

Review by Nick Meihuizen of

***Dog Latin* by Norman Morrissey**

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Versed in country things

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The epigraph for this book is the final stanza of Robert Frost's wonderful "The need of being versed in country things", the last two lines of which, reflecting on the burnt-down farmhouse which sheltered the phoebes or flycatchers, read: "One had to be versed in country things / Not to believe the phoebes wept". In Morrissey's book, the link between human and non-human life seems to be affirmed by one who is versed in country things. Sounding Frost's note as an epigraph, Morrissey announces a connection with it, a like-mindedness, but also a re-examination of the notion in order to weigh its truth. Morrissey offers the poetic fruits of his experience in the face of Frostian (on the face of it) disbelief, though Frostian disbelief appears to exist in tension with a strong will *not* to be versed in country things. After all, if there was "nothing sad" for the birds in having the farmhouse burn down, why should they yet be seen to "rejoice in the nest they kept" – clearly, from Frost's point of view, they participate in emotions recognizable by human beings. And,

not to be too whimsical one hopes, is it not a short step from seeing phoebe, the flycatcher, as "Phoebe", a human girl with the Grecian substance and bearing inherent in her name? Phoebe was also a name for Artemis, who held sublunary life beneath her sway — the implications are evident. There is continuity, there is unity in experience. Morrissey is no more sure of country common sense than is Frost, and so can likewise evoke the mystery of this continuity and unity.

Despite the Frostian epigraph, Morrissey, a fine Yeats scholar too, does not align himself with poetic tradition in any obvious way. Not for him the "ancient salt" of Yeatsian form (Yeats, 1961: 522); his voice is personal, confessional, almost *informal*, though one should not underestimate the care which goes into structuring this informality. It is the structuring of an aphoristic vision, which clinches observations taken from life, compresses them within a few syllables, makes dense the matter put before us, and makes us aware that to achieve this density, this distillation, years of experience must have been slowly filtered through the mind for a long time. As readers will find, this type of linguistic serviceability, this "Dog Latin" of a sort, functions beyond the human sphere (I will not spoil the reader's treat by saying anything more about the book's eponymous poem).

Take the very first poem of the book, "Settler Country" (1). "A poem about the Eastern Cape with a political comment", one thinks, and indeed the first incident depicted (politically inflected) is set in the Eastern Cape. But even this incident, about "an APLA commando" which "took out the bar at the Highgate Hotel", is framed by the ominous crashing of "a coucal" into the speaker's car, widening the lens of concern from the start. By the time we read the second section of the poem about "bickering sunbirds", we realize that "settler country" is a notion which underlies all of existence: "— a fight over territory; / the old story". What on

earth does not comprise a border of something, whether among European farmers, Khoi valleys, Xhosa cattle, ants, even "blades of grass clashing for light"? While telling of a universal condition, however, the poem also questions issues of land ownership and land rights, as well as an unthinking acceptance of the opprobrium attached to being a "settler".

It is the last two lines of the poem which share with the aphoristic density of much else in this book. Aphorisms, of course, teach, and there is something didactic about Morrissey's life lessons couched in aphoristic form, but this sort of didacticism, even if we bear in mind Keats's abhorrence, is powerfully poetic because of the verbal grace that is achieved in its percolation of experience and understanding:

no inch of land that's not a border
— settler country.

Morrissey's Frostian unity between human and natural sensibility sometimes takes on paradoxical forms, as in "Mother Africa" (3), a poem which celebrates the *Schotia afra*, commonly known as the karoo boer-bean tree. This is as powerful a political commentary on South Africa as any rendered in more explicit terms. The sympathy between humankind and nature seems to make these particular trees flower through summer and winter at the birth of the new South Africa, "as if the earth were rejoicing". But in another twist of the political kaleidoscope we view a different image, from the perspective of those who have lost power, the "heirs of men who took horse agin Kitchener", and "the trees wept blood without ceasing". The conclusion of the poem affirms the type of empathy questioned by Frost, though the scale is continental. The specific narrative transforms the cliché of "mother Africa": "Africa has a heart that knows us all / — despite everything." That "— despite everything" intrigues me: it is a throwaway generalization from one point of view, but from

another tells of the type of support and forgiveness one only finds in a mother's breast, and so while evoking a multitude of sins also seals the notion of reconciliation, of redemption. Of Mother Africa.

This is what Morrissey's poetry can achieve on the level of individual words and expressions, a shifting of the verbal commonplace into another register entirely. Another good example is to be found in "Friar Lawrence Meditates" (10), which tells of the need to pick certain plants at the right time, "at the right phase of sun and moon", for them to have curative properties; "a few hours off beam" and they will be impotent. The "off beam" in conjunction with the phases of sun and moon is just the right touch to suggest moving beyond the range of the beams of heavenly influence; a colloquialism takes on a new life. And in "Last Spark" (29) where a dying shrew seeks warmth from the speaker's sleeve, is the play of words not extended by an implicit modulation (a sequence in a dog Latin-type declension) from "tinder" into "tender": "- just a last spark's ache for tinder".

The poem which follows "Mother Africa", "Field Report" (4), also questions being complacently versed in country things. The narrative is about a Parks Board employee, who is annoyed by the sentimental field reports of his young colleagues:

They can't see a cheetah pull down an impala
without telling me
the impala was afraid!
It's a different species
- you don't know what an impala feels

The response of "a young man fresh from the bush" affirms the strength of intuition: "He wouldn't know, would he? / - poor bastard!" What is at issue is not so much what is true or false about the case, but either an extension or a withholding of common sympathy for life on earth. I think the Frost poem, even while questioning sentimentalism, also affirms the

power of extending sympathy beyond the merely human. What is true or false cannot be known in scientific terms, whatever being versed in country things tells us; which does not prevent us from being absorbed by what is "palpably unknown" (4), as Morrissey puts it in "As far as it goes".

Extended sympathy can also be expressed as a practical empathy not based on imagined or real mirrorings. One quite often gets the sense that Morrissey needs this empathy, it gives him energy and life, as in "Without them" (5), a poem about acrobatic, "zippy" starlings:

and I can take their life for my own.
I'd not have that zest
without them.

"Proxies" (5) also tells of our complementary need for animal life, for this life's responses to what should move us but perhaps doesn't. A samango monkey "barks" with "shock" as the speaker fells a "great pine":

one of my proxies
(hawk, cat, snake, hound)
that think
where I've no mind of my own.

But then Morrissey, who hears the "first phrase" of Brahms's "Lullaby" (6) in a cuckoo's call ("In our nature"), also questions our tendency to impose "meanings", bringing us back to the initial Frostian tension of the book:

but it's in our nature to find echoes in unlike things,
make meanings that are
quite unnatural.

This is very different from other poems already mentioned, but especially from the affirmation in one not yet mentioned, "The Eland's Gift" (19-20), where the speaker is "watched", "unmoving" by an old Eland cow: "no-one has ever seen me that clearly". This is surely an assumption of the egotistical sublime, the self in all

things which is recognized by all things; a *negation* of being versed in country common-sense? The Renaissance scholar, Thomas M Greene, tells of how poems enact “the way a sensibility defines itself through performances of perception” in order to “dramatize the speaker’s effort to unify an emergent self which is always struggling to acquire coherence” (Greene 2002: 15). He quotes Emerson: “Since every thing in nature answers to a moral power, if any phenomenon remains brute and dark it is because the corresponding faculty in the observer is not yet active” (ibid.). Morrissey’s shiftings are defining “performances of perception” that spurn simplistic “coherence”, but that indeed “answer to a moral power”, where everything that lives is holy. There is a “faculty” in him which is “active” at such moments as in “The Eland’s gift”, which illuminates experience, and where the distinction between the observer and the observed does not matter. Again, whether the speaker deludes himself or not in writing “no-one has ever seen me that clearly” is beside the point. Poems such as “In our nature” and “Habit” (22–3) qualify his statement anyway, just as Frost’s inconsistencies regarding the emotions of the phoebes qualify the final two lines of “The need of being versed in country things”. The affirmation of the “moral power” is what is important.

This “moral power” has its darker side. This we see in “Maureen” (16–17), and especially in “To be” (12), a poem through which we move like flies in marmalade, so difficult is it for the speaker “to be” in it. The poem retains much of its mystery, but in the end it is clear that the speaker’s choice is “to be”, as a “sun” which could easily slip back, it seems, is “pulled . . . up, slowly” by the speaker. The denizen of nature against which the speaker measures himself in this case is a “crow”, once expectantly hovering on the edges of the “not to be”. The final expression of “empathy” here is wry, reflecting (from albeit opposing positions) a shared sense of the passing of the “not to be”:

and when a crow creaked up the hill
to curse me for not being the roadkill he’d expected
I had to admire his empathy.

Not a predictable empathy, but reflective of a pure morality based on the choice of the moment and its consequences as they occur to a stripped consciousness.

There is stripping, a paring away, of the complementary need previously referred to in “Progress” (14):

I loved hadidahs once
for Thoth’s sake
– the Egyptian mystery;

now, a pair at sunset
– soon to be lovers –
is enough;

someday
just blood beating the wind
will do.

The hieroglyphic mystery of the birds is peeled away to reveal the present emotional sense of the birds as lovers; further, the poem anticipates a future where biological reality is reduced to essence and force.

But the poem of empathy (so to speak) which touches me most is “Homo ludens” (18), which describes a crab (an extreme embodiment of the otherness of nature perhaps) obviously “playing” with a leaf. The description is light and sure, and full of life. Here is the crab playing with the leaf:

pouncing, worrying it with his claws,
letting it go in mock disdain
to bob and eddy round again

– till back he’d dance, spring
like a kitten in a high freak of fancy:

This exemplary, minutely observed and subjectively involved description contrasts quite shockingly with the subsequent human perspective: “seeing that strange, brittle frame and

stalked, / stony eyes". But then there is a conscious decision to return to crab world and though the terms are (necessarily) human, something fine is achieved:

— how do you look from a crab's head,
call that terribly simple scene home?

This is enough for me. The final lines (although the "seeping" of "something warmer" is admirable) make explicit what the poem already embodies:

but now
something warmer
seeps
from that dour-clawed world to my own.

The book concludes with "Beads" (29), a talisman poem which sets its own continuities. It is African indeed, but other tradition is incorporated, as San head-beads, prehistoric (or ahistorical) "charms against night" are also seen as "a rosary". Charms against the darkness. A good idea in contemporary South Africa, and perhaps anywhere in the world in these times:

When the hyaena comes snuffing
this odd string ground in my head
keeps him wary:

tokens that I've been here and kept trying,
charms against night,
a rosary.

The diminuendo of the conclusion, its typographical scaling down, brings finality and peace. But it is the fourth line which complicates what might otherwise seem the drawing of obvious connections: "tokens that I've been here and kept trying". Here is human presence and effort of the type found throughout this book, the verities of honest existence which (in a typical Morrissey shift) imbue string and rosary with much more than their simple syllables (sapped by anthropology and religion) can say.

Works cited

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