

# Wandering from the Path

Dermot Moran

“Scotus Eriugena held that: Authority comes from right reason. I suppose he considered himself a good Catholic . . . I still invite correspondence as to the trial and death of Eriugena. I can still see a Catholic renaissance or the Church taken seriously once again if Rome chose to dig up the records, if Rome chose to say that the trial was a mistrial . . . these disjunct paragraphs belong together, Gaudier, Great Bass, Leibnitz, Eriugena are parts of one iedogram”.

“Civilised Christianity has never stood higher than in Eriugena’s ‘Authority comes from right reason’”

—Extracts from Ezra Pound *Guide to Kulchur* (New Directions Press, NY, 1970)

Eriugena, the ninth century Irish philosopher, expressed his Irishness directly in his name, which means Irish born; and indirectly in that way in which so many Irish people subsequently expressed it — in emigration to a foreign land. “All the world is foreign soil to those who philosophise”, Eriugena’s follower, Hugh

of St. Victor says in his *Didascalicon*. To Ezra Pound, who championed in his own flamboyant and imprecise manner the philosophy of Eriugena, this emigration, this pursuit of foreignness, this exile, was an expression of the rational independence of the mind, deemed heretic by the stay-at-homes in Rome. St. Augustine urged the philosopher to “travel not abroad, the dwelling place of truth is the inner man”. Finally, the German philosopher, Martin Heidegger, urges the finding of new paths for thought, yet warns the traveller to remain true to the earth. The metaphor for thinking has often been travelling, the problem of this essay is how far the Irish philosopher travels on a pre-established road, and when he must leave the comfort of the highway for those dangerous, dark paths which are the source of all newness and strength.

Belief in a single Irish identity, spirit or soul; belief in a unified unconscious for the group or the race; belief in the dominance of a complex of beliefs or mores or intuitions; all these beliefs are — unless further examined — vague, uncritical, misleading and possibly even politically dangerous. To discover an Irish psyche and to diagnose it are tasks which may not be the specific domain

of the Irish alone, nor of the Irish merely looking inward. One form of consciousness does not exclude all others, even schizophrenia may have its political rewards. The debate concerning Irish self-identity demands a philosophical foundation, and philosophy itself is a mere abstraction without the vitality of living discussion, without the presence of philosophers. We are thus brought to face the paradox — something in the Irish soul and history which suggests flight, travel, distance, and — the very absence of philosophers in Irish history. Christianity, politics, nationalism, all are dead without their historical understanding and critique, however the Irish philosopher, the instigator of such critique is himself rootless, without tradition or history.

In Ireland today, philosophy is a problem. Although there has been no lack of philosophers — the traditional *fili*, Scotus Eriugena, Peter of Ireland (teacher of Thomas Aquinas), Berkeley, Edmund Burke, Stephen Mackenna, and a host of Kantians, Thomists, Lonergans and theologians: Ireland has no great reputation as a guardian of philosophical tradition unlike France, Germany and, to some extent, England. There is a visible absence of the philosopher *engagé*, the humanist thinker, the iconoclast, or the cultural anthropologist. The cultural association of the word ‘philosopher’ in Ireland is almost the same as that of ‘hermit’, ‘scholastic’ or ‘priest’. The situation has not been improved by the isolation of the professional philosopher from education committees, cultural councils or political debates. Ireland has no Sartre, Camus, Russell or Levi-Strauss. Before the issues of Irish nationality and culture can be discussed, we must find a model

for our thinking, a source to locate our thought.

John Scottus Eriugena, as layman, as rationalist, as anti-authoritarian, as heretic, must be our beginning. He represents both the historical beginning of our known philosophical tradition, and one of its greatest thinkers, his present place in our currency serves at least to make him real, current. As Sartre puts it, we have been confronted by the very presence of his absence, we must reconstitute our tradition and our history in this paradoxical light.

Ireland must rediscover its future in the critical re-organisation of the past, in drawing up rules for the very use or abuse of history, in demythologising its unconscious heritage, its dogmatism, its obsessions. Pound admired Eriugena’s courageous stand on the question of the power of authority over reason, Eriugena advocated *vera ratio*, true reason, as the only source of authority. In the light of such clarity we must confront all the dogmatism of Irish thinking, of Irish (particularly Thomistic) philosophy.

Johannes Scottus Eriugena was the greatest philosopher of the Carolingian *renovatio*. He is an elusive but fascinating figure in the history of philosophy — born in Ireland, schooled in the Irish tradition, he emigrated to France, possibly to escape the Vikings. He taught at the Palace school of King Charles the Bald and later became head of that school. He was drawn into theological controversies on the question of predestination, was repudiated but continued to study, wrote commentaries on neo-platonic books and translated the writings of the mystic, Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite. His greatest work is a long philosophical dialogue on the scheme of this world, called the

*Periphyseon* or *On the Division of Nature*. After 870, he disappeared from our history and legends of his travels, mental powers, sense of humour, and final death take over. However his philosophy itself gives us great insight into the attitudes of this brilliant and headstrong man and his championing of human reason, the power of dialogue and the community of spirit of all men which are all necessary constituents of a true Irish philosophy. Eriugena can be said to overturn the accepted notions we have of the Middle Ages as a time of authoritarian hierarchy, lack of originality and general superstition. His work in fact comes closer to our accepted notions of the Italian Renaissance where the philosophers stressed freedom, imagination and vitality of thought. In any case, Eriugena is not a mere philosopher of the dark ages. His idea of man as the image of God led directly to a championing of the infinite power of the human mind. His development of neo-platonic notions of being and non-being, led him to conceive of man in Sartrean terms as emptiness, absence, negativity. His adoption of Negative Theology allowed him to proclaim that God both did and did not exist, that God was both more than being, and absolute *nihil*, Nothingness. He overturned the hierarchical notion of authority as proceeding from God through a long chain of command, in favour of a God who does not know Himself, as to what He is, nor does He know man. His stress on man's self ignorance is of vital importance to our theme of identity, both personal and national.

If all these notions seem paradoxical, extreme and irrational, then we are at the point where Eriugena's true bril-

liance may be seen. Eriugena is an extremist, but he leads us on this path with perfect logical grace, by stages of a rational dialectic which can include the irrational, by a journey of the intellect which demands that each of the stages be actualised before continuing, by using the theme of voyage, ascent and descent as the very core of the philosophical commitment. At its strongest, he suggests that no-one can enter heaven except through the practice of philosophy. Yet, equally, he refuses to allow that dissenters should be penalised – every one is not equal in intelligence, he says, those who do not agree, or who cannot be convinced should simply be left alone. Taken to its political conclusion, this admission of rational government without force or uniformity, would provide the groundwork of a pluralistic state or indeed federation of states.

Let us return to the theme of *navigatio* or voyage. Although the reason for Eriugena's voyage to France is not known, there is a thematic correspondence in his writings with the peculiarly Irish theme of the *navigatio pro amore dei*. In the dialogue *On the Division of Nature*, a pupil is being led on the path of wisdom by an experienced teacher. The imagery of this journey is one of weary travel, sea storms, embattled fortresses, and the buffeting of the confused mind. The whole purpose of the dialogue is not merely to impart information, but to achieve a concrete instantiation of that very wisdom. Therefore, whenever a problem appears it must be confronted and overcome, not merely avoided or equivocated out of existence. Eriugena finds often that this approach is not likely to appeal to those in ecclesiastical authority, who,

then as now, can find a straight narrow path from Christ through the Fathers to themselves. Eriugena was aware of the necessity for such continuity of tradition, and of doctrine, but saw no need for authority to erect its own signposts on the way. The path of truth can be discovered because it is also the path of reason, reason creates its truth on the way, thus explaining the richness and diversity of the world. We are not here discussing the relation of faith and reason which obviously is also coloured by the equation of right reason with authority, because we are not attempting to define Eriugena's Christianity. Rather we are pointing to the importance of considering Eriugena's method in discussions about culture and continuity. Eriugena saw that his journey of the mind would lead to ecclesiastical exile, and that his journey would depart from the standard path. But he saw only richness, strength and truth in that course, giving encouragement to the Irish philosopher to challenge the established reality. Let us quote from the beginning of the fourth book of the *Periphyseon* (On the Division of Nature) to illustrate the point:

"The difficulty of this task and the confrontation and struggle of different senses strike such terror into us, that, compared with it the three previous books seem to offer a safe course to readers who are like sailors coasting in a smooth sea, navigable with calm waves and without danger of shipwreck. This book however is impassable because of its sinuous bends, steep with the obliquity of its statements, dangerous with the expanses of the Syrtes, that is, the guidance of

unfamiliar learning of most subtle intellects, like hidden rocks which suddenly shatter ships, exposed to shipwreck because of fogginess . . . But under the guidance of the Divine Mercy, with the favourable breath of the Holy Spirit filling the canvas of our ship, we shall make a safe straight course among these dangers and, free and unscathed, shall arrive at the harbour towards which we are making."

The student's reply to this speech indicates the precise turn of Eriugena's faith in the steering power of God:

"We must spread our sails and set out, for reason, well acquainted with this sea, hastens us on. It does not fear any threats of waves or bends or Syrtes or rocks. It takes greater delight in exercising its power in the hidden waters of the Divine ocean than in resting at ease in smooth and open seas, where it cannot reveal its force."

(Translation by Myra Uhlfelder. Bobbs-Merrill, USA 1976)

The *navigatio* is most definitely for the love of God. It is, too, guided by God. Yet Eriugena's own twist on this theme is to make reason equally powerful with God. God comes from above, reason comes from below, both meet in man, perfectly in the perfect Man – the Christ-Logos. The whole of Eriugena's philosophy is an intellectual wrestling with the paradoxes of the Christian heritage. He was faced with transition from all sides – he had the task of synthesising Greek East and Latin West, Augustine and Pseudo-Dionysius, authority and reason, Peter and John,

Roman Empire and High Middle Ages, secular knowledge and religious wisdom. To such a mind the harmonising of modern Ireland would not have seemed impossible, but would have required another strenuous journey on the road of reason.

We have said that, for Eriugena, reason creates its own truth. What does this mean? God is the creator of the external manifestation of Himself, in Eriugena's original conception of creation *ex nihilo*. God's act is to place Himself in the light, as it were, and therefore view Himself as creating. This initial act of self-definition is never complete as there is no special viewpoint from which this act of self-manifestation could be viewed. Hence Eriugena suggests that although God created Himself, this creation is incomplete, and in fact means that God does not fully know Himself, through and through. This creative action constitutes the generation of the Trinity and again, due to the relation of self to other, this process continues in the creation of man. Man (as Christ) is the centre point of the whole process, just as we must begin with a comprehension of ourselves, so also this very comprehension, because incomplete, creates the rest of the universe. Man himself in his emptiness is capable of engulfing the entire creation. In the realisation of this infinite role, man began to create what was inferior to himself, and added to the horizontal expansion of creation, a vertical depth of value — good to evil. This outward procession from God must be matched by a similar return to Him, by the very circle of Nature, on which Eriugena depends. This procession and return of the world takes place outside the frame of time. This of course is talking on a metaphysical level, abstrac-

ting from temporal history. But it does explain how Eriugena views the importance of the rational mind in the functioning of the entire world of Nature. Thus rationality is not just one of man's inherited gifts, it is a divine quality, an openness to experience which, unknown to itself, is actually writing its own scenarios. This idealism — that the mind is responsible for the very fact of the visible sensible world — is natural to the Irish consciousness, and is found again in Berkeley and in Yeats.

It leads to a kind of acceptance of things because they are caused by us, without our consent. It is an idealism which can easily fail to meet the demands of a harsh and immediate reality. Yet it also gives great scope and great strength to the mind. Eriugena's theology can be compared favourably with that of Hans Küng or Karl Rahner, though I would venture to say that he was greater than either. His attitude towards the world allows great tolerance of other viewpoints as being steps in the rational dialectic which will return to God. Eriugena's use of the voyage theme is not accidental or stylistic merely, it points to the use of dialectic at the very heart of the philosophical enterprise. If only he had translated this into a theory of historical understanding — then Ireland would have produced its own powerful version of Hegel and Marx. It is this deep comprehension of the movement of history and of living in history which marks out the Irish person, yet it is exactly this lack of a rational approach to the process of history and the forging of the future which marks out the Irishman's 'idealism', his passive acceptance of the course of nature, and his impression of being

but a sojourner on this island. To be more precise, Eriugena allowed man greater scope than God — because he is capable of sharing in God as His creative power. No man is tied merely to his position in the social or ontological hierarchy, but each is free to follow the path he creates for himself with his own mind. Such an emphasis on rational freedom is unusual except in the existentialist writings of our own times. But in calling attention to man's freedom, he also called attention to the difficulty of following that road — most people stop at the sunny resting places and do not forge on the treacherous paths. (Nietzsche uses similar imagery of the sick and healthy mind in the *Gay Science*).

The voyage of Eriugena led to his official condemnation by the Church, his books were burned, and the first printed edition of his writings was put on the *Index Librorum* and never taken off it. His notion of man as the universal container of all things was only a more developed form of Greek Neo-Platonism found also in orthodox writers such as Gregory of Nyssa and Maximus the Confessor, but his notion of the self-creation of God and of man is unique and original. It also provides us with the answer to Pound's dilemma — why was Eriugena declared heretic, when many similar theologians were sanctified? Eriugena declared that man would never be able to 'define' or 'comprehend' himself fully. Thus no authority could ever presume to take over that eternally unfinished but necessary task of attempted self-definition. Eriugena would allow no one privilege to dictate the other's identity to him — not even the angels and arch-angels can do it to man. Without such a pre-established identity

each person had to go in search of his own nature and his own God, allowing every other person full equal rights. This obviously conflicted with the highly hierarchical, political Church of his day. Eriugena too was no sexist, men and women equally share in a common human nature, and will return to that sexless state after death. (Christ risen is also neither male nor female).

Eriugena is insistent on the need for search for one's personal identity. Yet he always insists that men are not closed to one another — reason is the path way between men. Men can be united spiritually without remainder just as a single voice may be understood completely by many listeners. More specific details of Eriugena's fascinating philosophy must be left out of this account, but I would merely mention that Eriugena had precise notions of the existence of a male and female element to each soul — the *animus* or intellect and the *sensus* or female *anima*. Jung made great play with these concepts.

Eriugena also understood that a community of individuals develops its own collective consciousness — just as all lights in the church manifest one light. There was a world soul as well as individual souls. It would be anachronistic to seek political recipes, statements on nationalism or on the Irish people, but it is not impossible to find philosophical discussion for these ideas in his writings. Notions such as collective consciousness or unconsciousness have analogues in his development of the anthropology of image of God. Yet, as we said at the outset, none of these ideas should be accepted uncritically or without due attention to its historical context. But some of our problems have become clearer — we asked how far do

we follow on the road of Irish philosophy, and we have seen that the whole tenor of the work of our philosopher has been to advocate new paths, more difficult tasks, lack of blind certitude and avoidance of the common way. Eriugena is a model of what Irish philosophy must become — it must break new grounds, shake loose from academic disengagement, question its own involvement with Christianity, with history and with culture. At a time when Thomistic formulae are still being learned off by heart by students in some of our philosophy departments, and act/potency distinctions being applied to real problems, at such a time, and in the face of dogmatic opposition and/or silence, there is more pressing need than ever before for a critical, independent and living philosophy. The spirit of Eriugena must be blended with the spirit of Hegel and Marx — already the foundations are there. It is in confrontation with our own history and our own perception of ourselves that we will develop as a whole being. Ireland today has great need of her heretics. They must be ready to exile themselves from official sanction.

## *Between the Lines in the Book of Kells*

Archbishop Simms

The labour of copying the scriptures demanded dedication and accuracy. Adamnan recites the golden rule of check and counter-check. 'I beseech all those that may wish to copy these books', wrote the saint's biographer from Iona's island, 'nay more, I adjure them through Christ, the judge of the ages, that, after carefully copying, they compare them with the exemplar from which they have written, and emend them with the utmost care; and also that they append this adjuration in this place.' There was a Hippocratean solemnity in this glimpse of the scribe's vocation.

The well-nigh invisible mending, carried out by the corrector's hand, displays an ingenuity that deceives the eye and conceals the art. The page is a picture, deftly patched; every line gives God the glory and tells a tale of devotion and delight. Neatness matches resourcefulness at the foot of a page of the Kells manuscript, where Mark records of Jesus: 'he commanded them that they should take nothing for their journey, save a staff only, no scrip, no bread, *no money* in their purse. but be shod with sandals.' The erring copyist wrote in some characteristic insular Latin: 'in zonae sed calciatos scandalis (*sic*):' 'aes' means

'money', but the scribe's eye has been tricked into losing both 'a' and 's'. The corrector recovers the fulness of the phrase, by affixing to the bowl of the 'e' the missing 'a' on the left, and setting in the heart of the same 'e' a tiny 's', to make the record straight.

There was joy in such work. The scribe's and the corrector's hand alike had a skill to offer in this labour of love. The corrector might have murmured a thanksgiving for a happy error left to alter and even beautify. *Felix Culpa*. No arid toil or deadening drudgery lay in this penmanship. Did not a scribe picture his researches as 'hunting words', as he took inspiration from his feline companion whose sharp eye on the look-out for mice gave an edge to the keen thoughts of his master, finding meanings, and, intellectually speaking, turning darkness into light?

There was pain also in the discipline of the quill. 'My hand has a pain from writing' sings one. 'O my chest', cries another, as he draws breath and stretches himself for the next stage of the journey along the lines of his writing. He pictured himself on a pilgrimage of truth, with his fingers moving to shape the rounded uncials and control the direction of their flow. Taking 'the turn under the path'