



Antti Nylén

Me and Morrissey

Notes on the essence and effects of a voice

The singer Morrissey occupies a peculiar place in the music world: Beyond the categories of mainstream and alternative, he has reached fames as a gay icon, a literary dandy and high artist. In this essay, Antti Nylén, a long-time devotee of the singer sheds light on the nimbus that surrounds Morrissey.

"The most arresting thing about Morrissey's work, the thing that grabs you like a particularly overzealous store detective, is *that* voice. It's a voice which drives some to distraction and others to infatuation. Love it or loathe it, it is a voice on its own. In an industry full of stars who started out by imitating their predecessors so badly that they were mistaken for original talent, Morrissey's voice seems utterly, shockingly unique. Aurally *and* authorally."

Mark Simpson, "Saint Morrissey", 2003

In his hagiography "Saint Morrissey", the English writer Mark Simpson tells us of the way his life was lead to be permanently affected by Morrissey: "It was tea-time November 1983, I'd just turned eighteen and hardly ever been kissed. It happened in my parents' sitting room in Upper Poppleton, a nice sleepy normal village in North Yorkshire where such things aren't even supposed to be imagined."

At that time, totally unexpectedly, Simpson saw in a Channel Four music programme, "this pale, emaciated James Dean double... wearing some woman's blouse, a plastic necklace, a pair of jeans two sizes too large and a head three sizes too big." And that "man" sang: "When in this charming car / This charming man..." The Mancunian pop group The Smiths, who had just released their second single, was performing on TV. The single was called "This Charming Man".

"I stopped picking my ear," Simpson says. "Of course, I should have jammed my fingers in both ears." The lyrics of the song were decisively different from other pop lyrics. They weren't sensationalist or clichéd, but rather frank and comprehensible, ultimately harmless, but still seemingly in code... "bloody poetry", like Simpson puts it.

And the singer – "This Alarming Man", as the NME called him ten years later – wasn't an ordinary pop star, but comprehensible, frank and ultimately harmless. He didn't even look like a pop star, but more like a librarian or a bohemian of the 1920s.

He held a secret – and what would be more obscene and alarming in our secular, vulgar and pornographic society than a secret? Faced with a secret we are powerless.

Morrissey (b. 1959) was a poisonous man.

Simpson's growth into a fan of Morrissey – a Morrisseyite – is eventful and characterised by Simpson's opposition. There is nothing exceptional in his story. In the past two decades countless individuals have gone through a similar process: "Like many such victims, at the time I was in deep denial about what had happened. I pretended it was a bit of fun, a laugh. That it was just 'pop music'."

We know how the story ends (or rather, how the story continues). In 2003 Simpson publishes a book on Morrissey: "I resolved to expose him. To write a book about him. Or rather, to write a book about what he did to me and millions of others. With words. It was to be my revenge. Paragraphs taking on blank verse, prose assaulting bloody poetry. Pathetic and hopeless, I know, but satisfaction of a kind – the only kind available to me."

"Saint Morrissey" is the first book-length, serious, insightful and intellectually valid analysis of this pop curiosity who has proved to be difficult to place within any category in the pop institution. Morrissey is beyond the categories of "mainstream" and "alternative." He is still exceedingly popular, but that popularity is seldom seen anywhere. It is not "pop popularity", which is marked by figures and massive crowds. He is popular in the same way that, say, Marcel Proust is popular. This kind of popularity is always based on a private encounter with the author and the listener. We are talking about special relationships.

Morrissey himself has said: "It is love, not rock stardom."

The end of Britpop

Morrissey is the collective trauma of the pop-world. Pop writers, in particular, suffer from this trauma. They have to fight off their own fandom by decree of their profession. The impossible is required of them, namely objectivity. Morrissey was told by a *Melody Maker* journalist in 1997: "You broke all our hearts and never said sorry."

The Britpop-scene of the 1990s was characterised by the attempt to airbrush Morrissey out of the picture. Simpson analyses this rather stingingly: "Morrissey had to become an "unperson" so that the Nineties and its centrally-planned and co-ordinated pop economy could happen." Morrissey's pop popularity ended with the 1992 album "Your Arsenal". After this he entered his Marcel Proust phase. He became the ghost that haunted English pop. Paradoxically, Morrissey was at his most invisible when his effect on the pop mainstream was at its most visible. He was present, but not seen. The Smiths was the most self evident influence on all Britpop bands. Morrissey had damaged Brit pop heroes from Brett Anderson to Damon Albarn. Each and every one of them had been watching TV "in their parents' sitting room in Upper Poppleton" in 1983. It was impossible to surpass Morrissey, and thus he had to be erased.

The central argument presented by Simpson in "Saint Morrissey" is that Morrissey destroyed the English pop tradition (and even Englishness itself) by

fulfilling it *too* perfectly. Simpson goes on to say that the Gallagher brothers ("lottery winners with guitars") and Blur ("The Kinks for students and confused teenage girls from Epsom who mistook Damon Albarn for someone sexy") and all the rest of Britpop was "little more than a commercial footnote to The Smiths."

English pop withered into a symbol, a trademark, an empty gesture. Tony Blair was a fan of Oasis in 1997. This in itself was ominous, but the last sacrament was surely performed by Sir Elton John when he sang at Princess Diana's funeral altar the same year. It was also the funeral of English pop, "the last ever *Top of the Pops*." Simpson writes: "Morrissey was probably thousands of miles away in Los Angeles (or perhaps hiding at his Mum's in Cheshire). Nonetheless his scornful, spiteful laughter still echoed through Westminster Abbey that day, unnoticed by the assembled feudal dignitaries and their heirs and successors the celebs, but mightily frightening the pigeons nesting in the gargoyles and Dame Elton's wig."

Success as revenge

Simpson – like Morrissey – is a successor to the British literary tradition in which *wit* is the foundation of all usage of language and ethics. He exaggerates, and this may be the reason that he is spot on. He does so when he says that the English will forgive Morrissey only when he is dead. Not unlike how the English forgave Oscar Wilde – the Morrissey of the 1890's – and a hundred years after his death made a sentimental film about a clever playwright and a pitiable homosexual, who – despite it all – loved his wife dearly. Like him, Morrissey "will be rehabilitated too – miraculously cured of his scorn and self-destructiveness he will be remembered as a loveable "eccentric", a singing Grinch with a touching tendency to become mildly distracted at the plight of small furry animals."

Simpson canonises Morrissey prematurely, by his own decree, and this illegal process gives his book a considerable amount of its power. But above all, Simpson extracts from the act his own personal gratification: taking his "revenge" on Morrissey he also does so with English society. There is a kind of conceited pleasure in being able to say "I told you so" when no one can deny it.

Simpson tries to take Morrissey's place in this mechanism of revenge. He wants to reveal the truth about Morrissey before that truth is out of the bag; much like Morrissey in the end of the 1980s predicted the fall of Britpop that finally happened in 1997. "No matter what people say, I've won," Morrissey told the NME in 1991. "In a strange sense, the battle is over. It was over when "Viva Hate" went in at Number One." The rhetoric of revenge is certainly active in all noteworthy pop music, but it has achieved its keenest expression in Morrissey's oeuvre and persona.

This narcissistic motive, unfamiliar with the virtues of unselfishness and sincerity – and which Simpson too acknowledges in his writing – unifies Morrisseyites. They share a desire to take their revenge on everyone and everything by making the boorish masses admit that they well and truly are... better than the rest. This destructive urge is too often destined to remain unfulfilled, and damages the bearer rather than the community. That is, unless the fan manages to exorcise Morrissey through the means of general conformity.

The author J.K. Rowling, a well-known public Morrisseyite, has heightened the dynamics of the Morrisseyan subject in the portrayal of her protagonist Harry Potter. Potter is a lanky youth who lives under the stairs. But he is superior. He is above the *hoi polloi*, because he has a broom and a magic wand. And certainly Rowling's own success has been her own Morrisseyan revenge. It is ultimately irrelevant in which discipline one extracts one's own success, or revenge; it can be literature or the magical arts, but in pop music it has been difficult after Morrissey. The 1990s didn't bear witness to the birth of a real pop star, a real pop artist. On the other hand, international celebrities and entertainers cropped up by the truckload.

Still, Morrissey's outsider-ism and impertinence wouldn't be possible in any other art form. The institutions of literary and visual arts are too liberal for any kind of real opposition to be possible. They devour everything, and particularly so when faced with "rebellion" or "moving the goalposts", which are always welcomed with glee. The pop institution, on the other hand, is very intolerant and vulnerable; it cannot even stand intelligence – probably because it functions on purely economic terms (what would happen to pop music, if pop musicians and record companies would start to receive grants?). Morrissey is an independent institution, and as such has very little to do with representatives of pop music, although they have paradoxically admitted that he is *alarming*.

Going inwards

The psychological structures of Morrissey and his fans are similar. In some sense the fan is a metastasis of the idol, formed of the same substance and eternally defined by the originator, not a copy or an imitation, but a stem.

Being affected by Morrissey is a traumatic experience. It is an event that is simultaneously distressing and comforting. To begin with, exposure occurs in the teens or early adulthood, when all "experience" is by decree distressing, because it includes expectations: Now you *have* to amass experience. Now you *have to* test your limits. Now you *have to* get drunk and copulate for the first time. He who does not obey these commandments will be punished severely. That is, if he hasn't protected and armed himself – with Morrissey, for instance.

The comforting is densely ingrained in the distressing. When you say *yes* to Morrissey in a radical way, you say *no* to the world and its requirements. The experience is poignant, but above all sublime and relieving. It gives the retreat value and principle.

The Morrisseyite goes inwards. He doesn't come out, at least not as the same person, because "Morrissey" is a closed institution. The notion of "coming out" present in youth fiction and especially in gay literature is transformed into a "going inward", where the identity of the individual is no longer legated by the acceptance of the exterior world, but by an inward, impeccably organised sphere of symbols. Morrissey once wrote a slogan on the run out groove of one of the Smiths' 7" singles: HOME IS WHERE THE ART IS.

It has been noted that where the pop of the 1960s was concerned with the notion of leaving home, Morrissey – both as a singer and as a cultural icon – always tells us of pining for home. Simpson's story of how he came about writing "Saint Morrissey" is a typical "going inward-tale", an account of starting a home with Morrissey.

Me and Morrissey

I shall tell you my own story, my own case history, although there is nothing original about it either. Maybe it can still reveal some hitherto uncovered aspects of Morrissey's fearsome power.

I was listening to Radio City¹ in the summer of 1987, probably in the beginning of August, and playing with my Lego-blocks in my room in Mikkola, which is a 1970's suburb built into the middle of the forest in Vantaa². I was fourteen, and aware that I shouldn't have been playing with Lego-blocks anymore, but not aware of what I *should have* been doing. On the radio, the presenter Outi Popp informed us of the fact that the Smiths were breaking up. I don't know where I had encountered the name of this band before, because until then I had been reading Suosikki³ which – wisely – still does its best to hide from children what is essential in pop music.

Again, I don't know what happened in the following six months, but in March 1988 I purchased a copy of Rumba⁴, which included a cover piece and interview of Morrissey. As it is, I had not yet been exposed to Morrissey's voice – as it has been preserved on recordings – when I read his interview for the first time. In the interview he said things like: "I don't believe that people are going out and buying certain records in the Top 10. It's impossible, even taking into account the possibility that 30 percent of the public might be seriously mentally unspectacular. There's a serious conspiracy going on." – "I really do think rap music is a great musical stench. I find it very offensive, artless and styleless. To me it's very reminiscent of thuggery, pop thuggery. I don't want to hear it at all." – "I think what we're lacking is Direct Action whether we're discussing Tiffany or nuclear waste. Direct Action is the only thing that can save the world... I think a few bricks need to be thrown through a few specific windows... like Katie Boyle's."

These are intoxicating, poisonous words to a barely fifteen-year old child. What sensitivity! What aggression! What undemocratic fervour! I would have been satisfied with the mere fact that Morrissey used the word "artless" to describe rap music and calmly stated that many people were "seriously mentally unspectacular."

This was my first encounter with literary dandyism. Even if I wasn't aware of what was happening, I was becoming sensitive to the fact that pop music could be something more than "simple words of love."

In 1988 Morrissey released his first solo album, "Viva Hate", but I wouldn't hear it until a few years later. Instead I got given a tape of The Smiths by my older cousin and listened to it, perplexed and amazed. I still recognize the spot during "Well I Wonder" where the tape ran out on the second side of the cassette. In the spring of 1989 I bought Morrissey's single "The Last of the Famous International Playboys". It probably was the first single that I got right when it came out. Incidentally, I bought it from Stockholm, where I was on a school trip. The hated first phase of secondary school was over. I detested my classmates who "partied" onboard, even if it was precisely their vulgarity that had led me to Morrissey.

My educational responsibility was transferred from my parents to Morrissey. The song "Glamorous Glue" (off "Your Arsenal") contains the lines, "Where is the man you respect? / And where is the woman you love?"

As Simpson says, the correct answer to both questions is the same: Morrissey.

The anatomy of fandom

In the spring of 1990, when I had given "Meat is Murder" (1985) enough spins, I decided to go vegetarian. Actually becoming a vegetarian is not a "decision" at all. When someone stops eating animals he has already been a vegetarian for some time. Becoming a vegetarian requires a conscious act (actually it isn't as much an action as a non-action), but it also requires subjugating to the "vegetarian word."

The vegetarian transformation – which in my case was partly influenced by Morrissey – is not unlike a religious experience. It is an unfaltering emotional transformation rather than a moral decision. This is probably the reason why some sensitive humanists decide to be a part of the modern meat industry and identify with it. Even if a more absurd industry hardly exists, it represents for them some kind of reason and rationality. This is purely guesswork, for I have yet to hear a sensible argument for eating meat. To a great deal of people, humanism as a way of life signifies the opposition of all that is irrational, a kind of ideal of godlessness and "rationality", which of course only leads to general conformity. Vegetarianism is an anti-humanist discipline.

What caught my interest next was the means that Morrissey uses, his weapons of choice: words. I began to read literature and use a typewriter, of which I went through two before I got a computer. I don't know why people begin to read or write – why they become interested in something in the first place – but in my case it all goes back to one common denominator. My whole cultural identity was built under the influence of Morrissey. I still feel a closer affinity to French and English – rather than Finnish – cultural traditions. Väinö Linna⁵ and Juice Leskinen⁶ do not arouse any interest in me.

After graduating from the sixth and seventh forms of secondary school I was fully armed against the world. I had, in addition to Morrissey, Charles Baudelaire's "My Heart Laid Bare" and "Paris Spleen", Goethe's "The Sorrows of Young Werther", Oscar Wilde's Complete Works, which I had read and underlined (this seems incomprehensible now, but it was completely natural then) and Saima Harmaja's⁷ collected diaries and letters titled "Palava Elämä" ("This Burning Life"), which is filled with entries like these: "I wish I were a poet. I wish I could amass my wordless anguish, call it by name, and push it far away from me, up into the air like a new world, like a newborn star. I could squeeze strength and victory from this humiliation. But old and helpless verse is all that comes out of me." – "I wish I was already safely on the train! I wish someone would help me, that I could get into the arms of someone who I love!"

The brazen, noble and unnatural force of pop lies in the fact that it allows for the emotional control of loss before anything has been lost (or gained). It lulls us into believing that the uncontrollable is under control. This is what reading Harmaja's diaries and listening to Morrissey was primarily about. In 1992, when I hadn't actually "experienced" anything, I was already prepared for everything, not least unhappy love and tragic death. These scenarios had been acted out in my room countless times as I read and listened, simply *lived under the influence of these voices*. I had carefully hoarded my arrogant hate, which Morrissey had left smouldering in 1988, and I waited for the right moment. I wanted to throw "a few bricks through a few specific windows."

In other words, Morrissey provided me with a peculiar economy of emotions, where I could place love and hate into specific objects without having to "come out." I could hate and praise. That was all that was required.

I became a fan in the wider sense, in my character and psychological makeup. (My current greatest hopes are to be interviewed about my three favourite records or five favourite books in the regular spots where such things are discussed in the newspapers or TV. To be allowed to praise them *in public*. There is something obscene and arousing in that. In addition, I'm already savouring the pleasure of actually choosing those records and books, before I've even been asked. A conceited and repulsive wish, surely. But honest, nevertheless.)

In the beginning of the 1990s I had plans, of course. Having progressed far enough, fandom searches for ways to erupt into practices of hate and love. I didn't make any choices, but for some reason I didn't channel my hate into direct action or grab a brick. Even if I still feel that burning meat transport-lorries is nobler activity than constructing sentences, I have accepted the fact that a reader of Saima Harmaja or Goethe couldn't become an activist.

So I did exactly the same thing that Mark Simpson did in the same situation: I began to write. More specifically, I began to practise translating literary classics. The process of translating has some merits compared to actual creative writing, and they – in order – are as follows: 1) Translating is the consummation of author-centred love, or fandom. 2) The literary institution transfers some of the merits of a classic to the translator. 3) The translator is not required to *invent* anything. I began to see the possibility of revenge in writing, and specifically translating.

I translated, among others, Oscar Wilde's "De Profundis" and "The Decay of Lying". The latter I sent to Like⁸ because they had shown interest in it, but I never received a final reply. Later that decade, Otava⁹ published both, but not as my translations.

The concept of the author in pop

Writing your Master's thesis on Morrissey in Literary Studies may seem like a good idea when you're twenty-four years old. Morrissey is a tangle of connections and clues, and as such calls out for investigation. After all, his lyrics are "bloody poetry" compared to any "pop lyrics". He refers to Oscar Wilde, Sir John Betjeman, Virginia Woolf, Graham Greene, serious writers in general. What else would convince professors of his literary merit? He uses rare, literary words like "belligerent", "pamper" and "gruesome". Everyone simply has to admit that he is on par with any classic author as a wordsmith.

In reality he is only different. The central problem with my thesis, which I finally finished in 2002, was not that it wasn't worth to write about Morrissey (on the contrary, he demands to be written about). He just simply was exceedingly difficult to write about using the tools of literary theory.

When faced with pop music, modern science is powerless. The examining of pop has long been the work of sociologists – who have avoided the central problems by avoiding cultural products themselves – and focused on the phenomena of "pop culture". This results in the delusional conclusion that pop is essentially youth culture and social movement, and examining it reveals something about the status of our society. The voices and sounds preserved on

records are, in effect, secondary. The works of artists like Morrissey perpetually evade the sociologist's grasp unscathed (regardless of what they do to the artists).

Another kind of analysis is urgently needed. At the least, the concept of the author needs to be reformed. Morrissey's oeuvre includes – aside from lyrics, obviously – all interviews, all sounds, yelps and quips on record (like in-between song banter off live records), photographs, unrecorded live performances, record covers and their typeset, and the most irrelevant snippets of sentences, like credits on the record sleeve. The only criterion is the assurance that these all emanate from the same person.

There is no theory concerning the nature of the author that covers all this material. For the sake of convenience it has been decided that the author's personal and public life have no importance in relation to his work. But a new concept of the author cannot be formulated in a single academic thesis. Examining "themes" in the lyrics is frustrating when one has to use words like speaker, narrator and subject as circumventions of the word Morrissey.

Literary dandyism

Morrissey is a *voice*. He is a voice in the tangible sense because he sings: his voice fills the space where the record plays. His voice can also sound "in one's head." It can ingrain itself permanently into the listener's body. As has been examined above, the consequences can be devastating. Morrissey is a tormentor.

This "aural" aspect, common to many pop voices, is not included in the concept of the author in literary theory. In the twentieth century, when progress in sound-reproduction techniques took centre stage from the printed word as a cultural product, literature retreated from the battle and relied more and more on muteness. Modernist poetry attacked the insolent noise of the media and popular music with the graphic muteness of signs.

On the other hand, Morrissey is a voice that bundles meanings. This voice is a persona, a mask covering the random "production" (and thus compressing it metonymically). Here the standard concept of the author can be applied, although *what this author has done* cannot be clearly defined. We are dealing with an "author" whose position can be described: at the least it can be distinguished from what is non-Morrissey.

Simpson's book is an ambitious attempt to perform this description, and separation. Morrissey is often seen as an enigmatic artist, but in truth his "secret" remains a secret only to those who cannot and will not listen to him. "To get to the melancholic heart of Morrissey's condition," Simpson writes, "there is only one thing you need to do. *Listen to him.*"

Simpson describes Morrissey's authorial position accurately already in the first chapter of his book: "Aloof in an age of ghastly accessibility. Aristocratic in an age of dumb democracy. Inimitable. Indigestible. *Irredeemable.*" In other words, Morrissey's position is that of literary dandyism. It is defined by the prefix "anti". He opposes, but passively: through his intelligence, through his aural appearance.

Morrissey is not liberal. He doesn't seek "liberation". Repression is his prime motivator.

This has annoyed activist journalists, who have first latched on to the representations of "divergent" desire in his lyrics, and the fact that Morrissey hasn't revealed his sexual preference in public. Morrissey's sexuality has often been seen as his "secret", and as such naturally in need of "uncovering". He has repeatedly provided us with these kind of infuriating quotes: "I don't know anybody who is absolutely, exclusively heterosexual. It limits people's potential in so many areas. I think we should slap down these barriers."

In the early 1980s, in the beginning of his career Morrissey often proclaimed that he was living in "celibacy". Ever since then his "sex life" has been a kind of *tabula rasa* that journalists have eagerly scribbled on.

The British journalist Richard Smith, for instance, has written: "If you are gay then please, please, please wake up to the fact that it's 1990 and some sort of stand is expected. The words and labels you dismiss as "limiting and restrictive" are empowering and necessary." A little further on in the same text Smith relinquishes the personal address for a more straightforward: "If he's straight, he should stop feeding off of us [i.e. gay people]."

Richard Smith fails to acknowledge that "gayness" and its liberal, progressive ideology (and kooky aesthetic) are things that have been invented in the 1960s. Morrissey, whose intellectual origin is in the shift of the 1950s and 1960s, diverges from them *for this very reason*, because "it's 1990". And he diverges from them still, even if we live in the year 2004 (and considerable progress has been made since the year 1990).

Short-sighted – or more accurately, unilateral – critics cannot comprehend that Morrissey's position is the position of opposition. It is the same ideological stand that arose as an opposing force to the birth of modern Europe in the beginning of the nineteenth century. Even if he is a pop star, a product of the age of democracy and constantly available through the medium he has chosen (the audience doesn't even need to be literate), he is a fervently antidemocratic *public individual*. He is not only a thinker or only an artist. He is a dandy.

Mark Simpson, an ex-columnist for the magazine *Attitude*, and thus a "queer journalist" like Richard Smith, takes an altogether different stance towards Morrissey's sexuality. And because he is an intellectually superior writer, he recognizes and accepts Morrissey anti-conformist position also in this matter: "Morrissey's ambition, his perversity, his *sensibility* was far too large, too talented, too vicious to be fitted into this harmless, silly, precious, sequinned little word 'gay'."

Vegetarianism

Morrissey's vegetarianism has annoyed journalists for precisely the opposite reasons that his unannounced, yet obstinately supposed homosexuality. Morrissey has defended his vegetarian ideal tirelessly, and always as frankly as possible.

Having performed the song "Meat is Murder" (by The Smiths) in concert in 2002, Morrissey followed it with this: "The next time your granny offers you a part of a butchered baby... JUST... SAY... NO!" This message leaves no room for interpretation, but that is the very reason why it has been interpreted: *fundamentally* something else has to be at issue. Simpson, too, is in trouble with this issue and deals with it very briefly, considering how central it is in the world of Morrissey. He wants to see "The violence of meat-eating as... an

unappetising metaphor for the violence that human society wreaks." Simpson is right on target: Morrissey's perception of how society functions is violent. Individual sensitivity is weeded out; people are shoved behind "barriers", and so on. The album "Meat is Murder" (1985) addresses this theme from many directions.

The fundamental problem in Simpson's reading is that violence directed towards animals is seen as a "metaphor" for societal brutality. Morrissey always speaks of the issue entirely unmetaphorically. He is a preacher.

In my opinion Morrissey's vegetarian sermon has to be perceived as the lesson that it is. He wants to reveal the modern union of violence and hypocrisy. Contemporary meat consumption and the meat industry, like Richard Smith's liberal stance and gayness, are post-war institutions, and Morrissey feels that "everything modern is quite foul", as he has said. In this sense, he is a demoralist rather than a moralist. He ruins our modern morals by mocking them, by revealing their hypocritical nature.

Charles Baudelaire, the founder of literary dandyism, and thus Morrissey's predecessor, wrote that "it is more difficult for people of this century to believe in the Devil than love him. Everyone worships him, yet no one believes in him."

Correspondingly, Morrissey's vegetarian dictum is that *people of this century find it easier to perform violence rather than accept it*. The most insolent violence is always directed towards animals, and people find it easier to participate in it, rather than accept or name it: "The turkey you festively slice / is murder" ("Meat is Murder"). In the slogan the emphasis is on the predicate: meat *is* murder. This is not a metaphorical utterance.

To hate everything but to keep one's hate from erupting into violence. To hate with style. *Passive aggression*. That is the core of dandyism. The prevention and denial of one's own actions are the virtues and practices of the dandy. Simpson sums up Morrissey's loutish stance brilliantly: "A churlish refusal to suck Satan's cock."

Morrissey, Baudelaire, Bresson, Linkola¹⁰. All refusers, who cannot be seen simply as artists or thinkers. They can only be seen as dandies. They are my private canon. They have chosen to believe in the Devil rather than love him.

Dandyism belongs to the catholic cultural sphere because the dandy is a saint. "To be a great man and a saint to oneself, only this is important," writes Baudelaire. Protestant culture does not accommodate saints or dandies. If Lutheran culture is a democracy of sausage-eaters and beer drinkers, where everyone goes to heaven, then catholic culture idolises abstinence, strict rules, turning one's back on the world, personal strife and sacrifice. Catholicism, like dandyism, like Morrissey, relates to the world with contempt and masochism.

Simpson elevates Morrissey's catholic background to bear centrally on his art, and even if he doesn't mention dandyism, he is on the right track when he sanctifies Morrissey ("Saint Morrissey"). Dandy is the saint of the earthly regime. Richard Smith, on the other hand, blames Morrissey's catholic upbringing for his "erotophobia". There can hardly be a falsier reading. In a culture where "sex is more compulsory than the paying of taxes", (Simpson) "a refusal to suck Satan's cock" is a passive declaration of war and the most pronounced possible protest. It is the only real perversion.

Aura

If *dandy* describes Morrissey's authorial and cultural identity more exactly than pop star, artist or thinker, his works, like his songs, are always primarily concerned with the *voice* rather than the speaker or the narrator, let alone the subject. And this voice has an *aura*.

Walter Benjamin has pointed out that modernity includes inseparably the experience of the loss of the aura, which is the result of the reproducibility of works of art. This, like the original experience of the aura, is according to Benjamin a kind of *shock*. Writers have not had an "aura" for a long time, they have tumbled off Mount Parnassus, and the aural simulation inherent in modern culture is only a harmful nostalgia for a time defined by uniqueness and holiness.

That is to say, exactly those things that everyone affected by Morrissey has to experience not only in their soul, but also in their body. That voice penetrates them, it possesses them. This truly is a *shocking* experience, like Simpson writes in the introductory passage to this essay. Perhaps Benjamin's Marxist pessimism (or the fact that he died in 1940) prevented him from seeing that experience of uniqueness and holiness that pop music can raise in an individual. For example, every original Smiths single is a holy, powerfully aural object, but this is only half of it: it magically expands into the surrounding space when a thin needle touches it, and the amplifier transforms the grooves of the record into sound waves. A veritable impression of a presence is created. In this secular world this is a miracle.

Simpson also examines the covers of Morrissey's solo records. Almost without fail they comprise solely of Morrissey's image, often a close-up, and the word "MORRISSEY" in capital letters somewhere to the side of the image, like a halo (on the singles, even the name of the song is always printed on the back). Morrissey has not lost his aura. It has been conveyed upon him because of the reproducibility of works of art. Technology has created his voice.

For some reason, some people abhor Morrissey's voice. I once leafed through some old *Suosikki* magazines from the beginning of the 1980s looking for signs of Morrissey. The only thing I found was a review of the Smiths' single "The Boy with the Thorn in His Side" (1985) on Tapani Ripatti's regular feature "Jukebox Jury". The cryptic comments of the jury are symptomatic: "Weird yodelling towards the end." – "Pretenders sung by a live-fish." – "The singer sings as if singing into an old sock." – A member of the jury called Markku, who liked the song, said: "The vocalist's pleasant, frail voice tells of something."

Simpson quotes in his book Morrissey's description of what his fan-mail is like: "Mostly complaints, actually... It's often parents of fans who write and ask me to stop existing. Someone wrote that she couldn't manage to walk past her daughter's room, because she constantly played records by a man having his legs sawn off."

I don't know whether Morrissey's voice bothers people because (like Simpson presumes) it is radically personal and thus dangerous. For his fans, in any case, it is holy and unique. It is their *genius*, their guardian spirit, whose voice they hear in their head until the day they die.

A favourite among many fans, "Rubber Ring" (1985) is a prime example of this destiny:

But don't forget the songs that made you cry
and the songs that saved your life
Yes, you're older now
and you're a clever swine
but they were the only ones who ever stood by you...
And when you're dancing and laughing and finally living
hear my voice in your head and think of me kindly

But unlike the Roman genius, who was born and lived and died with its master, Morrissey will never die. His voice is preserved. It is eternal, and beyond time. It constantly seeks new victims.

Under the influence

Last year (2003) Morrissey came out with a collection of his favourite songs in the series "Under the Influence" by the label DMC. The record comes with his story of how he became to be affected by pop music. The text is a rare example of his literary style, which is considerably more eloquent than the one present in the interviews and more metaphoric than that of his lyrics.

Reading the essay, I regressed to the 18 year-old reader of Saima Harmaja, and I couldn't help but translate it. For instance, this is how he writes about Nico: "Her voice equalled the sound of a body being thrown out of a window – entirely without hope, of this world, or the next, or the previous. Onstage, she moved like a big bleak creaking house, never once altering the direction of her eyes. I am in love."

Morrissey's essay for "Under the Influence" deals with the unholy alliance between pop music and death. Pop shoves death aside for a moment. But simultaneously it makes it painfully apparent: "Of all of life's vanities, the singing voice reveals the most. Every day life is troubled by the inevitable advancing darkness, where our only certainties are pitiless decay and the final port of Death. Our days are stacked with pretended joys. But, so what."

The last two chapters require no explanation: "Klaus Nomi's name, and the names of others on this CD, conjure an atmosphere and a special standard because they were (or are) true pop artists. The mere sound of their names is as powerful as their work, so that we only need to hear *that* name in order to glide into a half-dream state. It is the terrifying power of the true pop artist, who seems to finally come into full bloom only at the hour of Death (as if Life is *just not quite* the point). Klaus Nomi, Nico, Johnny Thunders, Marc Bolan, Diana Dors, Joey Ramone, Charlie Feathers and maybe several other voices and players on this CD, all now rest with the martyred dead."

"Will I, too, die?"

Sources used:

Mark Simpson, *Saint Morrissey*. SAF Publishing, London 2003. Richard Smith, *Seduced and Abandoned: Essays on Gay Men and Popular Music*. Cassell, London 1995.

- 1 An influential independent radio station in Helsinki in the 1980s. [Translator's note]
- 2 A large suburban "city" of Helsinki. [Translator's note]
- 3 A generic Finnish teeny music magazine, similar to *Smash Hits*. [Translator's note]
- 4 A slightly more serious music paper, similar to NME. [Translator's note]
- 5 Finnish 1950s working-class writer, a kind of unofficial national writer of the post-war era. [Translator's note]
- 6 1970s singer-songwriter, traditionally held as the finest rock lyricist in Finland. [Translator's note]
- 7 A widely read Finnish writer who died young, comparable in effect to Sylvia Plath. [Translator's note]
- 8 A small independent publishing house in Helsinki. [Translator's note]
- 9 A large and conservative publishing house in Finland. [Translator's note]
- 10 Pentti Linkola, Finnish writer and radical environmentalist, often labelled as an "eco-fascist". [Translator's note]

Published 2004-08-24

Original in Finnish

Translation by Jean Ramsay

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