Continentals

OVER the past eight years Richard Kearney, as editor of The Crane Bag, has through ceaseless hard work and unfailing commitment succeeded in bringing a centre to the Irish cultural scene. He has devotedly and patiently worked with Joseph Beckett, and others, to achieve the symbolisation of the Nationalist symbol as he sees it built around a mythology of self-affirmation, and argued for a joint authority solution to the Northern question in the Forum sessions in Dublin. He is, however, a philosopher by profession and has managed to find the time to write three substantial books in philosophy.

One of these, Podlages da Possibility, published in French in Paris in 1984, is a development of his PhD dissertation written under the direction of the French philosopher, Paul Ricœur. This book argues that western philosophy has overvalued reason and undervalued imagination since the time of the ancient Greeks. The result has been an impoverishment of our vision of the world, a narrowing of horizons to focus exclusively on questions of actual fact, rather than opening up to a wider horizon of imaginative possibility.

In this, for example, much of traditional philosophy from Aquinas to Kant has been taken up with arguing about the actual existence of a supreme being. Leibniz, however, was one of his students. In Richard's view, the only hope for emancipation is some view of the other than actual. The only hope for life, freedom and domination is in the coming of the Kingdom. This concept of God in fact brings this being back out of the clouds and into human life, a corrective to the metaphysical distortions of western philosophy, and a return to the vision of the divine in the Old Testament.

Richard's second book, Dialogues with Contemporary Thinkers, published last December by Manchester Press, consists of a series of dialogues with leading European thinkers, including Richard's mentor, Ricœur. Among the themes explored is this central theme which emerged in Podlages da Possibility, and which is ultimately traceable back to Nietzsche and Heidegger, that our western philosophical tradition took a wrong turn very early on in its interpretation of the nature of reality or being, and is now dying a slow death. Culture, work, and morality are being eroded in an effacing nihilism from which there appears to be little hope of escape.

Many of the thinkers Richard Kearney spoke to in this book are students of Heidegger (who died in 1976), the greatest philosopher of the 20th century, and are in agreement with Heidegger's central claim that western philosophy distorted both the Greek Enlightenment and the Hebrew Revelation by attempting to weld the two of them into the system of Christian philosophy which sees man as founded on the supreme being, God.

One of the main interviewers, Levinas, is a Jew who is seeking to lay the essential characteristics of the Jewish intellectual tradition which was systematically effected from Christian thought through deliberate repression. He sees Jewish philosophy as based on a concern for the other person, a concern which takes us "beyond being," Ricœur, on the other hand, feels that we need to re-appropriate our own inheritance from the "European-centrim" by a careful critique of our common symbol and language. He is against all dogmatism, and all attempts to dominate others through cultural or even mental supremacy. Ricœur is a proponent of tolerance and respect for others, supremely conscious of the appalling consequences of cultural diseases in the aftermath of the 20th century.

Herbert Marcuse, who died shortly after this interview took place, was a student of Heidegger who went on to become a radical theoretician of social revolution, and in particular of the upheavals of the Sixties. His writings inspired the American student activities as well as the Black power and feminist movements. Angelo Dorigo was one of his students, in Richard's view the man who came across as a dignified, radical intellectual concerned to renew the Marxist critique of capitalism to fit the advanced technological consumer society of the present day.

For Marcuse, the present time is a time of alienation. A one-dimensional technocracy based on power and domination is in control. The only hope for human emancipation lies in small groups of resistance, small areas where freedom and imagination are still possible realities. For Marcuse art has a liberating role here in overcoming repression and giving us new possibilities for human being.

Kearney's dialogues are well-structured and penetrating interviews with noted European intellectuals, which offer us both an accessible introduction to modern continental philosophy, and also a basis for understanding the thought of Kearney himself, a thinker who is very anxious to transform theoretical insights into tools for understanding the complexities of Irish culture and society. He recently edited a book, The Irish Mind (Manchester Press, 1994), which makes an attempt at assessing the Irish intellectual inheritance.

Modern Movements in European Intellectuals. Dogma and Nihilism, by Richard Kearney, published by Manchester University Press, 1989, makes a major contribution to Irish culture and society. His work has had a major impact in Ireland. His programs will be eagerly watched.