

“Araby” in Ireland: *An Imperial Wolf in Sheik’s Clothing*

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Abstract: *While many believe that “Araby” is a story of a young boy’s early realization of the futility of turn-of-the-century Dublin life, I propose that its detached narrator tells the story in such a way that he acknowledges that he understands how Ireland is being manipulated by the British government and that such a realization is the basis for change. If like the boy, the Irish fall into the not always negative stereotype that they are romantic (that is, “original”) by nature, they run the risk of falling prey to those who would try to capitalize on this tendency. Instead of, as the boy did, trying to fill the national type of the romantic wanderer, the religious crusader, he who blindly loves that which symbolizes his nation, the Irishman should strive to be an individual so as not to fall into the trap of the English colonizer. It is possible that it is not the creating of the “Orient” that is hazardous, but that the Orient created by the wrong people is hazardous. Perhaps in his manipulation of the factual occurrence of the bazaar, Joyce was actually showing that despite the glamour that the English sponsors of the bazaar wanted the Irish patrons to see, so that they would spend money and have a greater reverence for the magnanimity of the Empire, the promise of opulence for the Irish through the Empire is empty, and is self-serving, benefiting only the Empire itself.*

In a study of James Joyce’s 1905 “Araby,” one of the stories of childhood in *Dubliners*, many readers focus on the epiphany of the young narrator as a coming-of-age that could just as easily have been experienced by anyone. A.R. Coulthard (1994), however, considers the real story of “Araby” not what happens within the story itself, but rather the effect that Coulthard believes the realization had on the young, naïve, “dreamy boy,” turning him into a “stern priest” (97). Coulthard asserts that “the antagonist of the story is not the hackneyed reality of a tough world but a repressive Dublin culture, which renders hopes and dreams not only foolish but sinful. ‘Araby’ is not a stock initiation story by the dramatization of a soul-shrivelling Irish asceticism” (97). Others would disagree with Coulthard’s assertions, since there is evidence in the short story that the adult narrator treats his boyhood self with a degree of ironic detachment.

Additionally, exactly what it is that is “soul-shrivelling” is open to debate. Perhaps it is not, as Coulthard suggests, that the Catholicism of Dublin limits the narrator and forces him into a puritanical lifestyle.

Joyce wrote to his brother Stanislaus that the stories of childhood in *Dubliners* were “stories of my childhood” (Jackson and McGinley vii). Having himself attended the “Araby in Dublin” bazaar in May of 1894 when he was twelve years of age, Joyce had first-hand experience of what such an event was like. However, in composing the short story, he changed important details about the bazaar that transform his readers’ impressions of the scope of the actual event. It is likely that the changes which Joyce elected to make have something to do with the other elements of his experience with which he chose to infuse the simple tale of a young boy’s trip to a bazaar. By including plentiful references to the mid-nineteenth century nationalist poet James Clarence Mangan and his work and to Catholic religion (specifically, to the Crusades) and by emphasizing the exotic and “oriental” elements of the Araby bazaar, Joyce points to the significance of the elements of religion, nationalism, and empire present in his short story.

The crux of the different perceptions of the Orient between the Irish and the English is what the Orient represented to the two groups. In *London 1900*, Jonathan Schnerer notes that in 1900, the Port of London served as “a crossroads of people and things entering and exiting not merely Britain, but what might almost be termed as the *idea* of British dominion” (39). Things and people, all commodified, which came into the port from various parts of the world proved that the Empire encompassed the exotic, the luxuriant, and most importantly, that which Britain had subjugated. To the Irish, themselves at this time under the political rule of the British, the other subjugated peoples were their counterparts. Also, a tradition in Ireland existed which connected the Irish with Eastern peoples, and this tradition in the time leading up to 1900 gained the support (however misinformed) first of linguistic scholars, then of cultural nationalists. Such an Oriental connection served to separate the Irish as Celts from the English as Saxons.

In “On the Edge of Europe: Ireland in Search of Oriental Roots, 1650-1850,” Joseph Th. Leerssen (1986) traces the development of credibility and the fall from scholarly credibility of direct connections between Irish language and eastern languages. In the eighteenth century, many linguists considered Gaelic to be “the most exotic, and supposedly the most ‘ancient’ archaic language” whose properties demonstrated linkages between oriental and Celtic languages (Leerssen 93-94). Some linguists (the Phoenician Scytho-Celtic school) came to believe that Celtic languages had eastern, rather than the northern roots that the Nordic Scytho-Celtic school claimed. As Irish, Welsh, and Scottish Phoenician Scytho-Celticists “sought to vindicate their Celtic antiquity against the Anglocentric, Anglo-Saxon orientation of the ‘Nordic’ Scytho-Celticists....the impact of Phoenicianism, especially in Ireland, was considerable” (95-96). Such a linguistic idea was backed up by Irish traditional history, recorded by Geoffrey Keating, which suggested that the island was populated largely by the descendants of Milesius, a Spanish

Celt. The connections that linguists of the eighteenth century drew between the Irish and the eastern peoples they had selected proved poignant, showing a political propensity: “in each case, the Phoenicio-Gaelic tradition is runner-up...vanquished by the true number-one nation of the day; but unlike the victors who have their day and decline, they are perennial, and form a tradition which links all these phases of Western civilization” (100). Phoenicianism was politically subversive for the Irish because it

contradicted the axiomatic classicist idea that civilization is by definition a Graeco-Roman tradition. Instead it turned to an orientalist tradition of civility, starting with Solomon’s temple and leading to Rome’s most stalwart opponent, Carthage....An anti-classicist attempt is...made to impugn the Graeco-Roman tradition of civilization as an intolerant, imperialist one, and to link its victims, from Phoenicia to Ireland, into a great tradition in its own right. (101)

Around the middle of the eighteenth century, Irish Celticists, spurred by the growth in interest in primitivism, used the scholarship of the French *celtomanes* and the “native bardic tradition” (99). Ireland’s ancient belief that it had been colonized by eastern peoples came out of the underground and into temporary scholarly respectability. While Celtology gradually began to lessen in scholarly influence because of the discovery that the Irish language was not a direct derivative of Middle Eastern languages, some influential Irish poets continued to cite Phoenician Scytho-Celticism, as it correlated with their long-held traditions. Phoenicianism, “though derided by ‘official’, scientific Celtology, kept [its] authority among a faithful band of amateur antiquarians who, significantly, all belonged to the nationalist end of the Irish political spectrum” (108). Not least among those who subscribed to Phoenicianism and who connected Ireland and the Orient in his writings, influencing writers of the Irish literary revival at the beginning of the twentieth century, was James Clarence Mangan.

The Phoenicianism of Mangan and of other Irish writers had not only linguistic implications (which were, perhaps, never taken very seriously) but also political ramifications.

Phoenicianism, linguistically as well as culturally, aligned the Gaels with those from the East, creating a polarity between oriental and occidental that both surrounded and was encroached upon by the British. By setting themselves up as Other from the British, the Irish nationalist poets of the nineteenth century pushed British ideas of identity to their limits; the Act of Union, then, forced Britain to encompass what the Phoenicianists believed to be a race that was completely foreign to English stock. Because, as Leerssen suggests, “Europe is defined in its periphery and by its margins, in its contact with the unknown past and the alien outer world...Ireland [served as] a testing ground *par excellence*” for defining the identity of the Irish as opposed to the identity of the English (*need a page citation here*). David Lloyd (1986) suggests that such a positive assertion of a unique national identity was an “extreme form of a drive to vindicate and unify Ireland through research...[that] is found in the parallel fashions of Orientalism

and Celticism. The exoticism of both, sustained by the comparative remoteness of their location in popular imagination from the centers of Empire, is involved in the notion of an ‘original people,’ one less removed from the wild and the natural than the citizens of European civilization” (33). Not only was the idea of Phoenicianism influential in the middle of the nineteenth century but, as Leerssen notes, its “characteristic fusion of orientalist and Celtic exoticism was to remain an important tradition in Anglo-Irish literature. As late as 1907, James Joyce brought up the Phoenician theory again” (108). While Joyce might not have fully considered or subscribed to linguistic Phoenicianism, his admiration for Mangan perhaps contributed to his frequent references to the East in his writings.

Mangan’s fondness for Eastern writings presents itself in what he calls translations of Oriental poetry. Lloyd suggests that Mangan’s “persistent recourse to a mode of translation which is refractive, parodistic, may be read as the entirely appropriate gesture of a provincial Irish poet concerned to complicate the ‘mining’ of Oriental – as Celtic – sources and resources by the imperial ‘speculator’ through the constant dissembling of the prospect of an ‘original’ behind the per-vision” (35). While Mangan was writing Oriental poetry, he was doing so for Celtic purposes. Mangan believed that in Oriental poetry, leaving an impression was more important than expressing a certain idea (24). Such a belief about poetry leads to the assumption that the writer might create ambiguous allegories, in the interest of raising questions in the reader’s mind, rather than presenting a moralizing tale. Mangan’s fan Joyce echoes such a mode of operation in *Dubliners*, where he provides an impressionistic image of the city of Dublin, portraying in tableaux the lives of various inhabitants of the city. Also, Lloyd notes that Mangan’s writings “shift the veils that we place over our own ‘counterfeit’ images by making us attentive to our own captivity in them” (35). Likewise, Joyce, beginning his writing career about fifty years after Mangan’s death, frequently points out the stagnancy of Dublin, but provides no possible solution. In *Dubliners*, Joyce echoes Mangan’s interests in Celticism and primitivism, the Orient, and in creating an impression, while challenging his audience to propose solutions to the characters’ problems. Among the *Dubliners* vignettes, “Araby” shows the most significant influence of Mangan on Joyce, making suggestions about the role of Ireland within the Empire, but also stopping short of making a definitive judgment that would preclude the reader from arriving at a unique conclusion. However, considering the short story in the context of its historical background, the literary traditions from which it arises, and the life experiences with which Joyce imbued the story, it becomes evident that the adult narrator, looking back on his childhood, realizes, as a result of his attendance at the Araby bazaar, the inappropriate place of the Empire in Ireland.

In addition to imitating stylistic elements of Mangan’s writing, Joyce sought to emulate Mangan’s use of one culture to evoke another:

The best of what he has written makes it appeal surely, because it was conceived by the imagination which he called, I think, the mother of things...the presence

of an imaginative personality reflecting the light of imaginative beauty is...vividly felt. East and West meet in that personality..., and whether the song is of Ireland or of Istambol [sic] it has the same refrain, a prayer that peace may come again to her who has lost peace....Music and odours and lights are spread about her...Vittoria Colonna and Laura and Beatrice...embody one chivalrous idea...and she whose white and holy hands have the virtue of enchanted hands, his virgin flower, and flower of flowers, is no less than these an embodiment of that idea. ("James Clarence Mangan" 78-79)

Referring here to Mangan's translation from Gaelic of "Dark Rosaleen," a sixteenth-century poem that allegorizes Ireland as a young woman awaiting deliverance from her English oppressors, Joyce asserts that Mangan (1944) uses a specifically Irish national image to evoke universal themes. Joyce's admiration of Mangan is evident in his inclusion in the nameless protagonist of "Araby" of the characteristics that Mangan claimed he possessed as a boy. For example, in Mangan's autobiography, he claimed that he was very bookish as a child, and scorned contact with others because his vanity convinced him that they could not understand him (Magalaner and Kain 28-29). Also, specific incidents, whether factual or fictional, that Mangan included in his autobiography are echoed in the experience of the protagonist of "Araby." In the short story, the young boy falls in love with the older sister of his friend, Mangan (identified in the story only as "Mangan's sister"), and during their only recorded conversation, he promises that he will "bring [her] something" (17) from the Araby bazaar which she is unable to attend because of a religious commitment. In the interim between the conversation and the bazaar, the zealous young narrator lives his mundane life as if it is part of a quest for his lady. However, upon his late arrival at the bazaar, he experiences a revelation of sorts and "saw [him]self a creature driven and derided by vanity, and [his] eyes burned with anguish and anger" (26), for reasons which will later be discussed, and, as the lights go out on the bazaar, the young boy has failed to fulfill his quest. It seems that Joyce's real-life hero Mangan had a comparable experience in his boyhood. When Mangan's beloved older sister died as a child (or left home, in one account), the young Mangan developed admiration for a neighbor girl who was a few years older than he. Fashioning himself as ever a poet, Mangan recounts that he set out on the streets of Dublin in search of a ballad befitting to the girl, and in his extensive searches, effects caused by encounters with the rain caused him to have damaged eyesight (Ehrlich "'Araby' in Context" 324).

By having the young boy identify Mangan as his friend and associating the object of the protagonist's affections with the nationalist poet of the previous century, Joyce makes explicit connections between Mangan and the short story of "Araby." It would be unlike Joyce, however, to end the connections between Mangan and the short story there. Instead, Joyce includes plentiful imagery that resonates with Mangan's poetry (specifically "Dark Rosaleen") and with Mangan's concerns: nationalism (the connection between Celticism and Orientalism) and religion. In "Romantic Ireland, Dead and Gone: Joyce's 'Araby' as National Myth," Joseph J. Egan explores the references to nationalism

in the short story. Additionally, he acknowledges the interconnectedness of religious imagery with nationalistic imagery. Mangan's sister is a touchpoint in the story for nationalistic and religious imagery:

...the sacred and ecclesiastical imagery associated with Mangan's sister, as well as the convent-school retreat she makes, emphasize 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. (190)

Frederick K. Lang (1987) furthers the idea of Mangan's sister as a religious symbol, describing her in terms of a religious icon. Of the conversation between the boy and Mangan's sister on the porch, Lang suggests: "This lighting effect seems inspired by the lamps that hang in front of the *iconostasis* [in Byzantine liturgy], especially since the figure of Mangan's sister is presented iconically...[so that] Certain details are always associated with a particular figure" (116). As a result, when the boy thinks of Mangan's sister on the night of Araby, "Now all the details have been incorporated into the boy's imagination and fixed in a definite pattern; at this point the image of Mangan's sister is totally iconic" (116-117). An additional religious symbol, Lang proposes, is the reference that the boy's aunt makes to Saturday "night of Our Lord" (18), as a reference to Pentecost, which he believes "the date of the actual *Araby* bazaar" (118). Although the bazaar was actually a week after Pentecost, Lang believes that based on the importance of feast days in other stories in *Dubliners*, Joyce may have intended Pentecost weekend to be, for the purpose of his story, the weekend of the bazaar. If the story does take place on an imagined day before Pentecost, "the story's last lines evoke a vision of a world bereft of Christ and still awaiting a visible sign" (118). This, of course, has national implications as well for a subjugated nation, suggesting a nation that is awaiting deliverance, not unlike Dark Rosaleen, who significantly, is advised by her beloved:

O 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! (II.1-8)

Ireland will be assisted by the Roman Catholic Church and by other Roman Catholic nations (interestingly, including Spain, which also has Moorish connections). In this way, it is clear that by focusing on the Catholic images of Ireland (including the girl's convent retreat and the Christian Brothers education of the boy), Joyce is also focusing specifically on the Irish national experience.

In addition to Mangan's sister's serving at least on some level as a symbol for Ireland, other characters and situations in the short story represent elements of Irish national life. For example, Egan suggests that Mrs. Mercer, although more of a negative character than the legend, evokes the image of the Shan Van Vocht (the poor old woman), another personification of Ireland brought into the popular consciousness by a song celebrating the 1798 rebellion. Egan believes that "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" (191). Egan further believes that by the English accents of the salesgirl at the bazaar and of the two men with whom she is conversing Joyce is suggesting "the exploitation of foreign, 'eastern' influence...[of] England" (191). When the salesgirl declares that the gentlemen are telling a "fib" (19), "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,' stripped of her nationality by folly and self-delusion and sacrificed to exploitative foreign power" (193). Likewise, Willard Potts believes that the nationality of the characters in the story correlate with their sincerity and depth: "The feeble sexual teasing carried on by the English-accented males is the antithesis of the narrator's passionate and idealistic devotion to Mangan's sister. Likewise, the stall attendant's coyness is far removed from the simplicity with which Mangan's sister accepts the narrator's adoration" (75). Perhaps the boy himself realizes that he is experiencing "a recurring source of disillusionment in Joycean fiction...[:] the grim truth that, in forwarding the destruction of Ireland's independence and integrity, the 'foreigner' is aided by the Irish themselves...the East ever encroaches upon the West" (Egan 192).

Another important trope in "Araby" is that of knightly chivalry, closely related to which is the idea of the Crusades. The narrator speaks of his quest as a young boy for the girl as his journeys through Dublin in which he "bore [his] chalice safely through a throng of foes" (16). The boy imagines that the girl has sent him on a quest to "bring [her] something" (17) from the bazaar, which conspicuously has the name reminiscent of one of the goals of the medieval crusaders. Additionally, the boy's travels through Dublin serve as a veritable gantlet for him, as he sallies forth with his aunt in the "flaring streets, jostled by drunken men and bargaining women, amid the curses of labourers, the shrill litanies of shop-boys who stood on guard by the barrels of pigs' cheeks, the nasal chanting of street-singers, who sang a come-all-you about O'Donovan Rossa or a ballad about the troubles in our native land" (16), tempting him to forget his mission. However, he remains steadfast. Also, the boy's uncle's drunken recitation of part of Caroline Norton's "*The Arab's Farewell to His Steed*" (18) explicitly links the themes of chivalry and Orientalism (Jackson and McGinley 27). It is not surprising that Joyce would elect to write a story of a young boy's coming of age (whether generally realizing the cruel ways of the world or coming to a greater understanding of his own precarious place as a mixture of colonial subject and citizen in a foreign Empire) in a medieval

milieu, because of the common perception that the medieval was a time of religious intensity and because of Joyce's own propensities. A friend of Joyce, Arthur Power, writes of Joyce

It was the Medieval and the Medievalists which attracted him most...He maintained that the present age was gradually returning to medievalism, remarking finally, with some bitterness, that if he had lived in the fourteenth or fifteenth century he would have been much more appreciated. Also the Ireland he had known, in his opinion, was still medieval, and Dublin a medieval city in which the sacred and the obscene jostled shoulders. (105)

Joyce also considered Yeats' magic and his later bawdiness medieval, and suggested that the Irish must be medieval and also not "empire" people because "we have never been subjected to the Lex Romanus, nor are we Renaissance men" (qtd. in Power 106). For an avowed medievalist such as Joyce, it is logical that he would write a story with medieval themes and a coming-of-age story that encompasses a romantic knightly quest which, in a Catholic city such as Dublin, must also include elements of religion, and in the context of the medieval trope of the story, the crusades are an appropriate religious quest; the Middle Eastern title of the bazaar solidifies the idea that the boy will go on a crusade to bring back a prize for his beloved. However, crusades have not only religious implications but suggest a clash of cultures: specifically, they evoke thoughts of one culture invading and overtaking another. In such a context, the young boy whose religious nature and zeal propel him into a quest for his beloved, whose connections with Mangan and Catholicism allow her to represent a nation, also imitates his own colonial oppressors.

While Joyce's imbuing his real experience of the Araby bazaar with all of these meaningful symbols is fascinating, his additions also involved some changes of the actual bazaar of the same name that he attended in May of 1894. Joyce's childhood schoolmate William G. Fallon remembers Joyce in his childhood: "When he was with us he sometimes appeared to be peering into the future. But he always entered into the spirit of things. One of the most notable things about him at school was his flair for observation linked to an uncanny memory" (48). It is likely, then, that Joyce would have remembered elements of the Araby bazaar that he left out of the story. Also, it is unusual, and probably significant, that Joyce who as a young boy would have been more likely to have exaggerated memories of the grandness of the bazaar, which featured imperial wonders, made the bazaar seem like a small and practically mercenary affair, which dashes the young boy's expectations. Fallon recalls meeting Joyce at the bazaar very late on Saturday evening "when it was just clearing up. It was very late. I lost Joyce in the crowd, but I could see he was disheartened over something. I recall, too, that Joyce had some difficulty for a week or so previously in extracting the money for the bazaar from his parent" (48). Perhaps Joyce's "disheartened" state left him with inaccurate memories of the bazaar, or more likely, considering Joyce's excellent memory and his obsession with detail, he changed the details of the bazaar to enrich his story.

Yet it is significant, if paradoxical, that the *omission* of detail can enrich the meaning of Joyce's story.

In "Joyce's 'Araby' and the 'Splendid Bazaar' of 1894," Ehrlich (1993) describes the actual bazaar, making use of the *Official Catalogue of Araby* (Dublin: Browne and Nolan, 1894).¹ According to Ehrlich, the bazaar was

a huge international traveling fair and trade show embracing many separate buildings and outdoor areas, encompassing dozens of attractions, including professional entertainments, amusements, music hall, theatre, tableaux, sports, orchestras, circus acts, fireworks, sideshows, exhibits, dancing, and a large number of richly costumed charity stalls – not just the closed Café Chantant and single sales stalls described in the story. (19)

Also, the real Café Chantant was "still in full swing" at the time that Joyce describes it closing, and Ehrlich therefore concludes: "Joyce's description in 'Araby' of the bazaar as a small, dark, silent, and lonely place at 9:50 PM on Saturday, May 19, 1894, is an intentional reversal of the historical reality" (19). There must have been something, then, about the bazaar that Joyce wanted to deny. Perhaps it was the decidedly English thrust of the Araby bazaar that Joyce scorned. Citing an *Irish Times* article from 23 May 1894, Ehrlich, in "'Araby' in Context: The 'Splendid Bazaar,' Irish Orientalism, and James Clarence Mangan" describes English influences on the production of the bazaar, as well as English profit from the event: "Most of the entertainments and amusements for Araby were arranged in England, and evidently the lion's share of the production costs were fees for the English entrepreneurs: 'The builders of Araby, Messrs. Womersley and Company, of Leeds, receive a few hundred pounds, and the contractors of Messrs. Goodfellow, receive a fair amount of money'" (313). Not only were English companies responsible for the production of the bazaar, they also profited monetarily from it. Ehrlich's description of the specifically imperial entertainments of the bazaar includes the ways in which "British rule [was celebrated] in a theater called the 'Empire' and in a *tableau vivant* representing a scene called 'Britain and her Colonies'" (315). Ehrlich compares the bazaar, at which British imperialism was celebrated, to small Irish county fairs, at which nationalism ruled the day. However, in the short story, the ballad-singers are relegated to the streets (316), where the boy, in his unenlightened state, sees them as a nuisance, dwelling "in places the most hostile to romance" (16).

Considering that Joyce eliminated from the short story the events at the bazaar which would have glorified the British Empire and that he included a possibly imagined occurrence (the frivolously flirtatious conversation among the English shopkeeper and two young Englishmen) which gives a negative impression of the English, it seems that Joyce is using this story to impugn the Empire for its infiltration into Dublin life, and specifically into the life of the little Dublin boy, a would-be religious and nationalistic hero. Such a reading of Joyce's intentions is perhaps not far off. As Elizabeth Butler Cullingford (2000) notes,

In 1906-07, Joyce was feeling warmer than usual about Ireland and the lecture [which he delivered titled “Ireland, Island of Saints and Scholars] demonstrates his desire to mitigate...[his earlier] harshness....Yet he remains skeptical about Revivalist claims for Ireland’s Catholic virtue and Celtic purity, and about the practical effectiveness of her revolutionary organizations. He condemns the British Empire, and considers rebellion justifiable; but cannot see ‘what good’ it does to fulminate against the English tyranny when the Roman tyranny occupies the palace of the soul.’ We might call this political position indifferent, balanced, or confused – or we might call it “semicolonial.” (221)

While he had not clearly articulated a position on Ireland’s place in the British Empire, the fact that “Araby” raises enough questions about the validity of imperial control shows Joyce’s tacit disapproval of it. Trevor L. Williams (1998) proposes that “Araby,” then, is an appropriate story to introduce the next set of stories about young adulthood, which also focus on national issues:

The conclusion of “Araby,” where “English accents” predominate, and the following three stories – “Eveline,” “After the Race,” and “Two Gallants” – all bring to the surface the subject of Ireland’s colonial dependence. Indeed, if those three stories are viewed as a group, they can be seen as the political manifestation of the boy’s coming to consciousness in “Araby”: while the story traces the confusions of “love,” its end points to the inferior position of the boy as Irish boy. (104)

The thrust of “Araby,” then, is not merely the coming to personal consciousness of an Irish boy, but the coming to national consciousness of a nation.

If the tale of “Araby” explores the relationship between Ireland and England, it does so by making use of the ruse of “Araby” in Ireland. By inserting an imperial image into another colonized area, Joyce provides polyvalent layers of meaning which allow for layers of interpretation about the degree of appropriateness of colonial occupation of Ireland. He does this by using the Orient as it had been used in literature leading up to that time. While Oriental novels usually had settings in an (inauthentic) East, “Araby” is set in an imagined “East” which has been plopped down by the English in Dublin. Prior to Joyce’s use of the Orient in his story, it had been given meanings by others. As early as the 1780s, the East was used in English writings to “offer...in addition to seclusion from the tedium of the quotidian[,...]novelty, self-knowledge and development” (Almond 21). The Orient was portrayed in novels of this time period as a location that was sufficiently distant from Britain to be safe as allegory. Rising in popularity in the 1780s, the Oriental tale was a particularly appropriate vehicle for political statement because British political life was centered on British influence in the East (Grenby 219). Additionally, making use of an Oriental backdrop allowed writers “to construct the world in pretty much any shape they wished, and yet without having to build entirely

from scratch” because the public envisioned the Orient as exotic and unpredictable (218).

In “Orientalism and Propaganda: The Oriental Tale and Popular Politics in Late-Eighteenth-Century Britain,” M.O. Grenby (2002) describes the various usages of the Orient in fictional writings during the eighteenth century, which effected significant influences on future usages of the Orient in fiction. The image of the Orient, Grenby asserts, factually inaccurate as it was, was portrayed not as “a place, or a concept, over which Britain could obtain easy dominance [but]...something to be feared, for it represented all that was most corrupt in Britain’s own political identity. For both radicals and conservatives, the Other was already within, and it was faced not with complacency, but with apprehension and disquiet” (234-35). Even before the eighteenth century, the Orient was sometimes used as the setting for political allegories, but these early tales “were almost exclusively utilized by those writing with an anti-ministerial agenda” (215-16). The Orient is “understood as a political dystopia,” that which, depending on the writer’s agenda, Britain already has become or is in danger of becoming (234). Because of its remoteness, “the Orient functions as a tremendously polyvalent abstraction,...able to reflect any image of Britain” (234). However, that it is reflecting an image “of Britain” is significant. Despite its distant setting, the Oriental tale is about not Britain’s response to the Orient, but about its response to the perils that Britain faces at home. Furthermore, in Oriental tales, “protagonists long for, and are temporarily granted, not only extravagant wealth, but also great learning and understanding....And just as the new wealth brings them misery, so their new knowledge brings them nothing but anguish” (225). It is to be surmised that because of the real subject of Oriental tales, the “anguish” that the protagonist experiences is because of his realization of the corruption with which he is faced. However, because of its anonymity, brought about by its failure to “name names,”

an Oriental backdrop could, at least in theory, defend an author against any charge that he or she was writing sedition. Or rather it could give to the reader the *impression* that the text was so dangerously subversive, so daring, defiant and hard-hitting in its satire, that it needed the screen of Orientalism in order to protect the author from the persecution of a putative censor or other government agent who would be sure to pursue the author of so audacious an attack. (219)

Oriental tales, then, were a coded signal for potentially challenging and dangerous messages couched in luxuriant terms. Tales of the Orient, by their nature, were always polyvalent.

In several ways, it seems that Joyce uses the influence of the Oriental tale in “Araby.” The boy’s vision of the Orient is characterized by “Eastern enchantment” (17) and “luxur[y]” (17). These images may be quite inaccurate; however, even these more positive images are dashed by the crass commercialism of the bazaar, at which the boy is treated with impatience by the female shopkeeper who is eager only for a sale. Additionally, the boy’s arrival at the bazaar is greeted with a new realization, as in

Oriental tales, of anguish – this anguish is not brought on by disillusionment with the Orient, but with a realization of his own naivete. Furthermore, the presence of the English Araby bazaar within the Irish city of Dublin that is under the control of the Empire is sufficiently polyvalent to obscure any direct political attack that Joyce might be making. However, it seems that because the bazaar is a creation of the English, taking advantage of what may be perceived as an Irish romanticism (which the boy does indeed demonstrate) by evoking images of the East, any indictment that Joyce is making herein is not against the Irish or against Middle Easterners, but against the English who through the bazaar manipulate and exploit members of the two groups. Irish and “Arabian” become one, as both are objects that play into English commercialism. Through the very affinity that the Irish have towards the “Arabs,” their imagined pre-Celtic counterparts, the English are able to extract the Irish subjects’ money and dreams.

The economic ramifications of the boy’s attendance and inadequacy at the Araby bazaar suggest imperial themes. In “Blind Streets and Seeing Houses: *Araby’s* Dim Glass Revisited,” Margot Norris (1995) suggests that “‘Araby,’ the name of a longing for romance displaced onto a mythologized Oriental geography, suppresses the mediation of commerce and conceals the operations by which the fantasy of an exoticized and seductive East is a commercial fabrication produced by the realm the boy finds ‘most hostile to romance’ – the marketplace” (311). Norris even notes the similarity between the real life of the boy, which he refuses to recognize, and the Araby of his dreams: “The boy, attracted to the Orientalism of ‘Araby,’ fails to recognize in the Dublin street life the colorful gestures and music of an indigenous bazaar, more spontaneous in its diverse cultural productions...than the francophonic affectations of the staged commercial simulacrum, the Café Chantant...he finds in ‘Araby,’ closed, its only music the fall of coins on the salver to announce its mercenary character” (313-14). Attempting to take flight from one world of “Oriental” wonders to another, the boy gets mired in a world of commercialism, one in which both his age and his race make him inadequate and a subject. While Ehrlich holds that in the ending of his short story, “The socialist Joyce avoids the opportunity of turning the story into an outcry against capitalist and imperialist deception and exploitation” (“‘Splendid Bazaar’” 20), it seems that the emphasis on the boy’s inadequacy in this new commercial world which he has entered signals a type of indictment against it. By pointing out the exploitation of which the boy believes himself a victim, and by then not stating a specific motive for the boy’s “anguish and anger” (19), Joyce implies that the boy is rendered helpless, his “eyes burn[ing]” (226) with the realization that he has been had.

Joyce, then, in “Araby,” is suggesting that someone is at fault in the colonial relationship between Ireland and Britain. Vincent Cheng (1995) believes that “the title of ‘Araby’ contains a sharp irony: for this is finally a parable about Ireland as much as about an Orientalized Other. Nor should this be surprising: after all, the same binary dynamics of othering and essentialism...are also built into the England/Ireland relationship” (98). However, Cheng proposes that in “Araby” Joyce indicts Ireland, and

that Joyce presents Ireland as “debased...Dark Rosaleen is not a Gaelic Madonna but a cheap flirt selling her wares and her self for the coins of strangers” (100). To Cheng, Ireland is implicated in its own subservience to England, selling itself to England “as a debased Harlot” (100). Yet the boy’s indignant realization that he is being taken advantage of shows that Ireland is not mindlessly going along with British occupation. Ian Almond comes to a different conclusion: “There is no East, Joyce’s narrator almost seems to be saying, no magical place which will fill our lives with all kinds of colours and passions and sensations – just an empty bazaar. This is a cynical, embittered response to the Orient” (22-23). However, because the bazaar is not actually Oriental at all, but is simply marketed as such, this conclusion which indicts the boy’s (or the Irish) imagination does not seem appropriate.

While many believe that “Araby” is finally a story of a young boy’s early realization of the futility of turn-of-the-century Dublin life, I propose that its detached narrator tells the story in such a way that he acknowledges that he understands ~~of~~ how Ireland is being manipulated by the British government and that such a realization is the basis for change. At the time of the Irish literary revival, Irish writers debated how best to celebrate their tradition in literature. Some writers, of whom the most notable example is William Butler Yeats, chose to retreat to Celticism, writing about myths and legends, magic and mystery: things that other writers, including Joyce, thought were too foreign to actually strike a chord with the Irish. Those who were against the overly Celtic style of Yeats criticized him, saying that it was nearly necessary to read a reference book on Celtic mythology to understand his poetry. One critic, D. P. Moran (1900), a nationalist journalist and member of the Gaelic League, leveled: “Even Mr. Yeats does not understand us [Irish Catholics], and he has yet to write even one line that will strike a chord of the Irish heart. He dreams dreams. They may be very beautiful and ‘Celtic,’ but they are not ours” (971). However beautiful “Celtic” writings were, they risked becoming formulaic, and when people used these Celtic myths and legends to define the Irish people and to imbue them with national characteristics, they ultimately ran the risk of reinforcing stereotypes against the Irish. In fact, if one could master the codes of Celticism, one could indeed “speak the language” of the Celts. Lloyd draws out the fundamental similarity between Orientalism and Celticism:

The “originality” of the Oriental – or Celtic – poet lies in his closeness to the “origins” of human kind and human feeling, and etymological play whose paradoxes, as James Stam has argued are, at the heart of those Romantic aesthetic theories for which the original genius is he who returns to and repeats the original moments of human perception, stripped of the veils of inherited customs and rules. (34)

And yet there is artifice in attempting to return to the origins, since it is impossible to become entirely divested of real life experience. Instead, just as something that is “Orientalized” should be commendable but, like the “Araby” bazaar created by the

English, can be corrupted, so too can Irish (or “Celtic”) literature be coopted and pirated by the Empire as a vehicle for further control.

If like the boy, the Irish fall into the not always negative stereotype that they are romantic (that is, “original”) by nature, they run the risk of falling prey to those who would try to capitalize on this tendency. Instead of, as the boy did, trying to fill the national type of the romantic wanderer, the religious crusader, he who blindly loves that which symbolizes his nation, the Irishman should strive to be an individual so as not to fall into the trap of the English colonizer. Ehrlich proposes, that “In denying the ‘splendid bazaar,’ Joyce showed both the glories and perils of attempting to recreate Arabian nights images in the solitary mind. The displacements would have been better understood by the reader of 1907 or 1914 as matters for powerful euphoria, pity, and irony” (“Splendid Bazaar” 20). However, it is possible that it is not the creating of the “Orient” that is hazardous, but that the Orient created by the wrong people is hazardous. Perhaps in his manipulation of the factual occurrence of the bazaar, Joyce was actually showing that despite the glamour that the English sponsors of the bazaar wanted the Irish patrons to see, so that they would spend money and have a greater reverence for the magnanimity of the Empire, the promise of opulence for the Irish through the Empire is empty, and is self-serving, benefiting only the Empire itself.

Notes

- 1 No copies of this book were available to me on this side of the Atlantic Ocean, and I was therefore unable to get a copy of it myself. However, Ehrlich’s elucidation of the text provides plentiful information and gives the reader what appears to be an accurate picture of the 1894 festivities from the text he cites from the *Catalogue*.

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