



THE
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'Lost love' – *Triptych*, by Norman Morrissey. Empangeni: Echoing Green Press, 2008. x + 105pp. ISBN: 978-0-9802501-5-2.

Reviewed by Colin Gardner

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Norman Morrissey has been publishing verse for two decades, and with this volume he deserves to be recognised as one of our accepted poets – one of those writers whom it is clearly enjoyable and illuminating to read.

Morrissey writes in a mode that is not particularly fashionable today, one that comes down from Whitman and Lawrence. We find ourselves being spoken to, in an easy conversational voice, in a register that is or appears to be not far from prose, but is in fact carefully structured, with the meaning concentrated, many of the words vivid and resonant, and the rhythms giving a quiet music to the motions of the mind and heart. Morrissey's voice is less confident than Lawrence's, far less apt to proclaim (not that I wish to criticise Lawrence); instead he probes, meditates, questions, and the last lines of the poems, though they are often tentative, sometimes seem as much of a surprise to the speaker as to the reader.

Morrissey's poems – one feels at times like using Lawrence's word 'pansies': flowers, but also *pensées* (thoughts) – are mostly autobiographical, so much so that one's interest is at times drawn strongly to the immediate human realities of the narrative. Of course all poetry, and perhaps all literary writing, is to some degree autobiographical. But straight autobiography is a different genre from poetry, and on the whole it is a somewhat lesser genre; poetry usually tries to talk to us about ourselves and about life in general rather than about the author and his or her particular circumstances, though all these can be obliquely generalized (and I suppose it could be said that almost all reading is autobiographical too). Writing explicitly autobiographical poems is a risky undertaking, however: the poet has to ask himself, and we have to ask too, whether he has succeeded (like, say, the earlier Wordsworth, or the Serote of the apartheid era) in making himself a sufficiently representative figure, someone whose experiences can move as well as interest the reader. On the whole, Morrissey seems to me to pass this test well. In a few pieces autobiography seems to overshadow or perhaps attenuate poetry, but through most of the volume the reader's sympathetic imagination is fully engaged.

The biggest event offered by the volume – an event and its personal consequences evoked powerfully, passionately but not self-pityingly in the longish first poem, ‘Folly’ – is a painful divorce. Morrissey is in his fifties, has had a breakdown and has had to give up his (academic) job, and a year or two after his recovery his wife of thirteen years moves out, finds another man. The poet is hurt to almost unutterable depths, but he always speaks of and to his ex-wife with sensitivity and concern. Many of the poems in the volume, and most of the more obviously memorable ones, fan out from this first poem, this central event. Other poems, many of them short, deal with a variety of often related themes, including depression and poetry itself.

Morrissey’s tragedy of ‘lost love’ (as Graves called it) plays itself out in a variety of directions. Here is one of the shorter poems:

That

I read you a marital riot-act,
 hit you with all I had
 to win you back
 – and you’d have given everything up for me,
 closed down into a dutiful marriage, you’d have done that:

 but then I saw you
 – a girl not yet forty
 living by rote, keeping any magic
 tucked under the mat till it tripped you too late at fifty –

 and I couldn’t let you do it.

A strong feature of the volume is the way in which the powerful feelings and acute observations, channelled into a delicately dynamic form, make up the foreground behind which lurks a world of previous art. The very title, *Triptych*, evokes subtly structured medieval art, and the three sections into which the volume is divided – alluded to on the front cover as ‘disintegration, revival and blessing distilled’ – hint at the three parts of the *Divine Comedy* by Dante, who is mentioned several times. Other poets make brief appearances too, and there are a number of submerged quotations or oblique allusions – for example Wordsworth’s ‘that inward eye /Which is the bliss of solitude’ becomes the ‘inward eye /which is the curse of solitude’. Morrissey also succeeds in a number of poems in reanimating Greek mythological figures.

Even more striking, perhaps, is the role of nature in the poet’s psyche and within the poems. He lives in the Hogsback, and is a country person through and through. The poems are peopled (I use the word almost literally) with the constellations, trees, plants and small creatures, particularly birds. The birds tap on his window pane and on his mind, and build their nests; they seem to participate in his grief, and it is through them

partly, or the truths of living that they in various ways embody, that he finds himself moving gropingly but grittily towards some sort of rebirth, some degree of emotional and spiritual equilibrium. The process of healing, he stresses several times, cannot be forced: it must be something 'natural'.