Mangan's Barmecides: Memory as a psychic space for remembering and re-membering personal and impersonal history

Arda Arikan
Nurten Birlik

Abstract

Literary scholarship acknowledges that James Clarence Mangan's (1803-1849) poems were a medium of objectification of his personal impasses and the ensuing melancholy. As Mangan was obsessed with mystification, he used puzzling verbal devices as in the case of his Eastern and oriental images that characterize many of his poems such as "The Time of The Barmecides" in which he reveals himself in a cryptic fashion. In these lines Mangan re-contextualizes his youth in the distant 8th Century Barmecides (or Barmakids) period of Arabic-Abbasid history that is elsewhere cited "as an ideal period in the history of the [Abbasid] caliphate." In this poem, Mangan's poetic persona's travel back and forth in space as well as in time and memory starts when he says "My memory ever glides/ To the old, old time, long, long ago/ The time of the Barmecides!" although the poet and the period he remembers are more than one thousand years and thousands of kilometres apart. In the poem, Mangan, as an Irish poet who had never set his foot outside his home country, re-constructs an image of the Barmecides while remembering his prime as an elderly man. In this process, the personal merges into the impersonal or the personal is voiced through the impersonal. It is due to these reasons that the aim of this paper is twofold. First, we explore "The Time of The Barmecides" as an example of Mangan's poetic journey through the East, culminating in his re-construction of a specific historical period, by looking at his operating poetic mechanisms in re-creating that period. Second, we try to understand the poem as Mangan's journey to his youth by analyzing the images and metaphors concerning his living present and his earlier years to understand how he remembers and re-members his prime. Our analysis of the poem will not only shed light on how a 19th Century Irish poet conceptualized the East but it will also help us understand the specific conditions that framed Mangan's memory as a Western man who travels in Eastern lore.