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Nicholas Meihuizen

Reviews *Triptych* by Norman Morrissey (Echoing Green Press, 2008)

The title reflects most obviously on the three parts of the book, 'Travels in Tartarus', 'Mosaic', and 'Tinctures', but also suggests the significance of the triad in a life, of things 'coming in threes' or structured in threes, physically, spiritually, symbolically. 'Disintegration, Revival & Blessing Distilled', is the triad offered by the subtitle on the wonderful cover of this book (a carefully wrought amalgam of heart, flames, flowers, roots, birds and butterfly). More than any other local work I've read, the book reminds me of the confessional poetry of Robert Lowell; not an extravagant claim if all things are considered in due proportion and if a helpful pattern of

a type is thereby arrived at. For instance, and most obviously, certain general points that Seamus Heaney made about Lowell back in 1978 apply equally to Morrissey today; Heaney wrote of the 'honesty and daring' with which Lowell lived through 'private trauma' in his poetry (1980: 222). Many writers, I suppose, exhibit daring enough, but honesty, in the case of the confessional work, is another matter, and it requires a particular type of daring, the daring to face one's shadow, one's darker self, with a steady, unflinching gaze, and this not for the sake of personal indulgence or public display, but because one recognises that in this self and its experiences is a rare beauty which needs to be articulated. Honesty, in such a setting, is the force of a purificatory fire that leaves the subject-matter being worked over free of the extraneous conceit, subterfuge and the type of sad melodrama confessional writing can all too often lapse into. What remains is the bare line, finely wrought, rendered with the precision and economy of a Zen brush-stroke. Of course, as Lowell knew, therapy has a place in this process, but therapy is only a part of the matter, for an inarticulate moan, tears, or laughter can be therapeutic. What lies beyond personal and private therapy is the ability to communicate the shadows of one's life in a way that is readable and satisfying to whatever the senses are that poetry appeals to. The instrument that these senses hear must be carefully tuned; a single false note in a line and one's efforts in the whole come to nothing.

As Heaney also recognised, Lowell's attempts to live-in-the-moment in his verse (largely through his latter-day commitment to following the movements of the spoken voice, 'free' but 'not footless', as Heaney puts it (*ibid.*)) are qualified by his historical sense of things—the weight of time and events, both personal and public—which surfaces in books such as *The Dolphin* and *Life Studies*. But for all his striving to be a poet of the moment, Lowell, actually, is not. Much poetry today, of course, including that of Morrissey, follows the same movements of the spoken voice to which Lowell was committed; but while the spoken voice in Lowell takes its bearing from historical vision, that in Morrissey, for all its intensity and craftsmanship, takes its bearing from a more casual (truly 'momentary') register, that arose, it seems to me, in the 1960s, and was mediated largely through American culture; it is inspired by, perhaps, but is not as colloquially extravagant as, the language of the beat generation, that of Kerouac, Ginsberg, or, slightly later, Richard

Brautigan. This is not to say that his work is derivative, as Morrissey has discovered (or uncovered) a clearly recognisable voice of his own. Nor is it to say that this voice is not South African. It is; but not obviously so. It is a voice with which I am intimately familiar, having grown up in the same environment at roughly the same time, when the youth of the day subscribed to a universalism premised on the American sources outlined above, and their more popular extensions in music. No doubt there was a considerable quantity of innocence and naivety involved in the absorbing and displaying of this influence, but it led to one important cultural fact (in a time of growing cultural isolation): we saw ourselves as part of the world as a whole, and reacted to life and all its demands and problems as inhabitants of that world, rather than as, specifically, South Africans. I find the voice that expresses this universal right to universalism (as it were) in Morrissey to be unforced, true to its provenance, and I treasure it, quite frankly, for that reason.

The poems in *Triptych* use the coherent syntax of a particular consciousness which has seen the 'worst' that is 'pitched past pitch of grief', in that it has experienced, precisely, not only grief, but what is worse: the dead numbness of Tartarus indeed. The poems ring against each other and across each other in a developing, interconnected narrative, and if the confessional subject-matter thus baldly described seems hardly appealing to the reader, this narrative intrigues and binds, drawing the reader on, until a point is reached where one's own satisfaction in the material presented is recognised. That such bleak matter should be satisfying is a credit to Morrissey's art, where a fineness of sensibility and candidness of purpose lead us through shadowlands we can all surely recognise:

It's not easy,
 keeping our souls' welfare
 as we're blown about the genome's weathercock,
 faithful and faithless together as we must be
 as blood stings and shivers at the question that ties and
 cuts loose
 so the chance to still-out a new liquor against the winter
 always lurking

might be taken,
the seed that never yet was
be set to new advantage,

as our hearts break bonds and themselves
in the obedience that splits our cells beyond themselves,
children
to carry on the edge of living

against the grain,
against our wishes,

love-struck to the end
so the end may never come. (*From 'Folly', 5-10*)

These sombre lines are exemplary of the book as a whole, where the possessive pronoun of community is beleaguered by the pressures of existence that force what is singular (and solitary, isolated) into relief, and where the stations of a life (repeated or implied throughout the book) comprise care of 'souls', the capriciousness of the 'genome', the antithetical binary of 'faithful and faithless', the 'stinging' quality of that most intimate substance which is one's 'blood', and the distillation of a comforting 'liquor' against the onslaught of a symbolic 'winter'. Other repeated elements are 'seeds', 'hearts', 'cells', 'children' and, overarching all, love. But while love is so prominent in this mix, the final lines of the extract acknowledge that life 'carrying on the edge of living' 'against the grain' and 'against our wishes' is an inevitable condition, and that while being 'love-struck' brings infinity blazing into the head, so to speak, the life-strategy it implicitly betokens is flawed, is doomed to failure. And yet what might emerge once the bleak 'winter' is past (albeit for a short season) is feelingly rendered in other poems in the book ('Tor Doon', 'Breath', 'Content', 'Prime'), might even be retrieved from distant memory ('Love Look').

This book is luminously written, in my view, but it is not an easy book to read; there is no easy comfort to be had within its covers, and yet a type of comfort is to be had—that which is communicated to us by a

consciousness we recognise to have 'come through', to whatever extent and for however brief a period of time. For what that consciousness passes on to us is the sense of a self clarified by antinomic realms of experience, as Dante was after passing through three realms of the soul, to emerge irradiated by Heaven and the Angelic Host, but who remained Dante yet, in all the folly of his humanity, the humbling yet ennobling folly of humanity we each of us share.

Reference: Seamus Heaney, *Preoccupations*, London, 1980.