

THE POET IN VAN MORRISON*

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ABSTRACT — *In a career of more than forty years Van Morrison has written and performed some of the most popular and critically well-received music of our time. Throughout, he has consistently asserted his artistic integrity in the face of continuous attempts at assimilation/trivialisation by the celebrity culture of the music press. Well-known forms of identification such as ‘Van the Man’ or ‘the Belfast Cowboy’ sit uneasily next to such estimations as Paul Durcan’s that – alongside Patrick Kavanagh – Morrison is ‘one of the two finest poets in Ireland in my lifetime’. One might ask: is it really valid to speak of Van Morrison as a poet? As in the case of Bob Dylan, his only serious rival in this particular field, the question entails much discussion. In contrast to the case of Dylan, however, Morrison’s work often insists explicitly on the poetic tradition, on the continuing presence of certain poets in the culture – and this, from a stated Celtic perspective. What kind of image of the Poet do we find in his songs? How do the songs themselves relate to this image? The answers may go some way to explaining the extraordinary power and unusual quality of Van Morrison’s work as a singer-songwriter, artist-performer, for our times.*

KEY WORDS: *Poetic tradition. Mysticism. Popular music.*

‘If I ventured in the slipstream / Between the viaducts of your dream...’ The opening lines of Van Morrison’s first solo album, *Astral Weeks* (1968), offer strong evidence for the

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singer's interest in poetic composition. The alliteration on 'v' (the most beautiful letter in the alphabet, according to the 1890s' 'decadent' poet Ernest Dowson¹) prefigures its later use in such mysterious formulations as the 'Vanlose Stairway' and the 'Veeton Fleece'. There is also the remarkable repetition of the same phoneme in those lines from 'Madame George' (another song on *Astral Weeks*), concerning 'the love that loves the love that loves the love that loves, / The love that loves to love the love that loves to love the love that loves'. 'V', too, replaced 'I' in the singer's signature at some point – his middle name, as is well known, being originally Ivan². There seems to be an interesting associative nucleus here between the self, the verbal, and the voiced.

One aspect of the 'poetic vision' in Van Morrison's work is the refusal of analysis. This goes deep, and may be construed as a Romantic or perhaps 'mystical' apprehension of poetry's relation to 'the real'. More than this - and connected to it through a form of Transcendentalist perception - the physical universe may itself appear sometimes to be a kind of poem. In another lyric from *Astral Weeks*, 'Sweet Thing', for example, we hear the following ...

And I will raise my hand up
 Into the night time sky
 And count the stars
 That's shining in your eye
 Just to dig it all an' not to wonder
 That's just fine
 And I'll be satisfied
 Not to read in between the lines...

'To read between the lines' referring surely to the need to tease out meaning (involving language) from the moment, where another form of disposition seems to be called for. How to characterize this disposition, except in terms of silent contemplation, an 'openness', an 'emptying' of mind, perhaps? We know from another lyric ('Cleaning Windows'³) that as a young man, the singer was familiar with 'Christmas Humphrey's book on Zen', and with Kerouac's *Dharma Bums*; with Buddhist philosophy,

that is - at least, as transmitted through the works of these particular interpreters.⁴

Sometimes the injunction against analysis is simpler: as in 'Beside You', the second piece on *Astral Weeks*...

To never, never, never, wonder why at all,
 No, no, no, no, no, no, no,
 To never, never, wonder why at all,
 To never, never, never wonder why, it's gotta be,
 It has to be...

Again, the clear implication is that wisdom lies in acceptance rather than questioning. Another instance comes in the lyrics of one of his most characteristic compositions, 'Summertime in England'⁵; a work, this, that probably details more than any other Van Morrison's sense of poetry and place...

Take a walk with me down by Avalon
 And I will show you
 It ain't why, why, why
 It just is.
 [...]
 It ain't why . . .
 It just is . . .
 That's all
 That's all there is about it.
 It just is.

The link between the musical and the mystical has been a constant throughout Morrison's career. One of the better-known early songs, from the album *Moondance* (1970), is called 'Into the Mystic', in which the term 'mystic' stands for an abstract state, rather than (as is normally the case) for an individual – 'Let your soul and spirit fly into the mystic,' the voice enjoins. The setting is one of nature (sea, sun, wind, sky) under the aegis of eternity. A few years after this composition, the first substantial biography of the singer was published - *Van Morrison: Into the Music*, by Ritchie Yorke⁶. The subtitle was an obvious reference to this song, and as such, a valid emphasis in terms

of an interpretative approach.⁷ At the same time, it serves to suggest that without the *music*, the ‘mystic’ (meaning the mystical dimension of the work) loses something of its force.

Of the poets most frequently named or alluded to in Morrison’s work, the two outstanding figures are William Blake and William Butler Yeats. There are around a dozen direct references to Blake and Yeats in Morrison’s works. He has also recorded musical settings of works by both poets. In terms of mystical, and occult, elements, there are clear affinities. But when these poets enter Van Morrison’s songs, they often enter as inspirational examples rather than as fully absorbed influences. There is the moment in the song ‘You Don’t Pull No Punches But You Don’t Push the River’⁸ where the singer refers to ‘William Blake and the Eternals’ as a focus of contemplation when ‘looking for the Veedon Fleece’, for example; and there is the (perhaps only mildly interesting) assertion - in the aforementioned ‘Summertime in England’ - of the fact that ‘Yeats and Lady Gregory corresponded’ (where the claim is more about spiritual affinity, one supposes, than mere postal exchange).

But sometimes, the reference is rather more substantial. One of Van Morrison’s most representative works, arguably, is a piece entitled ‘Rave on, John Donne’ originally recorded in 1983⁹, and a centrepiece of live shows for some time after. Apart from Donne, the song takes in Omar Khayyam, Kahlil Gibran and Walt Whitman, ‘nose down in wet grass’, before coming, once more, to W. B. Yeats...

Rave on let a man come out of Ireland
Rave on on Mr. Yeats,
Rave on down through the Holy Rosy Cross
Rave on down through theosophy, and the Golden
Dawn
Rave on through the writing of “A Vision”
Rave on, Rave on, Rave on...

What it might mean, exactly, to ‘rave on’, in this context, is anybody’s guess. The phrase was coined, for popular music, by Buddy Holly, way back in the 1950s – ‘Rave on, it’s a crazy feeling, / I know, it’s got me reeling’ and so on. It may be linked,

perhaps, to ecstasy and mystical illumination in Van Morrison's composition, rather than to the declaration of teenage love that Buddy Holly means; but also, more importantly, to inspired speech (and the vocal delivery during much of this piece is at least as close to emphatic speech as it is to singing, of any kind). John Donne at the outset - and close - of the song is denominated a 'holy fool' - 'Rave on,' the voice commands, 'Rave on, down through the industrial revolution / Empiricism, atomic and nuclear age / Rave on words on printed page.' With the reference to the Industrial Revolution the spirit of William Blake once again sounds here, as much as that of the other poets named and lightly sketched-in in the song.

Yeats in this instance is the occultist researcher, as much as the poet. This was a role Morrison himself was feeling drawn to at around the time of this song. While the nineteenth-century *fin de siècle* found its hermeticism in the teachings of Madame Blavatsky, MacGregor Mathers and company, the Age of Aquarius had (or has) its own gurus... *Inarticulate Speech of the Heart*, the album that features 'Rave On, John Donne', contains on the sleeve a note of 'Special Thanks' to L. Ron Hubbard, the founder of Scientology; and various songs of around the same time (the mid-'80s) allude to ideas of Alice A. Bailey, the 'esoteric astrologist' whose works, at least in part, 'channel' the teachings of a deceased 'Tibetan master', Djwal Khul (very much as Madame Blavatsky's 'channeled' the Mahatmas Koot Hoomi Lal Singh and Morya).

Most of this seems a long way, possibly, from Rock 'n Roll... But Morrison's relation to rock has always been rather distant, and complicated. Various labels have been attached to his music, but none seem able fully to encapsulate it, finally. While certain compositions fall fairly easily into one or another of the established categories (rhythm 'n blues, say, folk-rock, or even straight 'jazz'), many more stretch the customary boundaries to breaking-point, calling for ever-less-meaningful hyphenated forms of reference, 'folk-blues-jazz-rock-soul' for instance - that kind of thing. But two traditions in particular lie at the heart of most of Van Morrison's output: black American music (in its various forms), and Irish music; and when commentators offer

‘Celtic Soul’ as a description of his sound, both of these are contemplated. Given all this, it seems quite valid to view his work most usefully as ‘hybrid’, in generic terms. Thus he can be seen to have affinities with other artists in similar states of personal dislocation, with multiple, culturally-diverse frames of reference in their work.¹⁰

The literary frames of reference are essentially Romantic – as long as this may be understood to take in Arthurian Romance and the Troubadours, Ancient Ireland and the Celtic Twilight, and Transcendentalism and the Beat Generation; as well as the first generation of English Romantic poets.

Legendary, pastoral England is a staple of Morrison’s lyrics. But the landscape in such songs is treated as a gateway to transcendence, always. There is the song, ‘When Will I Ever Learn to Live in God’ from the album *Avalon Sunset* (1989), for example...

The sun was setting over Avalon
 The last time we stood in the west
 Suffering long time angels enraptured by Blake
 Burn out the dross innocence captured again

Standing on the beach at sunset all the boats
 All the boats keep moving slow
 In the glory of the flashing light in the evening’s
 glow...

The reference to Blake here appropriately precedes a view of the shepherd tending his sheep, ‘the mountains and the valleys [and] / The countryside ... so green’; all of which produces ‘a sense of wonder’. The same part of England (an England of the imagination, let’s be clear) gives rise to the following lines from a song called ‘Avalon of the Heart’ (from the 1990 album *Enlightenment*)...

Well I came upon
 The enchanted vale
 Down by the viaducts of my dreams
 Down by Camelot, hangs the tale

In the ancient vale

Oh the Avalon sunset
 Avalon of the heart
 Me and my lady
 Goin' down by Avalon...

The presence here of that phrase 'viaducts of my dreams', so close to the opening of *Astral Weeks* twenty-two years earlier ('If I ventured in the slipstream / Between the viaducts of your dream'), signals the organic unity of Morrison's work over time. This is also suggested by the use of certain key phrases within and across different compositions – the phrase 'Avalon sunset', for example, in the lyric just quoted, is the title of an album of 1989, already referred-to; the phrase 'a sense of wonder' (also just quoted) from that album is the title of an album of 1985 (in which – just to round out the references here – Morrison performs a setting by Mike Westbrook of lines adapted by Adrian Mitchell from William Blake's *America, a Prophecy* and *Vala, or the Four Zoas*). Other examples of this kind of intertextuality could be cited easily enough.

The Irish landscape – both north and south, rural and urban - also evokes poetry and transcendence. From Arklow, south of Dublin –

... as we walked
 Through the streets of Arklow
 Oh the color
 Of the day wore on
 And our heads
 Were filled with poetry
 And the morning
 A-comin' on to dawn¹¹

- to County Down, north of Belfast, dwelling of the 'Northern Muse' -

And she moves on the solid ground
 And she shines light all around
 And she moves on the solid ground

In the County Down

And she moves on the solid earth
 And she knows what her wisdom is worth
 And she moves on the solid ground
 In the County Down ...¹²

In fact, all these places have a unity in Morrison's vision, or 'feeling' for them. The song 'Celtic Ray' from 1982's *Beautiful Vision* clarifies his sense of this:

All over Ireland, Scotland, England and Wales
 I can hear the mothers' voices calling
 "Children, children, come home children"
 "Children, come home on the Celtic Ray"
 In the early morning we'll go walking
 where the light comes shining through
 On the Celtic Ray

Once again, esoteric teachings come into this, the 'Celtic Ray' (or 'Green Ray') being an astrological concept involving a particular form of planetary influence. According to the occult writer, Dion Fortune, 'The Greeks with their art and the Celts with their music and dance were the true initiates of the Green Ray, and the influence of the astral contacts can be clearly seen to this day in the temperament of the Celtic race'¹³ Whatever may be thought of this, there is some consistency, at least in the embedded associations of art (music, dance, poetry) and magic.

In a wide-ranging dialogue with the psychiatrist (or 'anti-psychiatrist') R.D. Laing in the mid-1980s, Van Morrison spoke revealingly about his own sense of the sources of his creativity. Laing put to him 'that assertion by Johann Sebastian Bach that music that doesn't come from God, isn't music', eliciting the following reply:

Well, I think that that's true. I mean everything comes from God. Understanding the way He meant it, I'd say that was true. Music coming from the spiritual worlds, I think by the time it steps down to

this plane, the material plane, it's got to change somewhat, I suppose from the original song. [...] I'm inspired and driven [*Morrison continues...*]. That's one part of it. I would call myself a channel, not a medium but like a channel when I get this inspiration coming through me. Then I write it down. Or it can come in a musical idea, without words and then the words are added or it can come in a spontaneous poem...¹⁴

The idea of 'the original song' in 'the spiritual worlds' that 'steps down to this plane' brings Morrison's thinking close to Neoplatonism. At the same time, it provides an interesting link to a poem by Yeats that he set to music (the lines somewhat adapted) and released on the album *Too Long in Exile* (1993). The poem belongs to the sequence, 'A Woman Young and Old', written in 1929¹⁵. The title of the lyric (in both Yeats' and Morrison's versions) is 'Before the World was made'. 'I'm looking for the face I had / Before the world was made,' says Yeats' female speaker. Morrison creates a double perspective, alternating between first and second person pronouns to finish (more or less) –

I'm just looking for the face you had
 Before the world was made
 [...]
 Your original face
 Before time and space
 [...]
 Your original, original face
 Before the world was made...

The formulation of the 'original face', as such, is Morrison's (linking to his notion of 'the original song', above) – but it is consistent with Yeats' vision, certainly; no arbitrary imposition. (The other Yeats poem set to music and recorded by Van Morrison, incidentally, is one of the Crazy Jane lyrics – 'Crazy Jane on God'¹⁶, with its repeated line (doubled each time by Morrison), '*All things remain in God*' – recalling, this, the statement

above that ‘everything comes from God’. There seems to be a firm association, here.)

In his 1988 article on Van Morrison¹⁷, the poet Paul Durcan claims him for the ‘age-old oral and place-name tradition [of poetry] (known in Irish as the *dinnshenchas*)’. This tradition (quoting *The Oxford Companion to Irish Literature*)

reflects a mentality in which the land of Ireland is perceived as being completely translated into story: each place has a history which is continuously retold. [...] Under the influence of Celticism ... the sense of an ever-present past inhering in the Irish landscape was romanticized in the writings of Ferguson and Aubrey de Vere; while in the 20th century a feeling for the luminous in Irish places has given depth to the symbolism and imagery of writers such as Yeats and Heaney.

Place-names are certainly frequent in Van Morrison’s songs; the titles often refer directly to certain places, which do indeed seem to glow with a luminous charge. ‘Snow in San Anselmo’, ‘Santa Fe / Beautiful Obsession’, ‘Orangefield’, and so on...¹⁸ Sometimes, as in ‘Coney Island’¹⁹ the song is a veritable litany of place-names...

Coming down from Downpatrick
 Stopping off at St. John’s Point
 Out all day birdwatching
 And the craic was good
 Stopped off at Strangford Lough
 Early in the morning
 Drove through Shrigley taking pictures
 And on to Killyleagh
 Stopped off for Sunday papers at the
 Lecale District, just before Coney Island

As the piece progresses, we hear how the scenery is shot through all the time by shining autumn sunlight – literally, that ‘luminous’ charge – leading to the final, simple sentiment (this is an interior monologue), ‘Wouldn’t it be great if it was like this all the time’.

The most resonant place-name in all of Van Morrison's work, probably, is that of Cypress Avenue. The road, in East Belfast, is close to where he grew up, though in contrast to his own street, graceful, stately, calm – wealthy, in a word... It features in two of the songs on his first album, *Astral Weeks*, and several thereafter (later, the reference is less direct – to 'the avenue of trees' and 'the mystic avenue'). As a reader of the English Romantics – Wordsworth and Coleridge are mentioned in his work, as well as Blake – Morrison would recognise the significance of the 'childlike visions' he records in association with Cypress Avenue in the song 'Madame George'; and the tumult of youthful passion and uncertainty described in the song 'Cypress Avenue' itself suggest slightly later, but no less powerful associations of a different kind.

Many of Van Morrison's songs attempt an approach to meditative consciousness. They offer a 'gateway' – quite deliberately in some cases – to forms of perception outside the preoccupations of modern daily life. There's no doubt that these works can be linked to so-called 'New Age' mysticism – utopian spiritual questing of a relatively superficial kind (arguably). The lyrics sometimes look weak (and often repetitive), when put beside the poetry of some of those writers mentioned here. What gives his work its lasting force, finally, is the combination of voice, musical setting and words. The voice most of all, for those who find it congenial, is the key. 'Listen to the Lion'²⁰, a song from the early 1970s, offered a vision of the singer's search for that aspect of himself expressible in the voice, simply - a performance suggesting something of the shaman's power of self-transformation. Out of some such dimension of ritual, incantation, and transcendence comes the force, perhaps, of this particular artist's poetic identity.

O POETA EM VAN MORRISON

RESUMO — *Numa carreira de mais de quarenta anos o irlandês Van Morrison tem composto e apresentado algumas das músicas mais populares e bem recebidas no âmbito anglo-americano contemporâneo. Ao*

longo desse período ele tem afirmado de forma consistente sua integridade artística contra as tentativas contínuas de assimilação/banalização na cultura-de-celebridade da imprensa musical. Formas de identificação bem-conhecidas como ‘Van the Man’ ou ‘The Belfast Cowboy’ situam-se incomodamente ao lado de avaliações como a de Paul Durcan de que, com Patrick Kavanagh, Morrison é ‘um dos dois melhores poetas na Irlanda durante a minha vida’. Poder-se-ia perguntar se é realmente válido falar de Van Morrison enquanto poeta? Como no caso de Bob Dylan (na cultura anglo-americana, talvez, o único rival dele neste campo específico) a questão implica em muita discussão. Mas, em contraste com o caso de Dylan, a obra de Morrison, muitas vezes, insiste explicitamente na tradição poética, na presença contínua de vários poetas na cultura – isso vindo de uma perspectiva celta fortemente afirmada. Qual é a imagem do Poeta apresentada nas canções dele? De que maneira as canções se relacionam com esta imagem? As respostas poderiam explicar, em boa parte, o poder extraordinário e a qualidade excepcional do trabalho de Van Morrison enquanto compositor-intérprete, artista-executor para nossa época.

PALAVRAS CHAVE: *Tradição poética. Misticismo. Música popular.*

NOTAS

¹ See Arthur Symons, ‘Ernest Dowson, a Memoir’, in **The Poems Of Ernest Dowson** (John Lane, The Bodley Head, London & New York, 1905), p. xxv - ‘There never was a poet to whom verse came more naturally, for the song’s sake; his theories were all aesthetic, almost technical ones, such as a theory [...] that the letter “v” was the most beautiful of the letters, and could never be brought into verse too often.’

² The singer was born George Ivan Morrison at the family home in Hyndford Street, East Belfast, on 31st August 1945.

³ From **Beautiful Vision** (1982).

⁴ E.g., from Christmas Humphreys, **Buddhism** (1949), (cited in The Van Morrison Website): ‘What is the goal of Zen? The answer is Satori, the Zen term for Enlightenment. As Satori lies beyond the intellect, which alone can define and describe, one cannot define Enlightenment. It is that condition of consciousness wherein the

pendulum of the Opposites has come to rest, where both sides of the coin are equally valued and immediately seen. Silence alone can describe it, the silence of the mystic, of the saint, of the artist in the presence of great beauty; of the lover and the poet when the fetters of time and space have for the moment fallen away.'

- ⁵ From **Common One** (1980).
- ⁶ Charisma Books/Futura, 1975.
- ⁷ A few years after *this*, Morrison may have been consciously acknowledging the book – the only biography to the present day to have received his cooperation – when he used the same phrase, 'Into the Music', as the title of an album.
- ⁸ From **Veedon Fleece** (1974).
- ⁹ On the album **Inarticulate Speech of the Heart**.
- ¹⁰ It may be worth remarking at this point the collaboration between U2 - Morrison's heirs in certain respects as Irish rock superstars - and Salman Rushdie, in relation to Rushdie's novel **The Ground Beneath her Feet**.
- ¹¹ 'Streets of Arklow', from **Veedon Fleece** (1974).
- ¹² 'Northern Muse (Solid Ground)', from **Beautiful Vision** (1982).
- ¹³ Dion Fortune, **Applied Magic** (1973), cited in The Van Morrison Website.
- ¹⁴ **Memories Of R.D. Laing**, ed., Bob Mullan, London, 1997, cited in The Van Morrison Website.
- ¹⁵ Published in **The Winding Stair and Other Poems** (1933).
- ¹⁶ Also from **The Winding Stair**.
- ¹⁷ 'The Drumshanbo Hustler: A celebration of Van Morrison', **Magill** magazine, May 1988, cited in The Van Morrison Website.
- ¹⁸ From **Hard Nose the Highway** (1973), **Wavelength** (1978) and **Avalon Sunset** (1989), respectively.
- ¹⁹ From **Avalon Sunset** (1989).
- ²⁰ From **St Dominic's Preview** (1972).

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