquisition of Armenian".[19] The latter – clearly at an early stage then –was not published until 1819. When printed, it contained the following:

> (The authors of the Persian religion) say, that before the creation of heaven and earth and their creatures Zervanus existed, which being interpreted signifies *fortune*, or *glory*. He sacrificed a

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14: A complete list of Greek and Roman references to Zoroastrianism will be found in the *K.R.Cama Oriental Institute Journal*, 14, 1929, pp. 1-145, compiled by W.S.Fox and R.E.K.Pemberton.
15: d'Herbelot, Bibliothèque Orientale, 1782 edition, IV 14-15.
16: L PBS I 499.
17: L PBS I 499.
18: BLJ V 130.
19: Letter to Murray, January 2nd 1817: BLJ V 156.

thousand years that a son might be born to him (named Hormistus) who should create heaven and earth and whatever in them is.

And after this sacrifice of a thousand years, he began thus to meditate: Will this sacrifice profit me? and produce my son Hormistus, or do I labour in vain?

And, during this meditation, Hormistus and Harminus were conceived in the womb of their mother; Hormistus by sacrifice, but Harminus by doubt.

Zervanus being assured of the fact, said: There are twins in the womb, to the elder shall the sovereignty be given.

But Hormistus having divined his father's determination, betrayed it to Harminus, saying: Our father Zeruanus [sic] is disposed to give the sovereignty to the elder of us two.

But Harminus hearing these words, came forth immediately, and presented himself to his father.

Having seen him Zeruanus knew not who he was, and said: Who art thou? he replied: I am thy son. But Zeruanus said: My son is bright and of a grateful odour, but thou dark and offensive.

But while they thus discoursed, Hormistus was born at this time, shining and sweet, and presented himself to Zeruanus.

And Zeruanus knew him to be Hormistus his son for whom he had sacrificed. And he gave the instruments with which he had sacrificed into the hands of Hormistus saying: With these I sacrificed for thee, henceforward do thou the same for me.

And Zeruanus held forth the instruments to Hormistus; and blessed him. But Harminus standing before Zeruanus, said: Hast thou not vowed the kingdom to the elder born?

Zeruanus who could not promise in vain, said to Harminus: Hence thou deceitful and malicious! the kingdom is thine for nine thousand years. But Hormistus I appoint over thee, and after nine thousand years he shall reign alone, and do what he wisheth.

Then began Hormistus and Harminus the creation. All things made from Hormistus, were good and right, but which Harminus made, was bad and wrong.[20]

I have argued elsewhere for Byron's hand in this translation (which is of the fifth-century Armenian writer Eznik of Kolb) and discovering it must have fitted in neatly with what we can see as two of his preoccupations during his first months in Venice – namely, finishing *Manfred*, and adding a Zoroastrian perspective to the way in which he did so. Byron had read, on the authority of Thomas Taylor, that Zoroastrianism shares ground with Platonism, in perceiving Soul, the creation of Hormuzd, or, as above, Hormistus, as having to struggle with difficulty from the prison of Matter, the creation of Ahriman, or, as above, Harminus, or, as in Manfred, Arimanes:

> ... howling dogs are the symbols of material daemons, who are thus denominated by the magic oracles of Zoroaster, on account of their ferocious and malevolent dispositions, ever baneful to the felicity of the human soul.[21]

Such dualistic implications would not have been the only factor in the Eznik passage to catch Byron's attention. The birth of complementary twins, one dark, the other light, echoes the section from Pausanias, referred to by Manfred at II ii 93-4, and quoted above, about the bringing-forth by Iamblichus of Eros and Anteros (though see also *Genesis* 25, 20-28, and 38, 27-30). The difference is that instead of two innocent demons, champions merely of lovers requited and betrayed, "fathered" by a mortal, the twins here, "fathered" by a spirit existing since before time, are responsible between them for the creation of, and embody the conflicting powers of, the entire moral and material universe. In likening himself to Iamblichus, Manfred makes himself – blasphemously – into an image of the primal creator of Zoroastrianism.

20: Aucher, *A Grammar, Armenian and English*, Venice 1819 pp. 199-203: for a detailed discussion, see Cochran, *Byron and the Birth of Arimanes*, Keats-Shelley Review 1991 pp. 49-59

21: *Dissertation on the Eleusinian and Bacchic Mysteries, The Pamphleteer* p. 43, quoted Raine and Harper, *op.cit*., p. 355.

The Hymn of the Spirits at the start of II iv – inspired perhaps by Shelley's thoughts in the Vale of Chamounix – chant the power of Arimanes over the created world; but the speech to the Sun of Manfred himself at III i 3-29 ("Thou material God! / And representative of the Unknown / Who chose thee for his shadow") hymn by clear implication the power of his rival and complement, Hormuzd, God of Light, and, as I have said, turns Manfred into a Zoroastrian priest. Manfred may attend the ceremonies of Ahriman – has indeed served Ahriman for much of his life, with the same disdain with which his spirits serve him – but in his true soul he honours Hormuzd. When the Sun sets at the end of his speech, he intuits – as a faithful Zoroastrian – that his own death will follow rapidly.