



Gripscapes

Norman Morrissey

(Echoing Green Press, 2021)

As a poet, Norman Morrissey was highly productive and thematically wide ranging. The previously unpublished poems collected in *Gripscapes* are a welcome addition to his oeuvre. At least half the poems come from the first half of Morrissey's writing life, whilst some space is also given to poems published in *Ecce* publications appearing after *Strandloop*, the

selected poems the poet signed off on one year before his death in 2017.

While *Strandloop*, “arguably weighted towards the second half of [Morrissey's] writing history”, could be said to be the stronger collection, editor John van Wyngaard's generous selections in *Gripscapes* leave enough room for readers to choose their own favourites. Further, many of the treasures unearthed in *Gripscapes* could easily sit alongside the poems chosen for *Strandloop*.

Culled mostly from the poet's pocket notebooks, *Gripscapes* is fascinating in the way it allows one to witness the development of Morrissey's craft. It is rewarding, too, for the same reasons that all of Morrissey's poetry is worth reading. As poems like 'Dragonfly', 'Buck's Head', 'Flowers', 'Leviathan Re-Visited', 'Sam', 'Love-Code', 'Watcher', 'Span', 'Missed Chance' and 'The First Eden' make clear, Morrissey is almost invariably compelling in his observations of animals, insects, and the natural world, demonstrating a close attentiveness, often paired with a characteristic self-reflexiveness, which makes them deeply engaging.

Other poems underline, equally, that Morrissey was also a vivid and affecting portraitist, and a chronicler of all kinds of relationships. In a later untitled poem, for example, he begins a nuanced description of an elderly couple with the following lines:

... one blessed pair so long wed

they look at each other amidst some vast family bash
only in simple utterly exact
caresses of meaning...

(Untitled 5)

Elsewhere, Morrissey as a portraitist would include poems where he revisits romantic relationships—such as ‘Sandy’, ‘Marriage’, ‘Goddess’, ‘Installation: Nude on a Bicycle’, ‘Prophecy’—and writes for a friend (‘For Anton’), a sibling (‘Comet’) and a daughter (‘Full-Fruited’). Morrissey’s often confessional self-portraits or ‘conversations with self’ are devoid of self-pity; they are characterised, instead, by insight and an unflinching honesty (‘Despair’, or ‘A Platitude Confirmed’).

His reflections on the writing process and its value—“...a poem’s just a kick at the wind anyway” (‘Kick at the Wind’) and “Poetry / is enacted proof / that pain / can be forced / to give a lamp / to any darkness” (‘Lamp’)—are another highlight. *Gripscapes* is peppered throughout with pithy and gemlike turns of phrase.

The Appendix contains a wonderfully lucid and illuminating essay by John van Wyngaard in which he maps out and explores the thematic territory of Morrissey’s poetry. The subject matter ranges from a considered examination of where and how the poet can be said to situate himself politically in his poetry, to a commentary on Morrissey’s use of a “loose tercet form”. Van Wyngaard also meticulously connects the dots with respect to the poet’s primary influences, among them Yeats, Heaney, Wordsworth and Lawrence.

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