

saint morrissey

mark simpson

Mark Simpson is the author of several critically-acclaimed books, including:

- MALE IMPERSONATORS “Brilliant.” - *Observer*
- IT’S A QUEER WORLD “You’d have to be a chronic
depressive not to laugh.”
- *New Statesman & Society*
- THE QUEEN IS DEAD “Something of a masterpiece.”
- *Independent*
- ANTI-GAY “The year’s most controversial book.”
- *BBC Radio 5*
- SEX TERROR “Every page has gem-like sentences Zadie Smith
would give her white teeth for.”
- *Independent on Sunday*

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*For the other Steven in my life.
Also a ruffian butterfly collector.*

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contents

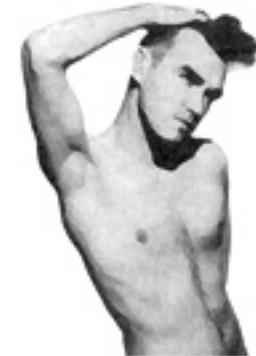
1. preface: i am a living sign	9
2. introduction: on a hillside desolate	15
3. you are your mother's only son.....	31
4. dump her on the doorstep, girl.....	47
5. i need advice.....	63
6. others conquered love.....	75
7. stay on my arm you little charmer	89
8. a murderous desire.....	97
9. celibate cries.....	113
10. it took a tattooed boy.....	129
11. take me back to dear old blighty.....	163
12. fame, fame, fatal fame.	195
13. index	219

‘Saints should always be judged guilty until they are
proved innocent.’

George Orwell, *Shooting an Elephant*

‘Every great man nowadays has his disciples, and it
is always Judas who writes the biography.’

Oscar Wilde, *Intentions*



i am a living sign

1

Morrissey.

The name, like the artist, like the unmistakable if somewhat dated hairdo, stands apart. Aloof in an age of ghastly accessibility. Aristocratic in an age of dumb democracy. Inimitable. Indigestible. *Irredeemable.*

Instead of being famous for being famous, Morrissey has the breathtaking petulance to be famous for being Morrissey.

And this from a pop performer! The former frontman of Manchester indie legends The Smiths and long-distance solo artist since their demise in 1987, is the anti-Pop Idol: a reminder that pop music might not just be something you have to do, like expensive dentistry, or cheap sycophancy, to become what everyone *really* wants to become these days – a TV presenter.

A reminder that pop could in fact be literally an end in itself: a (dangerously careening) vehicle for someone's prodigious, provocative, poisonous perfectly beautiful scorn. Like his hair, Morrissey has succeeded in fashioning his shyness into an elegant weapon.

Truth be told, Morrissey should never have been a pop star at all – he should, by his own admission, have been a librarian, like his mum (though perhaps, given the gallows humour of much of his lyrics, he

did end up following in the footsteps of his hospital porter dad). Of course, librarians are very dangerous people, and bear more grudges than High Court judges – so you can imagine what happens when one ends up on *Top of the Pops* with the words 'MARRY ME' scrawled on their scrawny chest in magic marker.

Morrissey was the last, greatest and most gravely worrying product of an era when pop music was all there was and all anyone could want. As anyone young enough to remember that time knows, sex, drugs and materialism are pisspoor substitutes for pop music. Gloriously, terrifyingly, pop music was invested with far too much meaning and significance by a whole generation of young people back then. And no one had over-invested pop music with more meaning than Steven Patrick Morrissey, who spent the Seventies in his box bedroom in his mother's Manchester council-house listening to the New York Dolls and Sandie Shaw and wondering how he was going to become that strange, transfigured, transmitted thing, a pop star.

In that brief window of opportunity called the early Eighties the ultimate fan somehow spectacularly managed to become the ultimate star – one with a global following that to this day displays the kind of devotion to him unmatched by the fans of any other contemporary artist. The kind of devotion that only dead stars command. Or deserve.

Worse, this criminally shy working class Anglo-Irish boy from the mean Manchester suburbs of Stretford managed to become a pop star on his own terms, in his own right and in his own words: bizarre enough back then, but an unheard-of outrage in today's music business.

Bookish, reclusive-but-pugnacious – avowedly *celibate* – with an almost Puritan disdain for cheap glamour and armed with a deeply unhealthy interest in language, wit and ideas Morrissey succeeded in perverting pop music for a while and making it that most absurd of things, *literary*. Some were moved to talk of how much Morrissey owed that blousy Anglo-Irish nineteenth century torch-singer and stand-up comedian Oscar Wilde, the 'first pop star'. Arguably, poor Oscar was merely an early failed and somewhat overweight prototype for Morrissey.

* * *

Now that the Twentieth Century itself has already been counted down like a particularly tedious Sunday evening singles chart and the world has woken up to a Hit-me-over-the-head Parade of Boy Blands and Girl Gropes, even to his enemies Morrissey is looking more and more like the man he told us, again and again, he was: the celibate climax to the once-splendid and now well-and-truly spannered tradition of English pop.

The man from whom, in other words, pop music and England never really recovered.

You think I exaggerate? You think me partisan? Well, of course.... But even the *NME*, Britain's most famous music newspaper and his sworn enemy since the early Nineties when it tried to assassinate him in one of the greatest *crimes passionel* in music history, in 2002 finally faced facts (and all those torrid Morrissey centrefolds they ran in the Eighties), naming him the 'most influential artist ever'.

Morrissey may stand apart and aloof, but he still casts a long disdainful shadow over the current British music scene *almost* without trying, even from the distant, sybaritic comfort of Hollywood where he has lived since the late Nineties, partly to be closer to his largest fan-base, partly to be within idolatrous distance of the grave of his secret heroine Bette Davies the 'difficult' diva who defied the studio system and almost won, but mostly because of a fabulously sulky desire to continue punishing the English for their ingratitude by the most painful means possible – depriving them of himself.

But then, one of the central paradoxes of the Morrissey phenomenon has been that whilst no one gives more of themselves in their art and their performance, no one is more selfish in the purest sense of the word. Morrissey is possibly the last privately owned company in a world where artists are floated on the stock exchange of public opinion.

As a result he has somehow managed to hang on, not only to his integrity, but also his privacy – in an age where transparency and confession is increasingly compulsory even for mere nobodies, let alone artists who have been globally famous for nearly two decades. Even in an hour-long TV documentary on Britain's Channel 4 in 2003 (his first major TV appearance in sixteen years) he managed to give noth-

ing away except his relationship with hairdressers. Like his private life, his personality remains for most a puzzle to be unlocked. To the world, Morrissey remains a baffling enigma, an almost *occult* mystery.

Yet there is something rather pertinent here which everyone except his fans seem to have overlooked: *Morrissey is not a mystery at all*. There is no need to train a telephoto lens on his bathroom window or rummage through his dustbin looking for evidence of lesbianism. To get to the melancholic heart of Morrissey's condition, to get inside the wasteland of his head – or his bed – there is only one thing you need to do.

Listen to him.

Granted, this requires a certain amount of recklessness. Not only is Morrissey one of the greatest pop lyricists – and probably *the* greatest ever lyricist of desire – that has ever moaned, he is fully present in his songs as few other artists are, in a way which fans of most other performers, quite rightly, wouldn't tolerate for a moment. In an age when 'truth' is whatever keeps the customer (vaguely) satisfied, Morrissey resolutely delivers only his own. Frequently unpalatable, it is often as hilarious as it is mortifying; after all, since desire is his subject – or rather his tormenter – frustration is frequently his material.

Morrissey's work is his life: there is no 'clocking off', as he puts it. That is the key to his greatness and to his tragedy. Morrissey is a record to be played, never a life to be lived. One day perhaps, in spite of all the evidence to the contrary, a fascinating secret life of scandal and debauchery may be revealed (and I suspect that no one would be happier than Morrissey at such an exposé). But who would bet money on it?

In his singular *oeuvre*, which must include his interviews, in themselves frequently riotously entertaining performances, Morrissey offers himself up, dandy Christ-like, as a fascinating, foppish 'fuck up', atoning for all our neuroses. As the novelist and Morrissey's 'sister-in-law' Michael Bracewell has suggested, for his audience Moz represents not only the ultimate pop star but the ultimate patient, one they want to kiss better: *I am sick and I am dull/and I am plain/how dearly I'd love to get carried away...*

Hence like its subject, *Saint Morrissey* is not a conventional biography. Instead it is a 'psycho-bio' – one that does not presume to put

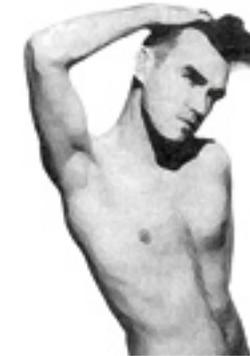
the performer on the couch as he's already chained himself there, but does try to listen carefully, and informed more by literary than clinical psychoanalysis offers an interpretation and a kind of diagnosis of this famous patient's extraordinarily creative if rather disturbing symptoms. And how he has succeeded in turning them into a global epidemic.

Saint Morrissey is an inquiry conducted through words, images, and music into the beautiful but damaged soul of a man who has willed *himself* out of words, images, and music. It is a history of a man as a history of ideas, not all of them terribly wholesome.

It does not, however, promise any cure.

* * *

But before any of *that*, before we start rummaging around inside Mr Morrissey's enormous head, please indulge me for a moment as I presume to lie on the couch myself and tell you something about Mr Morrissey and me...



on a hillside desolate

I think writing about unhappiness is probably the source of my popularity, if I have any. After all, most people are unhappy, don't you think?

PHILIP LARKIN

All people are lonely in some ways. Some people are lonely in all ways.

NOW VOYAGER

2

I remember it clearly. All too clearly. Seems like only yesterday and several lifetimes ago all at once. 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.

I was minding my own business slouching on the sofa, picking wax out of my ear and watching a pop music programme on Channel Four called *The Tube* while I waited for my tea. Then, without warning, this pale, emaciated James Dean double, clearly much more in need of my fish-fingers and chips than I was, wearing some woman's blouse, a plastic necklace, a pair of jeans two sizes too large and a head three sizes too big, leapt out at me with his mouth open: *when in this charming car this charming man...*

I stopped picking my ear. Of course, I should have jammed my fingers in both ears.

He was singing at me, right at me, in the most indecently direct and alarmingly fey way. He'd singled me out for his warped attentions, I could tell. And it wasn't just any old pop lyric you could hear at that time – the sort of thing that's a bit pretentious like The Associates, or

daft, like The Cure, or kinky and daft and pretentious like Soft Cell – but basically harmless. Oh no, it was, well... *bloody poetry*. How are you supposed to get over that?

Bloody poetry like I'd never heard before, but which spoke directly and assuredly to a happy-sad part of me that I barely knew existed myself – so how the hell did he know it was there? *Why pamper life's complexity when the leather runs smooth on the passenger seat*. Such a strange thing to sing in a pop song. Such a disturbing thing. Such a thing that shouldn't really mean anything but which, you couldn't help but notice, even without those intense, over-expressive beetle-black eyebrows aimed at you, meant far too much. Such a thing that made it sound as if I'd never heard a pop song before.

And that voice, coasting, feet off the pedals, over the chiming, tearful, bright guitar chords that also sounded entirely new and familiar, young and ancient all at once; so naïve and wise, wistful and lustful, carefree and very, very controlled – and this is the really ill part – so clearly taking pleasure from the feeling of the words in his mouth: *this charm-ming mman...* A pleasure in possession, for these were incontrovertibly his words and nobody else's, with more lyricism in a single syllable than most popsters had in their entire back catalogue: *It's gruesome that someone so handsome should care*. This was an alliteration of the soul.

Oh yes, I knew he was a wrong-un. But I couldn't help myself. There he was, blouse billowing, junk jewellery jiggling, economy-sized Adam's apple bobbing and his skinny arm windmilling a poor abused bunch of gladioli round and round and round, like a floral mace, hitting me over the head again and again until I felt so dizzy that I didn't know what was the right or wrong thing to do any more. Petals were raining everywhere, like fairy dust, like free drugs, like jism, like poison. And all this well before the nine o'clock watershed.

I was alone with this man for less time than it takes to boil an egg. But he knew what he was doing alright, and he made sure it was two and a half minutes I would never get over.

Accomplices? Well, I have a vague memory of three fresh-faced, slightly shifty lads looking on, smirking behind their instruments. I

think he must have hit them over the head with his gladioli too as whenever they stole glances at him they had big, round dazed eyes, as if they'd do anything he asked. I tried to get away, really I did. But I was rooted to the spot, like an especially pathetic victim in a Freddie Kruger film. This strange man's sense of abandon, his openness, his archness, his tenderness, his viciousness, couldn't be resisted. I just couldn't look away. He was, simply, the funniest, saddest, smartest, loveliest, deadliest thing I'd ever seen.

Of course, I also knew the moment I saw him that he was the man my parents had warned me about: the man who steals children from their destiny, that makes good sons bad. But when I tried to open my mouth to call out for help, I just found myself singing along: *Will nature make a man of me yet?*

I can still hear that unearthly noise he made – YOW! – a falsetto animal yelp of release and abandon, not heard since Little Richard found God, Elvis joined the Army or Ziggy climbed back inside his spaceship. It was the cry of something unwholesome, unearthly and unfed, unleashed upon a world too flabby and too soft to get away, to want to get away.

A yell of triumph, I think, at having caught me: I'd accepted the ride this charming-alarming man had offered me.

As if there were any other response possible.

* * *

Like many such victims, at the time I was in deep denial about what had happened. I pretended it was just a bit of fun, a laugh. That it was just 'pop music'. I tried to forget about it. Put it down to experience. After all, I didn't have time for such foolishness. I was Going To University. I was Going to Experience Life – or at least leave home, make some new friends, get drunk and maybe even get laid. I certainly wasn't going to let this blousy madman spoil it all.

Of course, the reality was that I'd taken a lift to somewhere I'd never quite be able to come back from; I'd just met someone that I would never quite manage to get rid of.

Within just a few months I was to give up higher education as a bad mistake and find myself in January 1984 on the dole and shivering in

a rented room in Levenshulme, a depressed and dilapidated district of South Manchester without the romance of Whalley Range. I kidded myself that I was still in control, that I was hot on the trail of Real Life now – and somehow managed to overlook the fact that I'd ended up in Morrissey's hometown.

And then The Smiths' eponymous debut album was released.

I can't remember how I came to buy it. I didn't plan to, it just happened. In a haze. But listening to/mainlining that album, as I did constantly for weeks, I was happy to be shipwrecked in Manchester, and Morrissey was both Siren and Man Friday to me – the seductive architect of my doom, and my sole, loyal companion in the wilderness. I lay on my mattress gasping and panting as I listened – above the sound of my teeth chattering: *under the iron bridge we kissed/and although I ended up with sore lips/it just wasn't like the old days any more/no it wasn't like those days/am I still ill?*

Who needs heroin or analysis when you have lines like these? With their curiously hypnotic self-sufficient, self-mocking nostalgia they speak of a longing for something lost that was almost certainly never possessed in the first place, and which could never be recaptured anyway even if it were. The mixture, the intimacy of longing and lack is so acute, so intense that it even produces 'sore lips'. It's a song of innocence and experience that is entirely adolescent but at the same time seems to do away with adolescence altogether.

The pathology at the root of 'Still Ill' and *The Smiths* and Morrissey's art is the familiar modern malaise of self-reflexivity – an illness that the singer makes entirely his own but somehow universal at the same time. It's melancholia mixed with nostalgia and incubated in Morrissey's heart, head and mouth to produce... melanalgia. *Does the body rule the mind/or does the mind rule the body?/I dunno....*

Sickness never sounded or felt so good. For my part, sharing that box room and mattress with him, I was like thousands of others at that time rapidly developing a full-blown case of melanalgia myself. I may have felt unloved and unlovable but I also derived an exquisite, narcotic satisfaction from the knowing of these things and the ability to laugh under my breath at the perversity of that knowledge. Instead of feeling eighteen and inept, I felt a thousand years old and wiser

than the hills, and somehow this allowed me to float above the pathetic reality of my life. To this day, Smiths songs reek to me of cheap hair gel, unwashed sheets, damp walls, badly ventilated gas fires and impossible, intoxicating expectations. That's to say, a time when I had everything.

I had precisely one love affair to my credit at that point. Yet, according to Morrissey, in that one long, drawn out, pathetic, spotty disappointment, I had experienced everything there is to experience in Love. He cooed in my ear that yes, adolescence, like The Smiths and pop music, might be a moment that passes, that one day you might be laughing and dancing and finally living, but that feeling of aloneness and the bitter-sweet prospect of a life of disappointments stretching out before you, like a football supporter who chooses the wrong team to follow, is the purest, truest, noblest feeling you will ever have.

In other words, he told me terrible, venomous, mad things that innocent teenagers should never ever be told. Precisely because, of course, they're true.

In fact, *The Smiths* and The Smiths were experiences from which not only I but, I'd like to think, the whole of Western civilisation never recovered. *The Smiths* was not so much an album as a serious illness – the kind that you secretly relish because in the grip of its fevers and sweats, its aches and agues, it transforms your view of the world and leaves you so charmingly debilitated, so thoroughly exhausted, that afterwards you almost find the idea of yourself quite likeable. To this day there are precious few Smiths songs that can't mist my vision; but pretty much every track on *The Smiths* can have me abashedly wiping my eyes – if I make the mistake of really listening to it.

Not because they are 'sad' or 'miserable', but because they are so unutterably, unfeasibly, unlawfully *handsome*. Which is the deadliest drug of all. If ever there was proof that Keats's assertion that 'beauty is truth, truth beauty' is anything more than just a trite line, or simply wishful thinking, then it is in *The Smiths*.

* * *

The Smiths is the greatest of The Smiths' albums, making it of course the Greatest Album of All Time. The first Smiths album had to be the best. It's the most immediate, the freshest, the purest and the most deprived. Its power and poignancy is in the final emergence into the light, blinking and gasping, of all the passions and preoccupations that consumed Morrissey for years, alone in his darkened bedroom.

Like the first single, 'Hand in Glove', the first album has an evangelical brilliance, an urgency and malice that fills you with a lust to go out shoplifting expensive perfume with which to spray bus-shelters, or seditiously stay in bed all day picking your nose. With bafflingly beautiful tracks such as 'Still Ill', 'Reel Around the Fountain', 'Suffer Little Children' and 'I Don't Owe You Anything', *The Smiths* did nothing short of reinvent desire and turn it into something palpable, something communicable, something transmissible, something catchable – the inevitable effect of capturing the fickle, fleeting essence of it so definitively.

The much mentioned poor production on the album, apparently a source of great disappointment to Morrissey and Marr themselves, sounded and still sounds perfect to my ear. Its very lack of hi-tech professionalism, the slightly muffled, distant quality, especially of some of the vocals, even the rough balancing that allows Mike Joyce's drums to dominate too often, lends it an innocence and energy which underscores the remarkable depth of its knowledge, as well as reminding you where this album is coming from – someone's bedroom, someone's past, someone's bottomless frustration. *The Smiths* represents a once-in-a-lifetime explosion of suffocated ambition, disappointed desire and blocked aggression that could never be repeated, not even by Morrissey.

The official 'rock critic' best album, *The Queen is Dead* (decreed 'Best Rock Album Ever' by *Melody Maker* in its Top Albums of the Millennium list), is a very fine album, and in fact the second best album in the world. But the problem, or rather the slight and minor flaw with *Queen* compared to *The Smiths*, is that it sounds just a little too accomplished, a little too professional, a little too grown up.

Not content with just reinventing-perverting desire, Morrissey also reinvented-perverted the Eighties – or at least the version of it that I and other losers like me inhabited. Thousands of young people fled to Morrissey's version of that decade, abandoning in self-righteous disgust the shiny High Street one that everyone else seemed to live in: the wake-me-up-before-you-go-go-kajagoogoo-morning-in-America-do-they-know-it's-Christmas-the-price-is-right-for-I-am-your-laydee-and-yoo-are-my-maan-this-lady's-not-for-turning-gotcha-this-time-you've-gone-too-far-Alexis-red-gold-and-green-cruise-missiles-are-the-guarantors-of-peace-we-begin-bombing-in-five-minutes-just-rejoice-at-that-news-you're-about-as-easy-as-a-nuclear-war-isn't-Princess-Di-pretty-Eighties.

It was a difficult decade for idealists, and not only because crassness and shoulder pads were all the rage. Margaret Thatcher's constant tuneless refrain 'No Alternative' was the biggest-selling single of the decade. The crushing weight of mainstream stupidity was becoming increasingly impossible to resist with marginal eccentricity, quaint lyricism and a sketchy knowledge of the works of Pierre Joseph Proudhon. In bitter hindsight, it's possible to see that the Eighties was nothing less than a glacier composed of icy common sense and hard commercial realities which smoothed and ground the culture flat and featureless ready for the Nothing Nineties...

But before that glacier did its terrible work, there were still quite a few young people who dared to be different, to dream, to be . . . well, *prats*. Even punk's nihilism had been based on an essentially idealistic belief in the sacred role of youth – young people's divine right to rebel, reject, purify and generally behave like a bunch of total wankers.

The post-punk early Eighties may have been an increasingly disillusioned and cynical period, but it still boasted the last generation of young people who were naïve enough to believe that there was an alternative – and that a pop star prophet would come and save them from dowdy darkness and take them to the lacy light with his fey ways and magic spangly cod-piece. This was the last generation to actually listen to pop records, all those who came after would merely shuffle

tracks. And I mean really, really, listen, in a way which young people today would, quite rightly, consider merely 'sad'.

This intensity was partly down to the fact that young people in the early Eighties had nothing better to do (Ecstasy had not yet been added to potato crisps and watching your parents' home-made pornography on the Internet was not a common teenage hobby back then), and partly because they really did believe that if they listened hard enough and often enough they would hear The Answer.

It was the measure of both his genius and his dangerousness that Morrissey, the latest, last – and most pre-eminent – in a long line of pop wrecks turned pied pipers, wrote lyrics that finally justified this kind of hopeless attention, right at the very moment when pop as a whole was descending into pointless gibberish. The situationist, anarchic stunts and poses of punk had long run out of steam; the glamorous, post-modern sashays and simpering strategies of the New Romantics had been shown to be ultimately empty if rather gorgeous attention-seeking, while the initially exciting urgency and icy aestheticism of electro pop was about to descend into a disco inferno.

Morrissey saved pop not just by making it lyrical and melodic again (with help from Marr's sacred guitars), but by making it intellectual, by making it literary – something from which it would never recover (even Bowie's 'cut-up' lyrics had been merely artful where Morrissey's were inspired; coldly contrived where Morrissey's were wittily, deadly accurate; ironically, or perhaps inevitably, in making pop music, for want of a better word, intellectual, Morrissey succeeded in provoking some of the most passionately emotional responses to pop music ever). As a final proof of his destructive creative genius, Mozzer, the greatest enemy of the Eighties and everything it represented, would ultimately come to be remembered as its greatest artist.

Morrissey was the pop Anti-Christ in a way which a contemporary controversy merchant like Marilyn Manson cannot hope to be, no matter how many gallons of eye shadow he sprays on of a morning. Manson offers only a grotesque pantomime and travesty of everything that a pop/rock star is supposed to be; a *reductio ad absurdum*, in which all the drama of rock music is externalised – which may be ironic and, frankly, fucking hilarious but is no more inspiring or sub-

versive for that. Morrissey on the other hand was the actual, fleshly (though maybe not that fleshly) antithesis of everything that pop and rock had come to stand for. He was bookish; he wore NHS spectacles and a hearing aid on stage; he was celibate. Worst of all, he was sincere. He said what he meant and passionately meant what he said. Especially when he was joking. Some thought him an arch ironist and stylist, a sultan of insincerity, like his Wildean role model, but they weren't quite right. Even though hyperbole was his idea of a healthy balance, Morrissey wasn't making it up as he went along.

In assaulting pop's nostrums and clichés and remaking it in his own image, Morrissey made it about the one thing both parents and pop music had been united against: intelligence. Forget drugs, forget promiscuity, forget green hair and safety pins, and certainly forget androgynous silver body-suits. As Morrissey himself demonstrated incontrovertibly, *Thinking Too Much* was undoubtedly the most degenerate, most anti-social habit any teenager ever picked up.

This was the vengeful virus of Moz Pop: he made pop music which was so intoxicatingly melancholic, so dangerously thoughtful, so seductively funny that it lured its listeners, most of whom were not really damned just slightly cursed, into a relationship with him and his music instead of the world. The Pop Pied Piper knows that life doesn't imitate great art, it is destroyed by it.

* * *

It certainly did for mine. I was the barely living proof that whether or not an unexamined life is not worth living, an over-examined one simply isn't lived. During my Manchester embalment I foreswore the corruption of the world in the form of meat and lived on a diet of curried lentils (which didn't help the condensation problem), and heady books (which didn't help the alienation problem). There were a limited number of reasons for actually leaving my room. Shopping for food wasn't really necessary, as a large bag of lentils lasts approximately fifteen years.

I would however visit second-hand clothes shops or Manchester's Central Library, both mortuaries of dead people's fancies. There were hours of bleak fun to be had in sifting through the detritus of loves,

hates and passions just like mine. Wearing clothes worn by people now perished, and reading books written by hands now melted, wasn't simply an economic necessity, oh no, it was a symbolic protest against the Way of the World and a championing of the dejected and down-trodden in a decade in which shopping and superficiality were rapidly becoming the national religion.

Like much of early Eighties youth, in other words, I was unemployed.

Difficult to believe, but back then unemployment and a certain kind of poverty was actually fashionable, so much so that even southern career-girls Wham! noticed and one of their early singles, 'Young Guns', extolled the benefits of a life on benefits and the hipness of the DHSS (the government department which then paid them). Which was quite fortunate really, given that three million people were on the dole – most of them in the North, and most of them, unlike me, not through choice.

But the great thing about being unemployed in the early Eighties was that you could devote yourself to the noble and sacred and artistic pursuit of Being Yourself. And Being Yourself was undoubtedly a full-time occupation: England owed us all a living and the fortnightly Giro was really an Arts Council grant. Certainly, being surplus to capitalism gave you plenty of time to practise your chords and stage moves. Or at least think about practising them. Finding a real job rather than planning your pop career was considered a compromise at best, collaboration at worst. After all, being a pop star was the only way you would get paid more than Supplementary Benefit for Being Yourself (though as the history of pop shows, making it as a pop star is actually about Becoming Someone Else – or in Morrissey's case, Becoming the Person You Were Meant to Be).

I discovered an amazing fact while on the dole: if you just ate lentils and porridge, walked everywhere, wore second-hand plastic shoes and nursed a half pint of beer all evening on the only night you went out all week, you could in fact save money. It was, I suppose, another way of cheating The System. It was also very Northern.

Essentially, the trick to saving money on the dole was to minimise your life functions until they could barely be measured. This meant

staying in bed for most of the day, while wearing two layers of clothes, with your overcoat over the bed to save fuel. In other words, you had to actually die, in an economical if not a clinical sense. (Hence it seems very likely that Morrissey was rather good at saving money during all those years he was on the dole).

My mate Herman, so dubbed because he looked a bit like Herman Munster, was another expert at saving money on the dole. Perhaps this was because he'd been on the dole for longer than anyone else I knew. Herman was a few years older than me and had been on the dole since the Seventies, which seemed to me like another century. There wasn't anything Herman didn't know about minimising your life functions. People used to come to him from as far afield as Stockport for tips on how to avoid eating for three months without going into a coma, something which would actually have been a very desirable, very economical condition if it hadn't meant that you would miss signing on and therefore have your dole stopped. After all, Herman had managed to buy equipment for his band, Three Fish, out of the money he'd saved on the dole. It had taken him about five years in bed.

The only activity that Herman actually recommended when you were trying to save money on the dole, other than staying in bed all day holding your breath, was visiting the dentist. This was because dental care was free for the unemployed. 'We may be starving,' Herman would grin, proudly showing off a set of gleaming pearlies that made his vitamin B12-deficient skin look even greyer than it was, 'but we got perfect teeth!' A Wildean sentiment that no doubt Morrissey would have endorsed.

* * *

Manchester itself was somewhat malnourished in the early Eighties: a vicious economic recession engineered by Morrissey's love-hated Margaret Thatcher, designed to get rid of the troublesome working class and turn Britain into a post-industrial service economy based on finance, property and hairdressing, had hit the North harder than anywhere else.

Its front teeth weren't in good shape either. Apart from the occasional tatty pub and Job Centre, and a confusing number of bus and railway stations whose purpose seemed to be to evacuate people from the centre rather than bring them in, its heart seemed to be mostly a collection of boarded up warehouses and abandoned Victorian office-buildings – glazed red-brick Neo-Gothic edifices that were once full of people working for life assurance companies, but whose sightless windows now bore testament to a society that had given up on the future. Most commercial life seemed to have retreated to the climate-controlled windowless refuge of the day-glo orange shopping centre hell known as The Arndale, a structure clearly based on a prototype model for *Space 1999's* Moonbase Alpha, one discarded because it didn't look convincing enough (mercifully it was bombed by the IRA the following decade).

Manchester, the Los Angeles of the nineteenth century, the city to which the world once looked as The Future, the hub of industry and enterprise where Engels lived so as to study capitalism at its most dynamic, was at its lowest ebb, deprived of a future by its own past. The perfect Diamond Dogsian backdrop, in other words, to the arrival of Morrissey, a prophet of doom drunk on nostalgia.

Of course, from the perverse pop view of things, which weaves joy out of misery, beauty out of boredom, this was Manchester's Golden Age, one that had begun in the late Seventies with The Buzzcocks, Joy Division, The Fall, and the presiding mad genius of Tony Wilson's Factory Records, and would last at least another ten years. If English pop was essentially Northern, and it was of course (just like Englishness itself), Manchester in its doldrums had become its pop capital. It wasn't only The Smiths that formed in the unemployed early Eighties: James and 'baggy' stalwarts of the early Nineties 'Madchester' scene the Stone Roses and the Happy Mondays also decided to take on the world at this time. If you have nothing it's easier to demand everything.

Twenty years later, those warehouses are million pound loft apartments, those abandoned red-brick neo-Gothic buildings are designer bars, cafes and hotels. Brand spanking new buildings sheeted with green glass that look like giant top-of-the-line Swedish stereo systems

shoot up overnight. Manchester, thanks to the IRA and an explosion of design terrorism has been improved out of all recognition, and quite possibly, existence, and is now a place where a London hairdresser could happily live. And many do. Manchester City Centre these days looks like a place that has everything.

But perhaps it also has nothing. Pop music is of course over. It isn't needed any more. What is the point of an aesthetic rebellion against the world if the world has been aestheticised? How can you deploy your youth to refuse the world – or demand it – when the world is much better looking than you could ever hope to be? Manchester, so much to answer for, has upstaged its inhabitants.

* * *

As for me, well, I'm not sure I ever made it out of the early Eighties, thanks to you-know-who. I did however make it out of Manchester. Sort of. After a few months in Levenshulme I decided that there was more to life than lying in bed all day farting, and sold my stereo and *The Smiths*, repaired that punctured bicycle, started eating meat again, and then ran away to sea, working as a deckhand on sailing yachts in the Mediterranean, hoping nature would make a man of me.

It very nearly did. But when I got back to Blighty a few months later, bronzed and with my, er... horizons... broadened, *Hatful of Hollow* had been released. I took to my mattress for a fortnight. I was right back where I started, though this time in a squat in South London.

I tried going cold turkey and living in the real world rather than a shell. I took a succession of jobs including: TV deliveryman, bouncer, cocktail waiter, warehouseman, double-glazing salesman, gym instructor, house painter, chauffeur, photo-love novel model (the horror!), all of which came to an abrupt end after I asked myself foolish questions like: *why do I smile at people I'd much rather kick in the eye?*

I only need to mention the fatal names, *Meat is Murder*, *The Queen is Dead*, *The World Won't Listen*, *Strangeways Here We Come*, and you'll know what happened to the rest of my mid-Eighties. When *The Smiths* split in 1987 I was elated: I thought I might have a chance now, that I might be finally rid of this guy and his terrible illness. But then he released *Viva Hate* and some of the highest charting, most

intoxicating singles of his career. In the early Nineties, desperate now, aware that my youth was already slipping out of sight like a boat on the Manchester Ship Canal, I tried running away again, this time to the the West Coast of the US where I thought I'd be safe. And I was doing OK, really I was, until someone put on a copy of *Louder Than Bombs*. The cloudless Californian sky immediately turned leaden and I was back in the UK inside a week.

On my return I drove five hours non-stop and flat out in a borrowed ten-year-old Renault 5 automatic, shredding the transmission on the Pennines, just to get to see him perform in Glasgow. I had to see my dealer. Of course, the bastard stood me up. The concert was cancelled – due to 'ill health'. A bitter, Morrisseyan joke.

When I got to hear *Kill Uncle* things began to look up. I felt optimistic about the future at last. I thought that we were finally through, that I was over him, that he'd finally returned the ring. But then in 1992 he made *Your Arsenal*. And followed it up in 1994 with *Vauxhall & I*.

I abandoned all hope. And of course did what anyone would do in those circumstances: I became a writer.

Then, just when I'd reconciled myself both to the fact I'd never be rid of him and the incurable, terminal nature of the dose of melancholia he'd given me back in 1983, Morrissey himself moved to the West Coast in the late Nineties, and it looked as if he was on the verge of retirement. His 'difficult' 1995 album *Southpaw* and lack-lustre 1997 album *Maladjusted* were poorly received and he was promptly dropped by his record company. In other words: Just when I'd begun to 'come to terms' with him and what he'd done to me and was finally willing to talk about it the fucker had walked out on me!

To make matters worse it looked as if he might actually be having *quite a nice time* in Los Angeles, that he might be *getting out and about* and actually be *having a life*.

This was intolerable. So 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.

Of course, by the time I'd found a publisher willing to be an accessory to this vendetta, Morrissey was back in Britain with a record deal and was on everyone's lips again. Now my revenge merely seems like tribute. But then, just like the bitterness and sweetness, euphoria and nostalgia, melodiousness and melancholia of pop music – and Mozza's voice – there's maybe not so much between them.



you are your mother's only son

A person is not born a genius or normal. He becomes one or the other, according to the accidents of his history and to his own reaction to these accidents. I maintain that genius is . . . an outlet that a child discovers when he is suffocating.

JEAN-PAUL SARTRE, *SAINT GENET*

I had the upbringing a nun would envy . . . Until I was fifteen I was more familiar with Africa than I was with my own body.

JOE ORTON, *ENTERTAINING MR SLOANE*