

Moriarty on Bare Mountain

Paul Durcan

Philosophy: Back in the late 1950s in UCD in Earlsfort Terrace, among a generation of brilliant men and women, there were two extraordinary students, AJF O'Reilly and John Stephen Moriarty, both tall, handsome boys, both sunny, kindly boys, both men of genius who in their adolescence had embarked on soul-treks that would carry them on journeys to the ends of the earth and to the ends of their lives.

Both would pay an enormous price for undertaking such journeys and both would give enormously to their state and nation; the one would become a king of world business and finance, the other would become a king of world philosophy and wisdom literature.

In UCD around 1960, if O'Reilly was our film-star football idol, Moriarty was our unique conjunction in the one personality of Wallace Stevens, Heraclitus and Isaiah Berlin. When he was awarded a double-first in philosophy and logic, no one passed any comment, for not to have awarded him it would have been as absurd as not to award John Keats the Nobel Prize.

But then, to our already conformist mindsets, the unthinkable happened: Moriarty threw up the academic life and vanished. For 20 years no one knew where he was. Then, on the evening of January 31st, 1985, on his series, Dialogue, on RTÉ Radio 1, the distinguished broadcaster, Andy O'Mahony, introduced his guest with the words: "My guest tonight is one of the most remarkable people that I've ever met in my entire life."

In the 1990s the Lilliput Press published five volumes by Moriarty, culminating in his magnum opus, Nostos, which is to Irish literature what Thus Spoke Zarathustra is to German philosophy.

Invoking Ireland is an extended footnote, an appendix to Nostos.

IT TRANSPIRED THAT Moriarty had spent his life living out his philosophy, just as Wittgenstein did before him, and he has paid dearly for it. He has wandered the face of the earth, working as a gardener. He has spent most of his life sleeping rough, walking, walking, walking where most of us would not dare to walk even for one day, not least those of us who would call ourselves environmentalists or cultural historians or artists.

Invoking Ireland is a book to be read in silence on street corners wherever people gather on Easter Monday, 2006. For, what lies behind the almost hysterical anxiety to mark the 90th anniversary of 1916? The 90th anniversary is the grand-mother of all identity crises.

We know what the Celtic Tiger is but we are unable to accept that we have become also the Celtic Parrot: a society of fanatical conformism in which almost everybody tows the same old psychologically exhausted party lines of mindless nationalism,

merciless greed, disloyal loyalism, information idolatry, designer culture, sports mania, troglodyte dandyism, Murdoch slavery and puritanical political correctness.

Moriarty is the original, radical, non-conformist questioner. Are we, the citizens of the entire island, all members of U2? Lads and ladies strutting about in cowboy hats and pinstripe suits fondling mobiles and mumbling a transatlantic, Celtic mumbo-jumbo? Where is Ireland? Has it relocated to the Canaries? Is Dublin anything other than a suburb of Atlanta, Georgia? Cork the new capital of Chiantishire? Belfast a post-modern north of England city? Is, should, Ireland be a state of mind only, a remembered dream, an imagined place, a recollected geography, a dreamtime?

Invoking Ireland is a miscellany of parables and aphorisms by which, as individuals, and not as a herd, we might find a way of living authentically on this island: "you must be religious but in being religious you must have no recourse to religion"; "our history is the history of our success in making ourselves and our world unreal"; "roll away our tidy town park and under it we will find a Jurassic savannah"; "the Ireland that is worth living in is the Ireland that cannot be clutched, either by John Bull or by Cathleen Ní Houlihan"; "by my count, this is the thirtieth dolmen we have slept on"; "in the final disposition of things, there will be no perdition".

Invoking Ireland is a book of meditations on the Skelligs, on Puck Fair, on Newgrange, on the Paps of Danu on the borders of Cork and Kerry: "the nipples of these divine breasts are cairns, they are tombs, suggesting that even while we are undergoing the disintegrations of death we are for all that being divinely nurtured".

MORIARTY WRITES A prose poetry in whose doorways we can discern the shades of William Yeats and Dylan Thomas, David Jones and Jack Yeats. Who else but Moriarty could combine in his palette the voices of Blathmac and Traherne? "Even so, cobwebbed though it is, the old pagan window can still fenestrate our lives with sacred sea-light, with sacred land-light, with the light, orient and immortal, of that first sheaf of wheat, progenitor of wind-blown gold, of god standing still, all over the land."

Moriarty's conversation is a dialogue between Christianity and pre-Celtic Ireland. If there is a saving evolutionary, environmental moment, it is what the painters of the Renaissance saw: that when, in Gethsemane, the disciples fall asleep, Christ stays awake. Invoking Ireland is an elucidation of Patrick Kavanagh's prayer: "We must be nothing/ Nothing that God may make us something."

Strange to surmise that in 20 years from now almost all the current icons of Irish cultural life will be in the process of being forgotten, while in the universities there will be courses devoted to John Moriarty, and movie-makers will vie for the rights to make a film of his life. One will see in TCD under the severe, genial eye of Bishop Berkeley the new John Moriarty Chair of Wisdom Literature, endowed by the Bank of Ireland, while outside the GPO cinema in O'Connell Street queues will be forming nightly to gain admission to the latest Oscar-winning movie from Ang Lee and Annie Proulx, Moriarty on Bare Mountain.

Invoking Ireland By John Moriarty The Lilliput Press, 238pp. €15

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