
**IRISH POET J.C. MANGAN'S VIEWS ON THE EAST WITHIN THE FRAME OF THE
ORIENTAL RENAISSANCE**

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Abstract: Irish poet J.C. Mangan (1803- 1849) wrote poetry about the Orient in a non-Orientalist mode of thinking. His ideas about the non-West make more sense if we locate him in the Oriental Renaissance movement of his time. This counter movement, which critiqued the givens of modernity, and the way the East was represented in the West underlined the operating mechanisms of the Enlightenment ideology which defined for the Easterners what/ who they were. In this mode of thinking, although Mangan acknowledged the flaws of the Eastern traditions, he placed the East on an equal footing with the West. In his prose work, he went so far as to say that “the Mind... looks rather Eastward than Northward.” Interestingly enough, he also poeticised his views about the Orient; a case in point is Suleiman, who appears as the source of solution to the impasse of the West in his “The Time of the Roses.” This paper will give an overview of his ideas on the East offering a close reading of his poem “The Time of the Roses,” and argue that Mangan establishes an alternative vantage point to approach the East, which is almost untainted by the ills of the West and the hierarchies established by the Eurocentric gaze.

Keywords: J. C. Mangan, Oriental Renaissance, “The Time of the Roses,” Irish Poetry

Irish poet James Clarence Mangan (1803-1849) wrote his poetry at a time when the givens and basic categories of the Enlightenment were problematized in English literature. In the Enlightenment epistemology, knowledge was limited to those things that we can know through our senses, mostly through our eyes, as emphasized by Lockean empiricism. Locke’s empiricism merged into skepticism and rationalism of Descartes and Newtonian understanding of nature, and a combination of all these vantage points led to a mechanical conception of nature, God and truth. Like Locke, Newton too banished “God (or the first cause) from the realm of the physical world, which became solely the arena of physical forces (or second causes)” (Kitson 2009: 40) [1]. They put the emphasis on reason, objectivity, positivism, progress and a mechanised view of truth. Their materialist assumptions, which put the intuitions, feelings or an idea of inherent or organic elements in human nature into a subordinate position, were difficult to accept even for Coleridge, who, in his youth, aspired to be a preacher at the Unitarian Church, the most progressive and the scientific Church of the time. Enlightenment’s materialist and empiricist nature was difficult to digest for many of the English Enlightenment philosophers as in Britain, unlike France, except for Godwin and a few others, they were not atheists but “preferring a form of belief known as Deism which accepted the existence of a Supreme Being in accordance with Newtonian science but which denied any dogma associated with belief, they vehemently attacked the superstition and corruption they believed to exist in the eighteenth-century Church...” (Kitson 2009: 43) [1]. They rationalized and scienticized religion, which revealed itself in Deism, “which saw the world as God’s creation and the laws of nature, therefore, as the laws of God: while man had within him as guide God-given reason, so that the revelation brought by the scriptures...” (Wedd 61) [2].

Enlightenment attitude was a breakthrough in the early 18th century in the context of the ruling pre-conceived ideas but when it established itself as part of the dominant discourse, it turned into another rigid discourse. The rigidity in the materialist assumptions of the Enlightenment discourse led to a kind of intellectual impasse and they tried to look for ways of overcoming this rigidity and new ways of formulating the truth. In this process, they turned to more idealist English philosophers like Berkeley, or the continental philosophers like Leibniz or German Romantics, or they consulted other philosophical traditions that originated or existed in the non-West like Neo-Platonism or exotic world views offered either by non-Western communities or communities of the pre-modernity in the West. They went back to the old poetic traditions as in the case of James Macpherson, who claimed that he discovered and translated the works of Ossian, a third-century bard who wrote in Gaelic. Later on, his so-called translations were challenged by the Irish scholars and he could never produce the original texts and his translations were assumed to have been written by himself. If we put aside the ethical dimension of the

issue, the amount of interest these poems raised in the audiences was immense. Macpherson was not alone in his endeavour to consult the pre-modernity traditions, as this attempt became a literary vogue at the time. Likewise, as stated above, there was a growing interest in what was happening in the rest of the world and in looking for new ways of coming to terms with reality. Oriental Renaissance came into being in such an intellectual climate.

The colonial discourse, which was part of the Enlightenment epistemology, took the non-West as less human than the West and configured a kind of humanism, which applied only to the Westerners. In other words, they took the West as the measure of everything, took the newly discovered regions of the world as their ontological other and legitimised their exploitation of the non-West by constructing a colonial discourse assigning a less-than human status to them. A case in point is the slave trade, which was a pain in the neck and a source of shame for the humanitarian intellectuals of the time. With the Oriental Renaissance movement, however, the conception of the non-West as the ontological other was challenged and the non-West was depicted in a positive light. Coleridge's "Kubla Khan" is the product of such an interest (Kitson 2008: 366) [3]. This was also an attempt through which they were trying to get rid of their Eurocentrism, which reached its peak in colonialism and slave trade. Rather than a colonising attitude to the non-West, they looked up to it with wonder, as a reservoir of answers to their questions.

James Clarence Mangan's poems about the East make more sense if we locate him in Oriental Renaissance movement. Birlik and Arıkan argue that he "contributed to the widespread recognition of Ottoman Diwan Literature by translating a considerable number of poems to English and by writing original poems through mimicking the Ottoman poetic tradition" (184) [4]. In the frame of thinking specified above, his "The Time of the Roses" a poem which he claimed to have translated from Mesîhî, an Ottoman Diwan poet, and which he substantially changed in his translation deserves attention [5]. In this poem, the poetic persona sees a social chaotic context in his immediate surroundings and experiences a kind of *cul-de-sac*. He looks up to Sultan Suleiman and the East appears as a source of remedy for the epistemological impasse he goes through in the West.

In the poem, the expression the Time of the Roses is a reference to a specific temporality but this temporality is given in terms of space. Therefore, in the beginning what we have is a spatio-temporality and in the end he achieves a different plane of existence in a temporal-spatiality. That is, in the early stanzas the poetic universe is dominated by the elements of space, then, by temporality and, later on, when he can achieve transcendence this time we see the dominance of temporality over space. The poem as a whole is temporalisation of experience but it occurs differently before the poetic persona achieves transcendence and in the aftermath of this transcendence. As a whole the poem tells the account of the persona's quest from spatio-temporality to temporal-spatiality, or from a Western conception of truth to an Easterner one. In other words, while transitoriness is attributed to the West, the eternity is attributed to the East.

In the first eight stanzas, the poetic persona speaks about an idyllic space and creates a *carpe diem* context. He is aware of the transitoriness of the beauties surrounding him, therefore, on the one hand, he is captured by a sense of bliss in this alluring context, on the other hand we feel the underlying sense of sadness that originates from his awareness of the transitory nature of these beauties:

1
Morning is blushing; the gay nightingales
Warble their exquisite song in the vales;
Spring, like a spirit, floats everywhere.
Shaking sweet spice-showers loose from her hair,
Murmurs half-musical sounds from the stream.
Breathes in the valley, and shines in the beam.
In, in at the portal that youth uncloses!
It hastes, it wastes, the time of the roses.

2

Meadows and gardens and sun-lighted glades,
Palaces, terraces, grottoes, and shades
Woo thee; a fairy bird sings in thine ear:
Come and be happy ! An Eden is here.
Knowest thou whether for thee there be any
Years in the future ? Ah, think on how many
A young heart under the mould reposes.
Nor feels how wheels the time of the roses

5

Pity the roses! Each rose is a maiden
Pranked, and with jewels of dew overladen:
Pity the maidens ! The moon of their bloom
Rises to set in the cells of the tomb.
Life has its winter; when summer is gone,
Maidens, like roses, lie stricken and wan.
Tho' bright as the burning bush of Moses,
Soon fades, fair maids, the time of your roses.

In the ninth stanza, there is the end of this idyllic space and brilliance, fragrance, hope and love and other positive components that characterise the Time of the Roses. The poetic voice is also sad because he cannot find “a magical vase” that can contain all these fleeting beauties. Here if we take the vase as a container that bears these beauties in itself, or a kind of discourse or a philosophical frame that gives expression to it, thus, freezes and eternalises it as in Keats’s Grecian Urn, then we can say that the poetic persona cannot find this “vase” or container in the epistemology he was born into:

9

O for some magical vase to imprison
All the sweet incense that yet has not risen,
And the swift pearls that, radiant and rare.
Glisten and drop thro' the hollows of air!
Vain : they depart, both the beaming and fragrant;
So, too, hope leaves us, and love proves a vagrant;
Too soon their entrancing illusion closes:
It cheats, it fleets, the time of the roses!

In the tenth stanza, in the absence of the beauties or the idyllic context, the persona becomes aware of the social turmoil and chaos surrounding him. When this chaos was about to assert itself, Suleiman rises and ends the “storms” and chaos. Once more, the peace rules his surroundings and the setting for the Time of Roses is re-established:

10

Tempest and thunder and war were abroad;
Riot and turbulence triumphed unawed;
Suleiman rose, and the thunders were hushed,
Faction was prostrate, turbulence crushed.
Once again peace in her gloriousness rallies;
Once again shine the glad skies on our valleys,
And sweetly anew the poet composes
His lays in praise of the time of the roses!

In this blissful context, the poetic persona reveals his name as Mesîhî in the last stanza and says that he has achieved fame; he is “crowned” for good. In other words, he achieves eternity through his poetry and Suleiman the Magnificent enables this. He identifies himself with the stars that shine in the sky and says that as long as those stars shine his art will continue to enchant people. He addresses Leila, (a woman’s name in the Middle East) and says that she is his rose. The word rose metamorphoses to a signifier for

eternity or transcendence in the course of the lines and when he identifies Leila with the rose, in fact, he attaches the same features of the rose to Leila. He also invites Leila to be identified with the nightingale, which is a bird of love and music in the Ottoman context. In this invitation, Leila's existence merges into the nightingale's.

II

I, too, Meseehi, already renowned.
Centuries hence by my song shall be crowned;
Far as the stars of the wide heaven shine.
Men shall rejoice in this carol of mine.
Lelia! thou art as a rose unto me:
Think on the nightingale singing for thee
For he who on love like thine reposes
Least heeds how speeds the time of the roses.

As Arikan and Birlik state "carpe diem is an important theme in the poem" (14) [6] and if we look at the ending of it, we can say that Mangan attaches positive attributes to the Middle East and the fact that the chaos has been re-organised by something offered not by Plato or any other philosopher that shaped the Western world but by a figure from the Middle East deserves attention. Again, he can achieve transcendence not through Neoplatonism, the Burkean, or aesthetic sublime but through what Suleiman suggests. We are not given enough detail about what Suleiman suggests but it is enough to make him achieve the sublime.

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