

Review

Norman Morrissey. *Dog Latin*. Empangeni: Echoing Green, 2006.

I have only seen one earlier collection of Morrissey's – his slim volume *Seasons* (1999). Therein he revealed his enjoyment and interest in *haiku*. Even the two longer poems in that volume were *haiku*-like, being brief self-contained stanzas grouped under a single title. His new volume, *Dog Latin*, consists of sixty short poems primarily concerned with man and nature. A number of these are *haiku*-like in their brevity (“Edgar on Inclusive Fitness,” “Setting Ratbane,” “Adam Again”), although they too often do not amount to more than post-it like notes. (“This habit / of holding habits to the wind / -me” is the sum total of the poem “Adam Again.”) The epigraph to the whole collection is the final stanza of Robert Frost’s “The Need of Being Versed in Country Things,” which suggests both Morrissey’s interest in the apparently unconsidered minutiae of natural objects and beings, and, it would seem, an admiration of Frost’s deceptively plain, unmannered style.

Morrissey’s talent lies in capturing an image succinctly (for example, “Hatchling” [21]), and such moments are the best in this collection. One of these short intense imagist poems is “Phoenix”:

You could see Spring coming,
The blush rising in the grass gleaming sheenier by the day
On reedbucks’ flanks
-old stardust kindling.

(6)

He is less consistently successful at philosophising in verse. The title of this collection points to the deliberately demotic register which predominates and suits some material more than it does others. The imagery too is often self-consciously mundane. “Wool-Gathering” (22), a six-line poem, is representative of this tendency, which can fall into the merely banal, as

happens in "Triologue for Two Cuckoos and a Cape Robin", the whole of which reads:

Piet my vrou!

Piet *my* vrou!

Piet jull' vrouens!

(7)

This brings credit neither to the volume nor to Morrissey.

Perhaps Morrissey reveals both his preferred approach, and the potential difficulties it might entail, most markedly in the final stanza of "In Our Nature" (6-7), where he claims "but it's in our nature to find echoes in unlike things, / make meanings that are / quite unnatural." Certainly those connections sometimes discover that poetic quintessence – the perceptive insight and the powerful expression thereof – but they are often strained and fail to deliver what Morrissey obviously desires. This is most clearly seen in the disastrous disjunction of register and focus in "A Taste for Things" (17).

Some poems combine this low-level register with an attempt at drawing significant analogies, resulting in mixed and disconcerting juxtapositions as with "Dark Turf" (7-8). "To Be" (12) has a rash mix of registers ("eidectically . . . Forest [sic] Gump's feather"), rather a bathetic ending, and attempts to gain significance through an e.e. cummings-like patterning and use of parentheses. "Chorus Line" (28) is sharply observant of the loeries ("the tones and pitches and little rills and lulls swapping between them"), but is spoilt by the gratuitous mixed references (the "Cleopatrian mask," and the chorus line from the *Moulin Rouge*).

Yet poetry and the poetic spirit is so fragile a plant in this country that one can only salute those who seriously engage with it. And in this volume there are poems which have that ability to open the reader's eyes, mind and imagination. "Homo Ludens" (18) combines a keen observation of the crab and its significance to man with Morrissey's trademark casual register ("my mind's murked") in a very satisfying way.

Perhaps my favourite poem is "The Eland's Gift," which presumably has deliberate echoes of Frost ("The Gift Outright") and conveys an almost Wordsworthian moment of man's awed awareness of the strangeness of the world and the creatures within it. The poem works because the plainness of the expression suits the stark awareness the speaker attains of his "utterly vulnerable" state of being.

The apostrophe does yeoman service in Morrissey's casual register – indeed conflation rule – which probably explains why an errant one (“50's Colonial” in the poem “Romance” [15]) escapes the editorial eye, which should also have picked up the incorrect “perques” as the abbreviation of “perquisites” in the same line.

These poems are short enough to appeal to even the most attention-challenged reader and one hopes this volume will persuade reticent readers that books of poems need not be daunting. Meanwhile one trusts that Morrissey will persevere and build on his obvious talents.

WORK CITED

Morrissey, Norman. 1999. *Seasons*. Alice: Lovedale Press.

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