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Romantic Ireland, Dead and Gone: Joyce's "Araby" as National Myth

by JOSEPH J. EGAN

ALTHOUGH A. Walton Litz points out that a "careful analysis of the last pages of 'Araby' shows how the boy's personal despair is extended symbolically until it encompasses religious and political failure,"1 perhaps insufficient attention has been given to the story's national imagery drawn from Irish culture and history and set in motion by the narrator's love for Mangan's sister, "the brown-clad figure cast by my imagination."2 The allusion here is to James Clarence Mangan, the nineteenth-century Irish poet, and primarily to his best-known work, the love song "Dark Rosaleen" (Roisin Dubh in Irish, or "Dark Little Rose")—in part a translation from the Gaelic of a lyrical address to a personified Ireland written by a sixteenth-century Tyrconnell minstrel (probably one of the MacAwards, the bardic retainers of the O'Donnells), but chiefly, in its present form, the poetic creation of Mangan himself. Ben L. Collins sanctions such an interpretation of Mangan's sister in "Araby": "To the world, Mangan is known, if at all, for his 'The Dark Rosaleen.' . . . By allusion to this poem, the themes of love and religion are reinforced and the theme of nationality—about which Joyce has already concerned himself by mention of the come-all-you's of O'Donovan Rossa and the ballads about the troubles of the country—is introduced. Modern Ireland is in a like situation, beset by England and in need of a hero."3 Collins, however, does not explore the nationalism theme in "Araby" beyond this point and thus fails to mention its further reverberations in the story.

3. Ben L. Collins, "Joyce's 'Araby' and the 'Extended Simile,' " James Joyce Quarterly, IV (1967), 84-90; rpt. as " 'Araby' and the 'Extended Simile' " in Twentieth Century Interpretations of Dubliners, ed. Peter K. Garrett (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1968), p. 96. Among critics of "Araby," Collins is somewhat exceptional in urging Mangan primarily as nationalist poet, though Harry Stone also mentions in passing Mangan's sister as "Dark Rosaleen." (See " 'Araby' and the Writings of James Joyce," Antioch Review, XXV [1965], 375-410; rpt. in Dubliners: Text, Criticism, and Notes, p. 348.) Others have called attention to Mangan the Orientalist and thus to the relationship between Mangan's sister and the eastern imagery in Joyce's story. (See, e.g., Herbert Howarth, The Irish Writers: 1880-1940 [New York: Hill and Wang, 1958], p. 262; and Homer Obed Brown, James Joyce's Early Fiction: The Biography of a Form [Cleveland: Case Western Reserve Univ. Press, 1972], pp. 54-55, n. 5.) Although the Oriental motif is certainly allied to the boy-narrator's dream of exotic romantic enchantment, there is also an element of ironic indirection here, similar to that in the title Travels into Several Remote Nations of the World, the major satire of another Irishman, Jonathan Swift; that is, in "Araby" eastern influences are not all "remote" from Irish affairs, as we shall discover.
After inviting a reading of his story on the national level by the reference to Mangan’s poem, Joyce renews the invitation by alluding subtly to other ideas and events fixed in the Irish consciousness. Throughout the story the Dark Rosaleen character is paralleled and varied by the mythic figure Kathaleen Ny-Houlahan, the traditional Irish heroine familiar to Joyce through Mangan’s poem of that name and popularized in 1902 by W. B. Yeats’s one-act play “Cathleen ni Houlihan.” In this patriotic allegory, derived from an eighteenth-century Jacobite song, Ireland again is personified, now as Kathaleen Ny-Houlahan (Kathaleen, daughter of Houlahan), the Lady Erin, who, enslaved by the foreign foe, draws followers to her service and devotion as she awaits deliverance. Notice the boy-narrator’s thoughts about Mangan’s sister: “I had never spoken to her, except for a few casual words, and yet her name was like a summons to all my foolish blood. . . . Her name sprang to my lips at moments in strange prayers and praises which I myself did not understand. . . . But my body was like a harp and her words and gestures were like fingers running upon the wires” (pp. 30, 31).

Of course, as might be expected, there is in Joyce’s story no trace of the sentimentality and Celticism found in Mangan’s poems and in Yeats’s play, for Joyce employs the Irish legends to indicate the vast discrepancy between the romantic vision of Ireland symbolized by the Mangan’s sister of the boy’s imagination and the reality of cheapened modern Ireland, with her “places the most hostile to romance” (p. 31). The notion of frustration and malaise in Irish life is suggested not only by the blind, mundane inhibition a shabby Dublin existence imposes (darkness and shadow are with us from the outset of the story), but also by the sardonic puns and inversions that punctuate the boy’s quest for love and beauty. One can, for example, view the entire story as an extension of Thomas Moore’s “Love’s Young Dream,” from *Irish Melodies*:

```
Oh! the days are gone, when
Beauty bright
My heart’s chain wove;
When my dream of life, from morn till night,
Was love, still love.

... ... ... ... ... ...
Oh! ’t was light that ne’er can shine again
On life’s dull stream.
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(from stanzas 1 and 3)4

Thus even Mangan’s sister, though “defined by the light” (p. 30), remains a “brown figure” (p. 30) amid the surrounding darkness, and her idealization is merely the product of the narrator’s self-deluding infatuation. As the boy realizes at last, a distinction must be drawn be-

tween the vision of Mangan's sister projected by himself as her naive young worshiper, and the actual girl, who is perhaps too fond of her silver bracelet and, in a veiled sign of sexuality, carelessly shows the border of her petticoat.

When the boy fails to buy the promised gift for Mangan's sister at the bazaar and, implicitly, renounces his adolescent attachment to her, we have another suggestion of the defeat at the core of Irish life and quite possibly a wry inversion of another old song that Joyce, an accomplished singer, was familiar with, "Oh, Dear! What Can the Matter Be?:"5

He promised to buy me a trinket to please me,
And then for a kiss, O he vowed he would tease me,
He promised to bring me a bunch of blue ribbons
To tie up my bonnie brown hair.
Oh, dear! What can the matter be?

Johnny's so long at the fair.

(stanza 1 and refrain)6

The trenchant irony here, as the story's narrative tension and epiphany make clear, is not that the boy stays too long at the gaudy bazaar, but that he arrives there too late to buy a present for a rather ordinary girl who has, after all, no feeling for him.7

Although the reasons for Joyce's quarrel with Ireland and Irish life are various and complex, one can discover some of them through a reading of "Araby." Central to Joyce's disenchantment with his country is his belief that Ireland's connection with Roman Catholicism has not been fortunate. The religious symbolism in "Araby" has been the subject of extensive investigation;8 suffice it to say here that the sacred and ecclesiastical imagery associated with Mangan's sister, as well as the convent-school retreat she makes, emphasizes the idea of the union of Ireland and the Catholic Church. Mangan's sister, then, is not only, as we have seen, the symbol of an idealized Ireland, but also a representation, equally unreal, of the Roman Church as Virgin Madonna: "At night in my bedroom and by day in the classroom her image came between me and the page I strove to read. The syllables of the word Araby were called to me through the silence in which my soul luxuriated and

5. References to "Dark Rosaleen," "Love's Young Dream," and "Oh Dear, What Can the Matter Be?" in other of Joyce's works have been thoroughly documented in Matthew J. C. Hodgart and Mabel P. Worthington, Song in the Works of James Joyce (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1959). Joyce also devoted an essay and a lecture to Mangan and his poetry.
7. Incidentally, the reference to "porcelain vases" (p. 35) and "great jars that stood like eastern guards at either side of the dark entrance to the stall" (p. 35) prompts a recollection of "Ode on a Grecian Urn"; but, whereas the search for beauty and meaning is successful in Keats's poem, the boy-narrator of "Araby" encounters only blank despair at the end of his search, when the "light" of love and hope is extinguished.
8. For a summary of the relevant criticism, see Florence L. Walzl, "The Liturgy of the Epiphany Season and the Epiphanies of Joyce," PMLA, LXXX (1965), 445 and n. 50.
cast an Eastern enchantment over me” (p. 32). Accordingly, the sales­
girl at the bazaar, which is described in terms of an Eastern “church after
a service” (p. 34), functions as a foil to Mangan’s sister: in her silly,
vulgar flirtation with the two gentlemen at her stall, she becomes the
Catholic Church as scarlet woman, the Whore of Babylon, who shows
the boy “her wares” (p. 35), and also presents the image of a sordid
contemporary Ireland. Still another, if incidental, national figure—an
ironic Shan Van Vocht, “the poor old woman” Ireland commemorated
in the song of the 1798 insurgents—is Mrs. Mercer, “an old garrulous
woman, a pawnbroker’s widow, who collected used stamps for some
pious purpose” (p. 33), the visitor to the narrator’s home on the night
of his fateful trip to Araby. Her dead husband’s surname and trade and
Mrs. Mercer’s own hypocritical charity suggest that Ireland has become
mercenary and petty, “poor” now in spirit.

In fact, the vagueness surrounding Mangan’s sister herself (she has no
first name and even her last is given indirectly), the hint of sexual
blemish in her show of petticoat, and the idea that she is making “a
retreat”—all call attention to the pervading vision of the story on the
national level. Ireland, “the Western World,” has lost her identity and
integrity because of the exploitation of foreign, “eastern” influences—
England, as well as Rome, as Joyce suggests by the “English accents”
(p. 35) of the salesgirl and her gentlemen friends.9 In the cogent histor­
ical link between the two exploitations is the origin of the abiding na­
tional tragedy of Ireland. In 1155 Henry II of England asked Pope
Adrian IV—Nicholas Breakspear, the only English pontiff in the history
of the Church—for permission to conquer Ireland. At this juncture,
according to some authorities, the Pope, influenced by rather exagger­
ated accounts of the fallen state of religion in Ireland, issued a bull,
Laudabiliter, authorizing Henry to take possession of Ireland in the
name of the Church. The king did not act immediately; but in 1166,
when Dermot MacMurrough, ruler of Leinster, having been driven from
Ireland by his enemies, appealed to him for aid, Henry directed him to
raise an army of invasion from among the Norman vassals of Richard
de Clare, earl of Pembroke, known in Irish history as Strongbow. The
authenticity of the bull Laudabiliter has been challenged by many writ­
ers, but the fact that England invaded Ireland with some sort of papal
approval—later, in 1172, reinforced by letters from Pope Alexander III
—seems beyond doubt. The Irish historian Edmund Curtis makes this
pertinent observation:

The grant of Ireland by the Papacy to Henry II constituted a “moral mission” under
which Adrian and Alexander III constituted Henry king or lord of Ireland for certain
purposes. Too much stress can hardly be laid on the moral and legal terms which accom­
panied the grant, especially the preservation of the rights of the Irish Church. When

9. Cf. the ambivalent attitude of Gabriel Conroy, that anglicized Gael in “The Dead,” towards the
values of the “West.”
Alexander praises the lay princes for receiving Henry willingly, he assumes a bargain which had to be kept. Later generations of Irishmen right up to the seventeenth century fully accepted the papal donation as a fact—witness the Remonstrance of the Irish chiefs to the Pope in 1317—but both then and later they accused the Crown of England of having violated the rights of the Irish Church and the Irish people. 10

Thus, in one of the many ironic twists of Irish history, the Church, as well as the Irish nation, came to rue what Rome itself had originally sanctioned—the English presence in Ireland. Ironically, too, Ireland remained loyal to Catholicism, whereas England, of course, disassociated herself from the authority of the Roman Church during the Reformation.

A recurring source of disillusionment in Joycean fiction is the grim truth that, in forwarding the destruction of Ireland’s independence and integrity, the “foreigner” is aided by the Irish themselves; one can surmise that to Joyce’s mind the treachery of MacMurrough—Dermot na Gall (of the Foreigners), as he is remembered in Irish history—was repeated by those later Irish “traitors” who, with the support of the Church once again, broke with Parnell, Ireland’s “uncrowned king.” The East ever encroaches upon the West; though not actually quoted in the story itself, the first stanza of “The Arab’s Farewell to His Steed,” the poem about to be recited by the narrator’s drunken uncle on the night of the journey to Araby, the Oriental bazaar, obliquely indicates Ireland’s betrayal at the hands of base self-interest:

My beautiful! my beautiful!  
That standest meekly by  
With thy proudly arched and glossy neck,  
And dark and fiery eye;  
Fret not to roam the desert now,  
With all thy winged speed—  
I may not mount on thee again—  
Thou’rt sold, my Arab steed!

The stranger hath thy bridle rein—  
Thy master hath his gold—  
Fleet-limbed and beautiful! farewell!—  
Thou’rt sold, my steed—thou’rt sold! 11

At the end of this poem, written by the celebrated Irish beauty Caroline Norton, the Arab, overcome with remorse, refuses to sell his beloved mount:

Who said that I had given thee up?—  
Who said that thou wert sold?  
’Tis false,—’tis false, my Arab steed!  
I fling them back their gold!  
(from final stanza)

11. As quoted in Dubliners: Text, Criticism, and Notes, pp. 468-69. An interesting discussion of the symbolic relationship between the poem and events in Caroline Norton’s own life can be found in Stone, pp. 357-58.
Alas, no such renewal of selfless love and loyalty altered Ireland’s fate. These observations return us to the beginning of our discussion—to Mangan’s “Dark Rosaleen” and, in the context of “Araby,” to the bitter irony of its opening stanza, wherein the supposed speaker, the late-sixteenth-century Tyrconnell chief, Red Hugh O’Donnell, comforts his mistress Ireland with the prospect of military aid from Rome and its ally, Catholic Spain, against the depredations of a now Protestant England:

Oh! my dark Rosaleen,
Do not sigh, do not weep!
The priests are on the ocean green,
They march along the deep.
There’s wine from the royal Pope
Upon the ocean green,
And Spanish ale shall give you hope,
My dark Rosaleen!
My dark Rosaleen!
Shall glad your heart, shall give you hope,
Shall give you health, and help, and hope,
My dark Rosaleen!

Early in “Araby” mention is made of the priest who died in a back room of the narrator’s house, leaving behind a rusty bicycle pump and a few paperback books—*The Abbot*, by Scott, *The Devout Communicant*, and *The Memoirs of Vidocq*—the first two of romantic and/or religious matter, the last, significantly, about a thief. These images, together with the closing reference to the extinguished light in the upper part of the bazaar hall—that is, the altar, with its darkened sanctuary lamp signifying the loss of the Real Presence—testify expressively, though mutely, to the “theft,” through her relationship with the Church of Rome, of Ireland’s vitality, aspiration, and hope. When the salesgirl, the figure of debased modern Irish life, coquettishly charges the two gentlemen at her stall with lying—“O, there’s a . . . fib!” (p. 35)—her accusation has symbolic reference to the various lies and deceptions practiced against Ireland herself. From the pervasive gloom of Joyce’s short story emerges the mythic vision of a country, the victim of “a throng of foes” (p. 31), stripped of her nationality by folly and self-delusion and sacrificed to exploitative foreign power.

*Slippery Rock State College*
Slippery Rock, Pennsylvania