

Haunted by the fact of being
Turtle Was Gone a Long Time - Volume 1: Crossing the Kedron, by John Moriarty
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By BRIAN LYNCH

JOHN MORIARTY is, perhaps uniquely, a historical mystic. Considering his history has Auschwitz clogging its aorta, it's not surprising that historical often shades into hysterical. This is not said offensively, for the etymology of hysteria, meaning "womb fever", can be applied to Moriarty precisely because of his maleness, a febrile yearning for a sexual as well as a cultural birth place.

But at the level of character, intrinsic personality, one senses in Turtle and in his equally extraordinary first book, *Dream time* (1994), a strong element of hysterical anxiety, a feeling that here is a man threatened at the very centre of his being by the nature of being itself and by bad dreams: "At night before giving myself up to sleep, I prayed that I'd be the only victim of what was at large in me ... that I wouldn't, knife in hand, somnambulate into murder."

In this book, the first part of a trilogy, Moriarty tries to bridge the historical abyss between religion and reason, or, as he puts it, between "myth and math". By now, most of us, if we're conscious of the pit at all, are like Jonah in the song who "made his home in/that whale's abdomen". Moriarty is a different kettle of fish. For one thing, he has trawled not just the depths of the European psyche but has also a deep knowledge of most of the world's thought: Arabic, Indian, Chinese, you name it; he is, in short, that almost mythical being, a polymath - if you're to make any sense of, what he's saying, you have to read the glossary before assaying the text.

For another thing, he doesn't argue, he declares. The Academy doesn't like that, for declarations, like those incestuous Siamese twins, personality and poetry, are resistant both to division and to the Academy's idea of fun, the taking down, very slowly, of your particulars. It is unlikely that, this book will be taught in our universities and yet it hard to imagine any Irish thinker not being excited by it in one way or another.

Moriarty has little time for science of any kind, though he has swallowed the Darwinian pill - no mean feat for someone who believes in divine intervention. For instance, he thinks Neil Armstrong's "giant leap" was "an insignificant step for humanity", since it didn't involve what he calls "movement essential", that is, from one state of being to another. But by stressing the mechanics of the journey, doesn't he neglect what many people were moved by: the concentration of the weight of history upon Armstrong's personality? Neil didn't just walk, he knelt.

His espousal of Blake against Newton and Democritus is central to his animistic view of the universe, but it's narrowing, too; the Democritean perception of the nature of light and sight, namely, that we see the world but the world does not see us, may be dismaying but it is also, surely, astringent and vision cleansing.

For Moriarty, though, the world is not only looking at us but also, striking its horn into our vittles. "When he comes to this meeting point his language is often uneasily sexual: penis/weapon and vagina/wound (the wound with teeth in it) engage in a life

and death embrace. In this valse de ventre, the day to day doesn't get much of a look in, but in the midst of a lot of stuff that is dizzyingly dithyrambical and litanical, Moriarty does see that "In our capacity for ordinariness is our final sanctity", and illustrates his perception with six stories drawn from everyday life in the West of Ireland which are comic (sometimes unconsciously), touching and profound.

When one considers the vapidness of what passes for contemporary religious thought and the pettiness of so much of our poetry, the appearance of Moriarty on the scene is, despite the boringness and hysteria, dramatic.

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