

Jonathan Korowicz

**Irish deep culture:
concepts of destiny and fatalism in Irish psychology.**

“The history of this island is a shared history - with different sets of memories - different interpretations of events - and different perspectives on the outcomes of those events. The pages of our shared history deal with a complex set of relationships - giving accounts of the storms and calms - of the victories and defeats - and of the fortunes and misfortunes of the peoples and traditions of this island”.

Speech by the Irish Minister for Defence Mr. Michael Smith T.D. at the Dedication of the Grave of Sergeant Major Cornelius Coughlan Aughavale Cemetry, Westport, Co. Mayo.ⁱ

These words were spoken in August 2004, in the presence of the Ambassador of Great Britain to Ireland and sought to emphasize the cultural ties between Britain and Ireland, their common history and achievements. That the occasion was the commemoration of an Irish Major in the British Army who received the Victoria Cross for military operations carried out in response to the Indian Mutiny of 1857 was not overlooked by the Minister. The irony of forging ties of peace with Britain by referring to a past partnership in suppression of a third party reflects certain underlying features of a peculiar national psychology, which places great emphasis on war as an inherent trait of identity. I intend to explore the theme of war and conflict as expressed in the canon of Irish literature.

Ireland has a rich cultural heritage and Irish society places a high value on artistic creation. Artists' earnings are tax-free and artists themselves play a composite role involving intellectual, magical/religious and political voices. This tradition goes back to the Celtic concept of the three classes of poet: the druids, the 'vates' and the bards.ⁱⁱ There are common themes which run through the Irish literary canon and which emphasize the concept of a great national destiny which sanctifies the past and blesses the future. Irish identity is closely connected with the earth. More precisely, it is connected with the earth itself, what lies beneath the earth and what surrounds the earth. Using Johann Galtung's concept of archetypal bundles or super-syndromes to explain Irish deep culture, we can identify recurring themes, which illustrate a behaviour of entrenchment in national and international relations.

The CGT syndrome: Choseness-Glory-Trauma

“In the name of God and of the dead generations from which she receives her old tradition of nationhood, Ireland, through us, summons her children to her flag and strikes for her freedom.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Thus begins the Proclamation of the Irish Republic read out at the General Post Office, Dublin, on Easter Monday 1916, by a small band of revolutionaries who were quickly defeated and their leaders executed. Their actions as well as the reaction to their punishment became a stimulus to rebellion in the years after and ensured them a place in Irish state lore, which painted their story in terms of sacrifice, salvation and the destiny of Ireland. This destiny, which is both a blessing and a curse, can be found in the countless ballads inspired by the struggle for independence. Amhrán na bhFiann (The Soldiers’ Song) replaced “God Save Ireland” as the marching song of the Irish Volunteers (an Irish Nationalist movement whose members played an active role in the rebellion) before becoming the National Anthem of the Irish Free State. It stresses themes of glory, sacrifice and a great national victory at the cost of the citizens’ blood:

“We’re children of a fighting race,
That never yet has known disgrace,
And as we march, the foe to face,
We’ll chant a soldier’s song.”^{iv}

While the founders of the Irish State settled on the principle of secularism, the Catholic Church continued to exert a strong influence on Irish consciousness. Due to the fact that their religion differed them from their occupiers (Protestant England) as well as due to the central role which spiritual matters had traditionally played in Irish culture, the heroes of Irish resistance often assumed characteristics of their faith. The symbolism is plain (and plainer still in times of conflict when the pulpit has been regularly used as a soapbox for rallying the troops.) Here, the Irish rebel is the Christ figure who redeems the Nation, overcoming death through becoming immortalized in legend. This self-sacrifice receives its apotheosis in the image of the dying Cuchullin, a statue of which was erected in the General Post Office, the scene of the 1916 Rising.^v The political party which took the more hardline attitude to the division of Ireland as a viable alternative to British occupation in 1922 and who demanded a united Ireland are called Fianna Fail (the Soldiers of Destiny), after the Fianna, a semi-mythic band of huntsmen whose adventures throughout tribal Ireland and the underworld are recounted to Irish children to this day. In the Leabhair Gabhala (Book of Invasions), an 11th Century history of ancient Ireland which places biblical and Irish myth alongside each other, Ireland is referred to by the Milesian people as Innisfail (the Island of Destiny).^{vi} In this book, the inhabitants of Ireland and their origins are identified. Beginning with the Formorians who are said to have settled there after the Flood, we are taken through successive waves of peoples, giants and heroes right up to the Milesian invasion. The Milesians are considered the

forefathers of the current Irish inhabitants and yet they were neither Christian nor overtly Celtic. What is interesting here is the idea that the concept of place and not people is emphasized in defining Irishness. The Irish citizen in mythic terms feels himself to be part of a process i.e. one of many races in the same land.^{vii} However, each race tends to overcome, obscure or dominate the previous race. Irishness is thus an experience combining concepts of destiny, suffering, sacrifice and exile/separation. This final component is evident both in the Leabhair Gabhala where the invading tribes are themselves exiles from other lands as well as in the 19th and 20th Centuries where exile is perpetrated on the Irish race for reasons of survival (the Great Famine^{viii}) and psychological reasons (as in the writings of James Joyce – ‘the quintessential exiled writer of the twentieth century, who obsessively relates to his past by distancing himself from it’.^{ix}) Other themes of exile to be found in Irish literature include the *Navagatio Sancti Brendani Abbatus*, which recounts the story of St. Brendan who is sent by God from Ireland to the Underworld, the story of Oisín in Tir na nÓg and even Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels*.^x

DMA Syndrome: Dichotomy, Manichaeism, Armageddon

Having discussed the importance of the earth and what lies around it (i.e. the sea and the theme of exile), we now turn our attention to the deep cultural importance of the underworld in Irish psychology. While stories of fairies, leprechauns and banshees may serve to instil fear in Irish children nowadays, they are vessels of a deeper culture.^{xi} There is an intense dichotomy between the earth and the underworld. The above-mentioned Book of Invasions tells of the Tuath De Danaan (the People of Danu^{xii}), who were the occupiers of Ireland when the Milesians first came. According to the story, the Tuath De Danaan were driven underground where they continued to reside in ‘sidhe’ or fairy mounds and play an influential role in manipulating events in the world above. This dualism with its attendant sense of dominant/recessive elements is reflected in many areas of Irish life. The Tuath de Dannan represent the magical, recessive component in the equation:

Human(Celtic Race)-Historical(1200BC)-Legitimate Rulers(Military Control)
Non-Human(Fairies)-Myth(Pre-history)-Subversive(Magical Interference)

This pattern of split-personality – the overt and the clandestine – is evident in many aspects of Irish culture. On the political-economic-historical-cultural axis, there is the effect of the English occupation, which suppresses Ireland in terms of access to power, access to economic advancement, the right to control and write their own history as well as the right to express the characteristics of their culture openly. One can find in the dominant/recessive structure the absorption of pagan (shamanic) culture by Christianity. According to legend, Ireland’s Patron Saint, St. Patrick, converted the Irish to Christianity using the three-leafed shamrock to explain the mystery of the Holy Trinity (three-in-one). The legend also tells how Patrick banished all the

snakes from Ireland (as an explanation of the zoological puzzle as to why there are snakes in Britain and not in Ireland). Here, the symbolic explanation favours the 'taming of nature' where the pagan is domesticated and controlled, his festivals assimilated and cloaked in the guise of Christian alternatives.^{xiii} An interesting addition is the fact that St. Patrick was born in the fourth century in England. St. George, the Patron Saint of England, is the slayer of dragons and, as in the related tradition of Gilgamesh, Rustavelli's Roustam and Ali, he represents the taming of disorder. Thus, England is complicit in the suppression of pagan Ireland and at the same time is the harbinger of Irish salvation in the form of Christ, whose vocation, wisdom, suffering and final victory form the basis for the new conception of social consciousness in the age of the Anglo-Saxon invasion.^{xiv}

The sense of dominant and recessive layers can also be linked to a certain inferiority complex and even self-persecution complex. The Irish mind, while proud, has been more likely to feel uncomfortable with being dominant within its own community. Irish persons who made a mark within other societies are traditionally given greater praise. It is as though only those who have suffered exile are worthy of their achievements. Thus, John F. Kennedy was/is considered a true Irish hero. When the Irish were given the chance (through the economic success of the 'Celtic Tiger') in recent years to become comfortable with their own achievements without going through the process of poverty, exile and discrimination, the negative results have included a new-found combination of consumerism, protectionism and racism. Other dualisms in Irish recent culture can be found in the factions who fought in the Civil War (1921-23), the very distinct division between the old IRA and the 'new' IRA (the Provisional IRA) as well as the relationship between Ireland's settled community and its 'traveller' (exile) community.

The Civil War followed the signing of the Anglo-Irish Treaty, which granted Ireland the status of Free State with various stipulations including the retention of areas under the Queen's jurisdiction in which the Protestant population was deemed to be predominant. The bitterness of this conflict which, in the tradition of a key Irish epic *Táin Bó Cúalnge* (the Cattle Raid of Cooley), pitted brother against brother and friend against friend created divisions which still exist to this day.^{xv} Each 'side' continues in the form of the two major political parties in the Irish Republic – the above-mentioned *Fianna Fail* (Soldiers of Destiny) and *Fine Gael* ('Family of the Gael'). While the Irish Constitution maintained, in Articles 2 and 3, the aspiration towards reunification with the northern counties, the Civil Rights movement (in which Catholics in Northern Ireland demanded equality in employment, social services and political representation) and the violence, which erupted in Northern Ireland starting in 1968, divided Irish society in the south once again. While the IRA who created the possibility of Irish independence in 1916 were freedom fighters, soldier-poets and, later, reigning statesmen, the newly-reorganized IRA (Provisional IRA) were more difficult to classify and posed the psychological dilemma of how to reconcile freedom with the means of its acquisition.

The Irish 'Traveller' community have continued to have troubled relations with the settled community. They trace their origins back to the Famine, when poor tenant farmers were forced off the land they worked and into an itinerant life.

In place of a conclusion: Why the war in Ulster?

In any long-term conflict situation where people get used to a daily toll of victims, a vicious cycle of retribution, entrenchment and the perpetration of ever-crueller atrocities, a sense of fatalism or disillusionment naturally arises. However, in the case of Ulster, this destiny of sorrow has a precedence in Irish history and myth. While countless battles took place on the territory of Ulster, the designation of the earth itself as being in some way violent can be found in ancient stories and myths. In "The Settling of the Manor of Tara", the division of Ireland into provinces is attributed to a giant named Trefuilngid Tre-eochair and Fintan, son of Bocha. Here, the provinces are named and described according to their 'character'. Ulster's character, according to C. Austin is 'pride, war, conflicts and contentions.'^{xvi} Thus, there is a sense of inevitability about the fighting in Northern Ireland for a mythic already context existed, which makes reasons redundant. In fact, the conflicting sides in the conflict consciously place themselves within the ancient myths. Thus, the war can be viewed as the resurrection of the battle for the White Bull of Cooley. In that legend, Queen Maeb of the Western Province (Connaught) leads an army against the Ulster King. In the contemporary conflict, both the Loyalist (Protestant) and the Republican (Catholic) paramilitaries have used as their emblem the Red Hand of Ulster, i.e. the crest of the O'Neill Family, whose defeat by the English led to successful occupation in the 17th Century. The distinction in symbolism here is that the Loyalists view the hand to mean the territory of Northern Ireland which they are defending against invaders while the Republicans view the territory of Ulster (Northern Ireland's six counties plus three counties which lie in the Irish Republic) as their battle ground.^{xvii} However, Ulster is only part of the whole. The other provinces represent wisdom, poetry, prosperity and leadership. It is the correct use of all these features which reflect the health of the Irish nation. These characteristics together can be used to stabilize society or, if used individually, to subvert and take revenge. The former is the ideal society and the latter is classic Irish subversion in the manner of James Joyce, who gets back at the English for suppressing the Irish voice by changing their language irrevocably. In the words of Carlos Fuentes:

"That James Joyce is indeed a black Irishman, wreaking a vengeance, even wilder than the I.R.A.'s, on the English language from within, invading the territory of its sanitary ego-presumptions with a flood of impure, dark languages flowing from the damned up sources of collective speech, savagely drowning the ego of the traditional speaker and depositing the property of words in everybody, in the total human community of those who speak and have spoken and shall speak".

-- *American Review*, 1975^{xviii}

Any sustainable peace in Ireland must take into account the rich tapestry of potent symbolism which makes up the collective subconscious of the Irish nation. The notion of the fighting Irishmen has deep roots and is closely related to concepts of patriotic duty and individual courage. Any attempts to 'demilitarise' this aspect of Irish deep society will struggle to achieve long-lasting effects. A non-violent Irish future must be based on the qualities of the five provinces (wisdom, poetry, prosperity, war and leadership).

ⁱ http://www.militaryheritagetours.com/info/spch_michaelsmithtd.html

ⁱⁱ "The Bards are singers and poets; the Vates, diviners and natural philosophers; while the Druids, in addition to natural philosophy, study also moral philosophy."

Strabo's *Geographica* (1st century BC).

See: http://www.groveofthegreatdragon.com/Bards_Ovates_Druids.htm

ⁱⁱⁱ For the complete text, see: <http://www.iol.ie/~dluby/proclaim.htm>

^{iv} For the complete text, see: <http://www.irishroots.org/aoh/anthem.htm>

^v Cuchullin is a mythic boy hero and champion warrior of Ulster who plays a major role in the great epic *Tain Bo Cualnge* which survives in the 12th Century Book of Leinster but was probably written down as early as the 7th Century.

^{vi} <http://www.irishclans.com/articles/milesians.html>

^{vii} This concept is reflected in the National Anthem in the second line which refers to Ireland's 'soldiers':

"Some have come from a land beyond the wave"

^{viii} The Great Famine refers to the period during and after the failure of the potato crops 1845-48. The effect was devastating. The Irish population was halved through death and emigration.

^{ix} From the *Reader's Companion to Twentieth Century Writers*, Ed. Peter Parker

http://www.themodernword.com/joyce/joyce_biography.html

Joyce's obsession with his native city and his simultaneous inability to live in it is famously parodied in the writer's play on phonetics: he calls his home city 'Dyoublong' (i.e. 'Do you belong?' instead of Dublin). He models the central character of his novel *Ulysses* on the Wandering Jew who is sent to wander the earth until the Second Coming.

^x This voyage is a Christian version of an earlier bardic tradition of 'imrama', which means a magical oversea voyage, being a recurring theme in Irish Heroic cycles. The story of *Tir na nOg* relates how Oisín, an Irish hero, visits the Land of Eternal Youth. Thinking he has spent only three days there, he returns home to discover that he has in fact been away for three hundred years and his family and friends are long dead.

^{xi} A leprechaun is 'small mischevous elf or spirit in Irish folklore; it is often depicted in literature as a dwarfish bearded old man; - legend tells that if a leprechaun is captured, he will reveal the location of his hidden pot of gold.' Webster's 1913 Dictionary:

<http://www.webster-dictionary.org/definition/leprechaun>

"[Ban'shee], Banshie [Ban'shie], n. [Gael. bean-shith fairy; Gael. & Ir. bean woman + Gael. sith fairy.] A supernatural being supposed by the Irish and Scotch peasantry to warn a family of the speedy death of one of its members, by wailing or singing in a mournful voice under the windows of the house."

Webster's 1913 Dictionary <http://www.hyperdictionary.com/dictionary/banshee>

^{xii} Danu is the mother of many Irish Gods. It is postulated that the pre- and proto- Celts possessed a matriarchal culture. Here is yet another dichotomy which concerns the role of women in Irish society. On the one hand, the early myths give women a strong leadership role. This role gradually changed with the growing influence of Christianity. However, despite the promotion of traditional patriarchal Christian values, individual women have always played an active, leading, revolutionary role in Irish society.

^{xiii} Thus, the solstices and equinoxes, which played such an important role in the rituals and rites of the early Irish inhabitants, were over-written by Christian alternatives. The winter solstice became Christmas and the summer solstice St. John's day. The Spring equinox was supplanted by Easter and the autumn equinox by the Feast of St. Michael.

^{xiv} While one version of the symbolism of the Irish tricolour paints the green, white and orange as Catholic-Peace-Protestant, another interpretation could be Pagan-England (the white flag of St. George minus the)-the Glory of (Protestant) Christ.

^{xv} The theme of union through battle can be found here. Fighting is thus a fundamental unifying force, for in the killing of another, we assume the responsibility for that death. Thus, the hero Ferdia, who is forced by Queen Maeb to do battle with his bosom friend, cries that if he is to be the killer, "*I'll be buried in his grave; May one grave hide me and him!*"

The complete English translation of Joseph Dunn can be viewed at:

<http://vassun.vassar.edu/~sttaylor/Cooley/>

^{xvi} <http://merganser.math.gvsu.edu/myth/uisneach.html>

^{xvii} For a comprehensive list and explanation of the symbols used in Northern Ireland, see:

<http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/images/symbols/>

^{xviii} http://www.themodernword.com/joyce/joyce_quotes.html