



Morrissey

THE PAGEANT OF HIS
BLEEDING HEART

GAVIN HOPPS

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His Bleeding Heart

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NEW YORK • LONDON

2009

The Continuum International Publishing Group Inc
80 Maiden Lane, New York, NY 10038

The Continuum International Publishing Group Ltd
The Tower Building, 11 York Road, London SE1 7NX

www.continuumbooks.com

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A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

Printed in the United States of America

9780826418661

For Liane—for what it's worth



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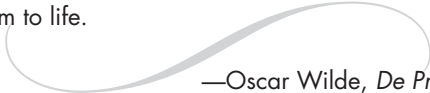
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If life be, as it surely is, a problem to me, I am no less a problem to life.



—Oscar Wilde, *De Profundis*

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PREFACE



There were all sorts of reasons for *not* writing this book: the perennial accusation of dancing to architecture; the parlous results of previous attempts to write about Morrissey's lyrics; the blokeish piety that furtively polices discussions of popular music; and the peculiar elusiveness of its object of study.¹ There were two reasons for persisting: firstly, love; and secondly, agreement with the counterobjection in defence of criticism articulated by Friedrich Schlegel: 'If some mystical art lovers who think of every criticism as a dissection and every dissection as a destruction of pleasure were to think logically, then "wow" would be the best criticism of the greatest work of art.'² I believe it is both possible and worthwhile to say more than 'wow.'

The aim of the book is, quite simply, to argue that Morrissey is a significant artist, working in a medium that still tends to be thought of as trivial. In doing so, I compare his work to that of a number of canonical writers—principally Larkin, Beckett, Betjeman, Wilde, Hardy and Christina Rossetti—who are invoked alongside a range of more familiar influences, such as punk, glam rock, the New York Dolls, Patti Smith, George Formby and the *Carry On* films. I also consider his work in the light of larger cultural traditions and critical theories—such as aestheticism, romanticism, camp, the carnivalesque and deconstruction. This is unusual for a book on popular music, but then Morrissey is an unusual artist.³ A word of explanation is therefore in order.

Morrissey is undoubtedly the most literary singer in the history of British popular music, and he has always conspicuously related his

1. Whilst I have found the existing studies of Morrissey's work disappointing, to put it soberly, there are numerous articles and shorter discussions to which I am indebted. Most prominent amongst these is the work of Michael Bracewell, Simon Reynolds, Armond White, Nadine Hubbs, Nabeel Zuberi and John Harris.

2. Schlegel, *Philosophical Fragments*, p. 7.

3. According to Pat Reid, Morrissey is 'the greatest lyricist in the English language since the Second World War,' and has 'probably had a more profound effect on British minds than any novelist, poet, playwright or film-maker of his generation. . . . By this I mean Morrissey is a serious artist, worthy of the kind of critical scrutiny usually reserved for poets like Ted Hughes or Philip Larkin, novelists such as Martin Amis, playwrights like Noël Coward and Joe Orton' (Reid, *Morrissey*, p. 8).

work to other artistic traditions (he has referred to himself as a 'poet' and frequently speaks about pop songs as literature;⁴ he cites Oscar Wilde as his greatest influence, and when asked in 2006, 'who do you admire lyrically?' he replied: 'Nobody in pop or rock. Elsewhere, the poet John Betjeman';⁵ he alludes in his lyrics to Virginia Woolf, George Eliot, Shelagh Delaney, Herman Melville, Graham Greene, Elizabeth Smart, Keats, Yeats and Pier Paolo Pasolini, to name but a few; his sleeve designs pay homage amongst others to Andy Warhol, Truman Capote, Jean Cocteau and Alain Delon; he has begun concerts with excerpts from Prokofiev as well as readings from John Betjeman and Maya Angelou; he has read out Proust at the start of a Luxuria concert; and has sung in front of a forty-foot portrait of Edith Sitwell). To restrict the consideration of his significance as an artist to what went before and came after him in the world of popular music is therefore to efface the continuities he self-consciously establishes and neglect a range of interpretative contexts which help us to appreciate his cultural importance.

In tandem with this widening of the customary focus, the book involves a countervailing emphasis upon close reading. This is also unusual for a book on popular music. However, if Morrissey is 'a serious artist,' and if a major element of that art is linguistic, we might reasonably expect his lyrics to repay this kind of attention. The underlying purpose of such close reading has been helpfully explained by one of its greatest practitioners. Speaking of what prompted his exquisite linguistic analyses of poetry in the preface to *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, William Empson comments as follows:

I felt sure that the example was beautiful and that I had, broadly speaking, reacted to it correctly. But I did not at all know what had happened during this 'reaction'; I did not know why the example was beautiful. And it seemed to me that I was in some cases partly able to explain my feelings to myself by teasing out the meanings of the text.⁶

The close readings of Morrissey's lyrics that follow are likewise rooted in a reaction to something 'beautiful' or aesthetically significant, which is accompanied by a kind of itch—a reflexive inquisitiveness

4. In his foreword to Toni Visconti's autobiography, he speaks of Marc Bolan's 'poetry,' the 'musical literacy' of David Bowie and the 'versifying' of Ron Mael of Sparks, who he claims 'introduced a new style of pop poetry' (*Bowie, Bolan and the Brooklyn Boy*, pp. 9 and 10).

5. True-To-You website, Questions and Answers, January 4, 2006.

6. Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, p. x.

about this reaction—which prompts an attempt ‘to explain my feelings to myself by teasing out the meanings of the text.’ In Morrissey’s case, the ‘text’ obviously includes a range of extraverbal elements—such as his voice, his appearance, his persona and the music (indeed, there is nothing outside the text)—but the basic principle still holds. These are the ways in which I attempt to exhibit his significance as an artist.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS



My first debt is to the Research Councils UK and Trevor Hart at the University of St. Andrews for the Academic Fellowship which made the writing of this book possible. I am also greatly indebted to David Barker at Continuum for his advice, patience and faith in the project. I would like to thank Angela Chnapko for her expert copyediting of the final manuscript and Max Novick for overseeing the book's production. Thanks as well to Paul Slattery for permission to use the cover image, and Gabriella Page-Fort for her work on this. Mark Elliott and Paul Curtis read and commented helpfully on early drafts of certain chapters, for which I am very grateful. For advice on more particular matters, I wish to express my gratitude to Paul Baker, Paul Bishop, Philip Davis, Steve Holmes, Mark Nixon and Marina Warner. I also owe thanks to the students with whom I have discussed such subjects—at the University of Aachen, Lady Margaret Hall and the University of St. Andrews. For their encouragement and support during the long evolution of the book, I wish to thank Helen Barr, David Brown, Geoffrey Davis, Niall Fox, Peter Hawkins, Chris Jones, Marie-Chantal Killeen, Pete Marsden, Andrew Palmer, Dirk Prinz, Alan Rawes, Kathrin Schödel, Jane Stabler, Dale Townshend and Cornelia Wächter. I am indebted more than I can say to Bernard Beatty, who cares little for pop music, but who taught me to think. Above all, I want to thank Michael Campbell for twenty-five years of conversation which have informed the writing of this book.

St. Mary's College
February 2008

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INTRODUCTION



Saving Eccentricity

There is no such thing in life as normal.

—*The Youngest Was The Most Loved*

A Taste of Honey—the film to which Morrissey's lyrics most frequently allude—begins with a game of netball in which a harried and inept Rita Tushingham struggles to join in, followed by a sympathetically hectic camera and ironized by a cartoon musical score. The opening dialogue, afterwards in the girls' changing room, runs as follows:

- You're not much good at netball, are you, Jo? [Tushingham's character]
- No—I'm bad on purpose.
- Are you going dancing tonight?
- I can't.
- You never go anywhere, do you?
- I haven't got any clothes to wear, for one thing. And for another . . .
- What?
- We might be moving home again.
- Like a couple of gypsies, you and your mother.
- So what!

It's remarkable how many features of Morrissey's art are prefigured in this short exchange. The notion of being 'bad on purpose'—of turning an ineptitude into a virtue—lies at the centre of the singer's early persona. The series of negations—'No,' 'can't,' 'never,' 'haven't got'—calls to mind the singer's incorrigible no-saying, whilst the pause after 'I can't' bespeaks of a paralysing force invisibly in play and puts one in mind of the unnameable, 'excessive' and ingenious darkness

2 Morrissey

that makes itself felt throughout his work. And finally—leaving aside the more explicit allusions—the notion of being a ‘gypsy,’ a wanderer, of ‘moving home again,’ which strangely coexists with a sense of ‘never going anywhere,’ is one of the most recurrent themes in Morrissey’s lyrics.

Let us consider another exchange, this time involving Morrissey himself. On *Later . . . with Jools Holland*, in May 2004, in a last-ditch attempt to get the profoundly embarrassed and awkward Morrissey to play the game and take part in the interview, Holland falls back on the apparently foolproof conventions of the participatory joke:

Holland: Knock, knock!

Morrissey: I’m not joining in.

Holland: Oh go on, please!

Morrissey: [to laughing audience] You can join in. [laughter] No, Jools, I refuse to open the door.

Holland: That’s very good, that’s very clever. You don’t even know who it is!

Morrissey: I’m not curious.

This short exchange reveals a lot about Morrissey. It reveals, for instance, that he’s witty and slippery and remains in character even when he’s offstage. It also suggests that central to this ‘character’ is a not-joining-in or a refusal to make friends with everyday experience—a being ‘bad on purpose,’ one is tempted to say. Perhaps most interestingly of all, though, what it reveals is that his not-joining-in is a double gesture which subverts and paradoxically *takes part in* the game. That is to say, in making a joke *of* the joke—which lays bare but nonetheless relies upon its conventions—his refusal is itself a sort of ‘knock, knock’ joke and a continuation of its tradition. These two snippets of awkward dialogue illustrate some of the central subjects considered in this book.

Awkwardness, refusal and not-joining-in are hardly a promising basis for an artist. However, it was by standing in its midst and yet refusing to take part that Morrissey thrust a wedge into the spokes of the complacently turning wheel of popular music, and out of this disturbance fashioned his art. It is likewise his awkwardness—his not-fitting-in—that paradoxically resuscitates the very tradition it subverts. This is partly because his refusal of the escapist morphine of 1980s New Pop was based upon a conviction that popular music

could be a space where one might reflect upon the most urgent realities, irrespective of whether they were messy, embarrassing or unwieldy—as of course most urgent realities are. (The space doesn't need to be large—think of the Psalms—but it needs to be open.) And it was partly because in speaking 'eccentrically'—from a decentred space of nonbelonging—Morrissey's art of awkwardness reclaimed popular music as a genuinely countercultural force and the voice of dysfunction and alienation.

The underlying claim of this study, then, is that Morrissey is a superlatively 'disturbing' artist, whose greatest virtue is his awkwardness. This appears to be consonant with the singer's view of himself as 'ringleader of the tormentors.' When asked, for instance, how he would like to be remembered, he replied: as 'Manchester's answer to the H-bomb.'¹ When the subject of his career came up in another interview, he interjected: 'Is that what I've had? A career? You make it sound like I went down to the Job Centre and asked if they had any vacancies for "dire troublemaker."'² And when asked if he had thought about life after fame, he said: 'One way or another, I will always be somewhere just skating about the edges of global fame, pestering people and throwing glasses.'³

This 'disturbance' is obviously an aesthetic matter, and the study examines the variegated ways in which Morrissey's work has had a seismic effect within the world of popular music. But it is also, importantly, an ideological matter, for these tremors affect and are reciprocally informed by a much wider disturbance that isn't limited to the aesthetic sphere. His work, for instance, intersects with contemporary debates about gender and sexuality, 'essentialism' and the discursive constitution of identity; his propensity towards irony, camp and linguistic play bespeaks an affinity with 'poststructuralist' thought on the nature of the sign; the recent turn towards the religious in his work ties in with a wider tendency to contest the sovereignty of an unreflective and complacent secularism; and his radical antipathy towards notions of 'normality'—as explicitly stated ('There is no such

1. *Uncut*, August 1988.

2. *NME*, May 18, 1991.

3. Reynolds, *Bring the Noise*, p. 83. Two recent prose pieces in which Morrissey reflects on his life before The Smiths confirm this impression. In 'We Are Your Thoughts,' his contribution to Linder Sterling's *Works 1976–2006*, he writes: '[Linder and I] both somehow knew that our presence on earth was trouble enough for those around us' (p. 101); and in the foreword to Toni Visconti's autobiography, he remarks: 'Many of the early records bearing Toni Visconti's name made me eager to get out into the world—if only to agitate' (*Bowie, Bolan and the Brooklyn Boy*, p. 9).

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thing in life as normal') and as evinced in the persistent 'eccentricity' of his art—is the corollary of contemporary philosophies of difference. All of which makes his work thoroughly postmodern.



Writing about Morrissey feels a little like Monty Python's 'Spanish Inquisition' sketch, as one is forever having to back up and begin again to take in some additional, often contradictory perspective. For this reason, the study begins in a sense *before* the beginning, as Morrissey puts it in 'Maladjusted,' by addressing various general issues which affect what things mean and how they mean. In other words, it's necessary to say something about 'the pageant' before we can speak about 'his bleeding heart.'

Broadly speaking, the first three chapters are concerned with the former, and focus on such things as the singer's persona, extra-lyrical aspects of his work (his voice, his appearance, the performance of meaning and the meaning of performance) and a range of destabilizing elements, which contribute to the radical elusiveness of his work. (In particular, attention is focused on such things as the songs' advertisement of their own artifice, their playing with signifiers, their self-reflexive gestures, their cartoon ontology and their deployment of mobile or equivocal voices.) Chapters 4 and 5 then take up the subject of 'his bleeding heart' and focus on darkness and light, respectively.

More specifically, chapter 1 is concerned with the formation, function and peculiar status of the singer's persona, which is born of his lyrics and everything he does,⁴ but which also *reflexively affects* his work. Crucially, his persona is something which doesn't stand still and is continually evolving. Nevertheless, it was decisively shaped by the musical and ideological context of the 1980s, in which it emerged (implicitly but resonantly at the centre of which is what I refer to as the negative inspiration of Thatcherism). Walter Benjamin once famously remarked that revolution is not a runaway train but the application of an emergency brake. And the appearance in the midst of 1980s New Pop of Morrissey's iconic 'destitute' persona—frail, pale, damaged and inept, looking as if he'd been raided in a cupboard on a diet of crisps—was a revolution in precisely this sense.

4. 'I don't have another life,' Morrissey has insisted. 'I don't exist as another person, somewhere else doing something else with other people. There is no other me. There is no clocking off' (*The Times* magazine November 6, 1999).

Essential to his early revolutionary persona is embarrassment. (This too is prefigured in the opening scene of *A Taste of Honey*, whose netball match is a miniature allegory of embarrassment, the filming of which encourages our imaginative participation in the experience, even as its whimsical accompaniment makes fun of it.) According to the social psychologist Erving Goffman, our lives are shaped by the desire to avoid embarrassment—a condition he refers to as ‘wearing the leper’s bell.’⁵ The artist, however, runs in the opposite direction—*towards* the things that others flee, towards the epicentre of the disturbance. In his fine study *Keats and Embarrassment*, Christopher Ricks shows how the romantic poet was ‘especially sensitive to, and morally intelligent about, embarrassment,’⁶ and argues that it was one of the poet’s unpraised virtues that he did not flinch or flee from what Darwin describes as this ‘most human’ of emotions, and instead turned awkwardness into ‘a human victory.’⁷ Morrissey, likewise, this study suggests, is acutely sensitive to embarrassment, and it is this sensitivity—which is at once social, moral and aesthetic—that is central to his significance as an artist. Like Keats—whose ‘To a Nightingale’ is read out and made fun of in *A Taste of Honey*—he frequently writes about embarrassment (‘Ask,’ ‘Girl Afraid,’ ‘The Youngest Was The Most Loved,’ etc.), documenting others’ and lamenting or ironizing his own awkwardness and ineptitude. Although instead of ‘exploiting misfortune,’ as Armond White perceptively points out, ‘Morrissey accepts it and extracts an empathic metaphor about human difference.’⁸ What makes his work so extraordinary, though, is the way he seeks out *and heroically holds himself in* embarrassing situations—suffering as it were sacrificially in front of us on behalf of humanity. ‘Ecce Homo,’ his characteristic posture suggests. If this sounds embarrassingly melodramatic, well, that’s because it is. Yet to say so is in no way to diminish his achievement; on the contrary, it is in braving the embarrassing grandeur of his own gestures that his greatness significantly consists.

Of course, for anyone seeing him for the first time now or unfamiliar with the work of The Smiths, nothing of this early persona is apparent. And yet, in some strange way, it persists and haunts everything he does, as a kind of ghostly effect, which may reinforce,

5. Goffman, ‘Embarrassment and Social Organization,’ p. 269.

6. Ricks, *Keats and Embarrassment*, p. 1.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 77.

8. White, *The Resistance*, p. 222.

complicate or exist in ironic tension with any given gesture. An analogy may be helpful here.

At the start of 'The Queen Is Dead,' after the sample from *The L-Shaped Room* but before the drumming begins, we hear what Simon Goddard refers to as 'Marr's ghostly, controlled-feedback whistle,'⁹ which is at times exposed and at times unapparent but which persists—in a sense 'unperformed' by anyone—throughout the song.¹⁰ Like all good ghosts it has a particular form, and the feedback whistles the song's keynote B. This means that Morrissey's voice—and the bass too, which frequently moves between B and A—has something to coincide with or pull away from, as he does, for example, in singing 'life is very long when you're lonely,' holding a subtly dissonant A in the second syllable of 'lone-ly' against the ghostly keynote B. In doing so he introduces an 'unresolved' cadence into the melody which imitates the suspended condition of which he sings. Morrissey's spectral persona is a similarly self-begetting effect or 'unheard melody' that floats throughout his work, which may underwrite or ironize any particular performance.

Chapter 2 is concerned with different kinds of 'doubling' and focuses on the conjunction of apparently contradictory traits which constitute the singer's persona (hence the 'oxymoronic' self). He is, for example, typically described as 'an ordinary, working-class "anti-star" who nevertheless loves to hog the spotlight, a nice man who says the nastiest things about other people, a shy man who is also an outrageous narcissist,' etc.¹¹ Similarly, when asked if there was any sex in Morrissey, he replied, 'None whatsoever,' but added, 'which in itself is quite sexy.'¹² And likewise, in terms of how he communicates, the singer is viewed as someone who 'advocates, simultaneously and with equal vigour, relevance and accessibility, indeterminacy and ambiguity.'¹³ These 'oxymoronic' characteristics have been frequently noted of course. However, the ways in which such 'doubling' constitutes a

9. Goddard, *The Smiths*, p. 176.

10. The genesis of the ghostly whistle is explained by Marr as follows: 'I'd done the rhythm track and left the guitar on the stand. . . . The wah-wah pedal just happened to be half open, and putting the guitar down made it suddenly hit off this harmonic. We were back at the desk playing back the rhythm track and I could still hear this harmonic wailing away, so we put the tape back on to record while I crept back into the booth and started opening up the wah-wah, thinking "don't die, don't die!"' (Ibid).

11. Stringer, 'The Smiths,' p. 16.

12. *Blitz*, April 1988.

13. Hubbs, 'Music of the "Fourth Gender,"' p. 270.

kind of irony—since so often he is as well something *other than* what he is—have been insufficiently appreciated.

The chapter proposes two ways of characterizing the singer's elusiveness: firstly, as a matter of 'mobility,' by which I mean the ways in which the singer manages to be neither this *nor* that; and secondly, as a matter of 'multiplicity,' which refers, by contrast, to the ways he manages to be this *as well as* that. Obviously, this is odd and interesting in itself. But it also has crucial implications for any interpretation of his work. For, in the same way that his multiplicity has an ironizing function—since being any one thing is haunted by the sense of being its opposite as well—his corollary mobility effects a linear subversion of meaning, since it dissociates the singer from what appears to be his own utterance. (This 'equivocal' voice is considered in more detail in chapter 4.) In parallel ways, then, his mobility and multiplicity engender something akin to irony, which radically effects where the singer stands in relation to his utterance, which is to say it fundamentally affects what things mean.

The second half of chapter 2, which deals with multiplicity, focuses in particular on the tension between artifice and sincerity, on the one hand, and seriousness and humour or 'gravity' and 'levity,' on the other. But the majority of its attention is devoted to a discussion of those aspects of Morrissey's work which have been most neglected or misunderstood in commentary on the singer—namely play, artifice, lightness and camp. Recognizing the significance of these 'lighter' elements of his work is necessary to counter the abiding impression that Morrissey's work is univocally earnest (and that 'lightness' is a deficiency of seriousness). Yet it is just as important to point up the significance of things such as genre, irony, textuality and reflexivity, as well as the prevalence of nonrealist modes, as a corrective to the kind of Scooby-Doo paraphrase that passes for commentary on the singer's lyrics.

The underlying focus of chapter 3 is Morrissey's sexuality. However, the discussion is as much concerned with *how* things mean as with *what* they mean, and proposes as an organizing principle the singer's notorious coyness. Here too, we find an 'oxymoronic' tension on the one hand between secrecy and exposure, and on the other between 'excess' and 'lack.' One thing in particular that makes Morrissey's lyrics so peculiarly coy is that they frequently flaunt and are *about* their own secrecy—which is brought into being by the

very gesture that purports to disclose it. In between the discussion of exposure and secrecy is a section on the extraordinary staging of presence in Morrissey's lyrics. This staging of presence is vital to all sorts of effects in his work, such as the dramatization of the moment of suffering—which takes place in the timeless present of the song and opens into the present of the listening experience—but also the benevolent quasi-religious offering of relation in the moment of the song, which means so much to so many listeners.

The second part of the chapter, on lack and excess, examines the singer's correlative habits of innuendo and interruption. These obviously relate Morrissey to the familiar world of the *Carry On* film, yet they also connect him to the larger sociocultural tradition of the carnivalesque, whose logic is that of the back-to-front or the upside-down—which underlies so much of the singer's art. His habit of interruption is additionally involved in the dramatization of extreme states—the interior flooding of excess joy and the bottomless descent of negative ecstasy—the 'light' and 'dark' examples of which considered in this chapter are 'Now My Heart Is Full' and 'Sweet And Tender Hooligan.'

The first three chapters, then, serve to introduce some of the singer's central concerns—melancholy, eccentricity, nonbelonging, sexuality, subjugation, comedy, the everyday and the aesthetic. All of which have something to do with his overriding subject, love. But as importantly, they also highlight a range of epistemological issues whose significance has been neglected. Most discussions of Morrissey's lyrics, for example, consider his allusions to other songs, films and novels, etc. Yet such inquiries invariably have a 'trainspotterly' character and tend only to be concerned with the question: where is it from? (Rogan's works offer us a nice line in displacement when it comes to such matters, seeking out the most tenuous of circumstantial connections for the benefit of 'source hunters.') The kinds of questions that don't get asked are: What is the effect of bringing one text into another? What kind of status does the 'imported' text have? What happens to its voice? To whom does it 'belong'? What of its original context does it bring with it and what does it leave behind? Similarly, with respect to the singer's use of personae and his speaking with a voice which is other than his own, what are the implications of this kind ventriloquism? How does the 'spacing' between the singer and speaker affect the utterance's meaning? And, finally, to take but a few

examples, what are we to make of the multiplicity of sites of meaning (the lyrics, the cover images, the song's performance, the 'matrix messages,' the commentary offered in interviews, etc.), which are frequently at variance with one another? Where, if anywhere, does authority lie? The almost wholesale failure to take account of these and other ways in which the singer destabilizes his own meanings is a serious shortcoming shared by the commentaries of Rogan, Simpson, Goddard and Bret. Seemingly oblivious to 'the death of the author,' the 'heresy of paraphrase' and all the songs' internal signs that insist 'This Is Art and That Is Life,' such commentators read the lyrics literally, as transparent disclosures of the singer's biography, which is to say they have a tendency to look *through* his writing, rather than *at* it.¹⁴



The title of this book is borrowed from Matthew Arnold's description of Byron in 'Stanzas from the Grande Chartreuse,' in which he speaks of how the romantic poet bore,

With haughty scorn which mocked the smart,
Through Europe to the Aetolian shore
The pageant of his bleeding heart.

(133–6)

The bleeding of the poet's heart, according to Arnold, is an elaborately staged spectacle, and it is thus conspicuously communicated by means of art. It is additionally something which is complicated by the self-reflexive mocking gaze of the poet himself, who bore its bleeding 'With haughty scorn which mocked the smart.' We are therefore looking at the poet looking at a representation of his bleeding heart. Nevertheless, in spite of the complexities of its mediation, at the centre of everything is a bleeding heart. Having considered in the first three chapters a range of issues to do with 'the pageant' and the folds of the singer's reflexive irony, the study turns in chapters 4 and 5 to Morrissey's 'bleeding heart.'

In a certain sense, chapters 4 and 5 are opposed to one another, for the former is about darkness whilst the latter is about light. More

14. There is a kind of bad faith underlying the enterprise of such 'psychobiography,' since it privileges the artist to the detriment to the art that we care or come to know about the artist.

precisely, chapter 4 focuses on melancholy, despair, the unravelling of self, alienation, destitution, the torment of desire, the self-fuelling and self-*haunting* character of depression, as well as racism, violence, evil and death. (The issue of racism, which has dreadfully been blown out of all proportion, is first addressed in chapter 2, in relation to a larger discussion of the singer's staging of character perspectives, and then in more detail in chapter 4, where a whole range of disturbing subjects confronted by Morrissey is considered.) Chapter 5, on the other hand, focuses on the religious, which has recently come to the fore in his work, but has always been a resonant and shadowy presence—intriguingly, both as a source of animosity and yet also as a privileged system of values, by means of which he articulates his most urgent concerns. In another sense, however, chapters 4 and 5 are two parts of a continuous inquiry, with the same fundamental questions in view, which repeatedly open into each other's territories. In the midst of darkness, for example, in chapter 4, we find the singer's greatest affirmation of love, and at the heart of the religious in chapter 5, we come upon an all-encompassing and windowless darkness. Chapter 5 additionally returns to a number of recurrent subjects—such as eccentricity, not-fitting-in, the sense of being 'a stranger on the earth,' the tormenting insatiability of desire, as well as the singer's no-saying, the difficulties he seems to have with the word 'love,' his imaginative sympathy for the outsider, and his peculiar ability to provoke a disturbance—and brings to light an underlying and hitherto unnoticed coherence in his work.

The argument of the book and the key to this coherence may be summed up with reference to the two senses of 'Saving Eccentricity.' On the one hand, the study claims that what 'saves' Morrissey as an artist is his 'eccentricity,' which literally means being 'out of the centre.' It is this participation from a position of nonbelonging that allows him to ironize or 'deconstruct' his own gestures in the very moment of their performance—and makes him a bone in the throat of popular music. Such non-belonging, however, also plays a vital role in his ability to speak for and extend our sympathies towards the outcast, the marginalized, the 'unlovable' and the other. It is in view of this radical charity—which has nothing genteel or squeamish about it—that the study claims on the other hand that Morrissey's art is essentially concerned with 'saving eccentricity.'

CHAPTER 1



Celibacy, Abstinence and Rock 'n' Roll

I am a ghost
and as far as I know
I haven't even died.

—*I'll Never Be Anbody's Hero Now*

ON BEING A LIVING SIGN

In the last song on *Ringleader Of The Tormentors*, with a gift for the upside-down, Morrissey sings:

At last I am born
historians note
I am finally born.¹

Speaking of the birth of Morrissey—an obvious and apparently straightforward way of beginning—is a peculiarly difficult thing to do. This is not simply because over the years Morrissey has repeatedly insisted that in some fundamental sense his life has never quite come into being (he speaks, for example, of being a ghost, of ‘a half-life,’ of being ‘scarcely born,’ of ‘not actually living’ and of a life ‘not even begun’).² It is additionally difficult because, on the one hand, what ‘Morrissey’ refers to isn’t simply the person who was born on May 22, 1959, to Elizabeth (née Dwyer) and Peter Morrissey, and christened Steven Patrick, but is a spectral entity or mythic personality which

1. ‘At Last I Am Born,’ in which he sings it is his ‘final hour’ and ‘soon I will be dead.’

2. The singer also articulates this curious sense of not quite belonging to being by conversely insisting that his life has in some sense passed out of existence before coming to an end (he speaks of half-dying; of being ‘a was’; and on *Ringleader Of The Tormentors*, maintains ‘I walk around—somehow / But you have killed me’).

paradoxically exceeds its creator; and, on the other hand, it is difficult because this spectral and fugitive subject *continues* to be born, since the story which constitutes this dramatic projection continues to unfold.³

'Morrissey' was born or began coming into being in the summer of 1983, when, according to Johnny Marr's version of events, a directive was issued by Rough Trade Records forbidding the use of Steven Patrick Morrissey's forenames.⁴ From this moment on, rather like the portrait in Dorian Gray's attic, Morrissey's eponymous creation began acquiring a quasi-life of its own—a dramatically constituted life, to which every lyric and public act would contribute—which effectively subsumed its creator. This sublimation of self seems to have been consciously willed by the singer. When asked in an interview, 'Is Steven Morrissey dead?' he replied, 'Yes. When The Smiths began it was very important that I wouldn't be that horrible, stupid, sloppy Steven. He would have to be locked in a box and put on top of the wardrobe. I needed to feel differently and rather than adopt some glamorous pop star name, I eradicated Steven, which seemed to make perfect sense. Suddenly I was a totally different person.'⁵

The existence of Morrissey as a mythic personality projected by his lyrics and other public performances was not perhaps immediately apparent. It was only following the 'glamorous turn' in his solo career that a contrapuntal tension seemed to emerge, which revealed the existence of this spectral persona and a 'something more' invisibly in play. The remainder of this chapter will attempt to explain more precisely what this means, how it came about, and why it is important to an understanding of Morrissey's work. As this is all a little abstract, I shall offer an illustration of what is at stake.

When at the end of 'Dear God Please Help Me,' Morrissey sings:

3. The perpetual genesis of Morrissey's persona is not a matter of serial reinvention and so differs, for instance, from the 'chameleon aesthetics' of David Bowie or the 'plastic' flux of Madonna's subjectivity. The difference may be clarified with reference to Isaiah Berlin's heuristic distinction between the fox and the hedgehog, which he claims represents 'one of the deepest differences which divide writers and thinkers.' According to Berlin, 'the fox knows many things but the hedgehog knows one big thing'; hence the former 'pursue many ends, often unrelated and even contradictory, connected, if at all, only in some de facto way,' whilst the latter 'relate everything to a single central vision' (Berlin, 'The Hedgehog and the Fox,' p. 71). In terms of this model, then, Bowie and Madonna would be foxes whereas Morrissey would be a hedgehog.

4. Marr's account of the event is given in Goddard, *The Smiths*, p. 20. Morrissey's pre-Smiths publications—*New York Dolls* (1981) and *James Dean Is Not Dead* (1983)—have 'Steven Morrissey' on their title pages, though this was altered to 'Morrissey' in post-Smiths reprints.

5. *The Face*, July 1984.

And now I'm walking through Rome
and there's no room to move
but the heart feels free

—repeatedly insisting ‘the heart feels free,’ it is hard to explain why the utterance is so moving. The melody, to be sure, conveys a restrained pathos that is difficult to resist, and Morrissey’s singing reaches out towards us with a plaintive urgency. Yet there are plenty of other songs that do this without the same effect. However, the narrative in itself seems to offer little that would account for it either (it is, after all, an apparently positive assertion!). How might we explain the effect then? The utterance is so moving, I suggest, because it represents the latest stage in a long and elaborate drama—which is the life and work of Morrissey—and is therefore densely resonant with what has preceded it. Such resonances routinely inform and complicate Morrissey’s songs, but they are especially operative here, as the utterance occupies the space of and recalls Morrissey’s other great fade-out refrains (‘I Know It’s Over,’ ‘That Joke Isn’t Funny Anymore,’ ‘Last Night I Dreamt That Somebody Loved Me,’ etc.). Almost in spite of itself, it thus implicitly speaks of a longing that hasn’t been cancelled out—as other songs on the album attest—but which isn’t entirely present either. This ghostly ‘excess’ or ‘something more’ invisibly in play is attributable to the shadow of Morrissey’s persona, which informs and is informed by everything he does, and which helps to explain why his lyrics seem to mean more than they say and why this meaning lies in a sense ‘elsewhere.’

The story is old; but to understand this ‘elsewhere’ and why Morrissey is, quite literally, ‘a living sign,’ we need to go back to the beginning and trace the trajectory of the singer’s career.



THE ART OF WEEKNESS

STANDING ON ONE’S HEAD

When Morrissey started appearing in public as the backward front-man of The Smiths in 1983, he was spectacularly gauche. The most

popular bands at the time were the likes of Wham!, Duran Duran, Spandau Ballet, Frankie Goes To Hollywood and Kajagoogoo, whose names, like their public appearances, were extravagant and courted a highly stylised and exotic glamour. The songs of such bands tended to be subsumed within a kind of operatic spectacle or kitsch *Gesamtkunstwerk*, involving lavish videos and technicolor stage appearances, whose performers became associated with shiny surfaces, the synthetic and hedonistic fun.⁶ It is of course easy to patronize this and overlook the ways in which New Pop was itself responsible for a revolution of sorts—rejecting the antiaesthetic tendencies of punk and challenging the pseudo ‘authenticity’ of guitar-based pop.⁷ We should also not ignore the wealth of ‘alternative’ bands—such as The Jam, The Specials and Dexy’s Midnight Runners—and chivalrous exceptions to both of these rules, such as David Bowie and Elvis Costello. Nevertheless, it remains fair to say that British pop music in the early 1980s was dominated by a range of bands who cared little about lyrics and a lot about glossy surfaces, and whose aerated and cosmetic charm perpetuated the dream of ‘sex and drugs and rock ’n’ roll.’⁸

The most shocking and paradoxically rebellious thing it was possible to be in such a world, as Morrissey with singular prescience intuited, was ordinary.⁹ Of course, now that we live in a more thoroughly postmodern time of flattened hierarchies and collapsed oppositions—in which the antitheses of fashion coexist without interval, priority or fixed value—it is hard to imagine the significance and perhaps even the *possibility* of such dialectical cultural shifts. Similarly, now that the market is flooded with anaemic imitations, it’s becoming increasingly difficult to see that the things Morrissey was doing were once shockingly new and a desirable corrective. Yet the shift that was inaugurated by The Smiths in the early 1980s was arguably more

6. Such characteristics had important ideological connotations. As Simon Reynolds notes, ‘New Pop, far from being a bright new beginning, turned out to be merely an inauguration of global designer-soul, the soundtrack of the new yuppie culture of health and efficiency’ (Reynolds, *Bring the Noise*, p. 44).

7. Matthew Bannister goes even further: ‘New Pop discourses were mainly concerned to demonstrate how postmodernism, poststructuralism and postfeminism as manifested in MTV, Madonna, Prince and digital sampling celebrated a shiny new androgynous semiotic wonderland, where continuous self-invention through artifice and intertextual pastiche erased sexual difference, problematized authorship and created polysemic and polysexual possibilities’ (Bannister, *White Boys*, *White Noise*, p. xxii).

8. For a good, nuanced account of pop music in the early 1980s, which keeps its heterogeneity in view and deals justly with the aesthetics of synthpop, see Simon Reynolds, *Rip It Up and Start Again*.

9. In a tour programme in 1985, his ‘likes’ were listed as: ‘Films, books, moderation, conversation, civility’ (cited in Harris, *The Last Party*, p. 5).

profound than anything in popular music, with the possible exception of punk. As Michael Bracewell points out, this shift involved a 'return' to something that hadn't existed before in the medium:

In its return to the cat's cradle of English ordinariness, the impact on English pop of Morrissey's writing and performance could be likened to the revolution caused in English theatre in 1956 by John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*. The sophisticated tragedy and the ironic comedy of manners had been usurped. And a return to the glamour of the ordinary, in the face of honed sophistication, could be achieved only by a writer who knew how to lift poetic truths out of the mass of common experience; a novelistic skill which had never been applied with such constancy and literary use of language within the English pop song.¹⁰

The Smiths were extravagantly, revolutionarily ordinary. The band's name, which quietly carries connotations of craftsmanship and Englishness—qualities of manifest importance to Morrissey—is an obvious metonymy of this ordinariness. However, as with so many things about the band, its significance lies to a large extent in what it is not as well as what it is; that is to say, it is importantly also a *refusal*—in this case of the fashion for ostentatious names.¹¹ The point is obvious enough, though the implications are worth teasing out a little.

Morrissey's art, in all sorts of ways, is an art of refusal.¹² There are, for example, the explicit refusals to make videos or use certain instruments, which from a thoroughly altered cultural perspective may well seem a little pointless or naive but were evidently part of a coherent and carefully thought-out stance, which had an important aesthetic and ideological rationale.¹³ There are additionally the

10. Bracewell, *England Is Mine*, p. 222. There were of course foreshadowings of this shift. Perhaps the most significant was the aesthetic stance of Orange Juice (1979–84), whose name betokened an anti-rock 'n' roll temperance, who sang about male vulnerability ('I Guess I'm Just A Little Too Sensitive'), who musically aimed for 'a sophisticated amateurism' that didn't 'place slickness as the ultimate virtue,' and whose singer-songwriter Edwyn Collins once declared 'worldliness must be kept apart from me' (Reynolds, *Rip It Up and Start Again*, p. 409).

11. 'When we started, inflated and elongated names were the order of the day. I wanted to explain to people that it wasn't necessary to have long names, dress in black and be po-faced. Our task was to choose the most ordinary of names and yet produce something of artistic merit' (Robertson, ed., *Morrissey: In His Own Words*, p. 58).

12. When the singer was asked, 'Which words or phrases do you most overuse?' he replied: '“No, I won't,” “Why should I?” “What's the point?” and “I'd like to terminate our agreement”' (*Kill Uncle* tourbook, 1991).

13. There is an interesting parallel between the aesthetic 'chastity' of the early Smiths and the agenda of the Dogme 95 movement—a collective of avant-garde Danish filmmakers, who were radically opposed to what they perceived as 'the use of cosmetics' in film, which they sought to counter by adhering to a cinematic 'vow of chastity.'