

A treasure of the mystical tradition
Aidan Mathews on the last volume of John Moriarty's 'magisterial trilogy'

Turtle Was Gone a Long Time: Volume Three - Anaconda Canoe by John Moriarty
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Cometh the hour, cometh the book. With the publication of its third and final volume, John Moriarty's magisterial trilogy, a treasure of the mystical tradition, offers all of us encouragement and an escort for the forced march into the dreadful, deserted millennium before us. Call him Ishmael, call him Isaac, call him Israel, this god-wrestling nightwalker who abandoned Lit. Crit. in Canada for lectio divina in Connemara and who transformed his varsity life-style into a hermit's vertical detour thirty years ago, has brought back bread and wine from the world of Melchizedek to the bread and circuses of our narcotised inertia.

And if the bread be real, digested with some difficulty, and if the wine be shrill, inhaled with a slight shiver, so be it: carbohydrate spirituality has us looking like death. It is protein we need now, pemmican for the Arctic.

All of which may seem like a caveat to the reader but is meant instead as a come-hither or, in Biblical terms, as a Come and See, the more so since the great Go and Tell of the Christian imperative has been altogether unnerved by its recent record of voodoo and atrocity, of hubris and Holocaust. To be sure, Turtle is intense and strenuous, in part because it proceeds in the agonised knowledge of its own shaken credentials, in part because it prescribes as mystery what most will proscribe as mystification.

Yet just as Ulysses secretes in its subtle folds the longest anecdote in the English language, a tale of two men meeting up at the end of a difficult day for them both, so Moriarty's odyssey (itself a study of all our Iliads) traverses the stories and sacraments of innumerable human communities, in a grand pan-ethnic reconnaissance of the forms of faith in a planet at prayer, to find and found himself again and again in the simple passion narratives of the Jewish Christian gospels.

As with Rene Girard, that anthropologist turned theologian, it is these poorly proofed Asiatic documents, the scriptural reportage of a routine execution in the hillbilly badlands of the Pax Romana, which both annihilate and at the same moment inaugurate our authentic human nature.

But Girard's project, while parallel, is more impersonal. His Passion is the detailed, undeniable anatomy of the regulated violence which oxygenates civic society by its ritual and religious election of scapegoats whom it misconceives as culprits; and his Jesus is Christ because he proclaims all black sheep to be lambs of God. Moriarty's Passion doesn't disavow the sociology of bogey men and fall guys, but his theme for Jerusalem is more ancestral. It is the paschal mystery which he intends, along with all the mentors and tormentors - the Zen Masters of the double Enlightenment, Buddha's and Bacon's - whom he champions in his ecumenical pages.

It is the threefold day, the Triduum Sacrum - Gethsemane, Golgotha, and the graveyard that becomes a garden - which he enters as sacred ground; which he encounters in fact as the ground-breaking, earth-shattering ground that becomes us; which he articulates in truth as the terra firma of our own interiority; which he names as the literal place of the passion, death, and real presence that fashioned the template of our individual lives forever; and which he prays and praises, finally, as sanctifying the very form and morphology of the way we are in the world.

This isn't Atonement thinking out of manual theology. Here vicarious sacrifice is itself replaced by exemplary embodiment, a Jesus who reveals and reconciles the gradual, grievous stages of our species' slow evolution over eons. Those who object that such a project abolishes transcendence rather miss the point. Transcendence wasn't cancelled by an 18th century sceptic who was rightly sick at the sight of a papier mache Creator. It was annulled by God in an act of love that Christians call the Incarnation and which they celebrate still at the worst possible moment of midwinter when they honour the miracle of material reality in the birth of a baby squeezed on to straw in a cattle-shed amid the incense of the breath of livestock.

In the green and painful ruin of a Church's superstructure, as ecclesial hope struggles to survive the belated ecclesiastical collapse of the recent purifying past, the choices implicit in the Nativity myth - the census of Caesar or the parables of Luke, pilgrimage or grim ageing, cannibalism or communion, Babel or Pentecost - implore us to discern the gospel truth in the bad news and to practise the Good News in Gospel truthfulness. The turtle who weeps as she lays her eggs in the precarious culture of the shoreline, the unruled margin of sand and salt, bestows her tears upon us as a discipline and a disinfectant.