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Stephen Morrissey

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Stephen Morrissey talks to Sachi Nag about his craft and artisanal habits.

1. "There is an elusive quality in these poems, a sense that the author is unconcerned whether you read them at all", says Michael Cameron about your first title, *The Trees of Unknowing*, Montreal Writer's Forum, 1979. Do you agree? Was there any specific life event that evoked this collection? What are some of the key influences in this work? Does this title in any way coincide with your own spiritual journey?

I understand what Michael Cameron is saying, but no one publishes a book unless they want it to be read. The important thing for me regarding *The Trees of Unknowing* (1978) is that these are the poems in which I found my voice as a poet. Finding your voice is significant for any poet, it's when you have the authority to write without second-guessing your work. No single event lead to writing this title, it was a series of events: I published my first chapbook in 1971; I started writing the poems in *The Trees of Unknowing* in 1973; I was a student at Sir George Williams University and graduated in 1973; I attended Krishnamurti's talks in Saanen, Switzerland, in 1973; I completed my M.A. at McGill, where I studied with Louis Dudek, that was in 1976; I met poets who became life-long friends and I gave poetry readings at Vehicule Art Gallery. The title of the book alludes to the 14th century spiritual text *The Cloud of Unknowing*, but *The Trees of Unknowing* isn't influenced by it at all except for the title.

2. "Mostly short lines, down to one word a line "spaced out" so

the reading of the poem is slowed down; part of the reading is the placement of the poem's talk on largely empty pages," says Isaac Osborn about *Divisions* (Coach House Press, 1983). "Its silences border on an art transcending technique and even viewpoint. The images are elemental, there are few adjectives," Michael Cameron says of *The Trees of Unknowing*; could you talk about how you achieve this silence on the page—is it premeditated or is it something that happens during your writing—when what is spoken is framed in by the unspoken or unspeakable?

This is something, the subject of composition in poetry, which I have thought about for a long time. Years ago I spoke with Allen Ginsberg and he repeated what many poets were saying in those days, referring to Charles Olson's essay "Projective Verse", that lines in a poem correspond to the length of the breath of the poet. I never agreed with Olson's connection of breath with composing poetry; to me, the lines of free verse, as printed on a page, are consistent with readability, with communicating with the reader, and with the emotion the poet wants to communicate. Years ago I saw that poetry is the voice of the human soul, this is not original to me but it was something I knew intuitively. Instead of Olson's connection of breath with line breaks, it seems to me that if a poem is the voice of the human soul, then poems are transcriptions of the soul, and lines of poetry are patterns of thought, expressing what the soul has to say. What the soul perceives, the poem says.

3. This sense of family memories is the unflinching recognition of the fact that "grief anchors us to points in time" and that we define ourselves through our experiences of loss," says William Blackburn of *Family Album*. Why did you write this book? In what way is this title related to previous titles?

Snap shots of family life, glimpses of the past, anecdotes, and long forgotten memories recalled in poems, existential doom and gloom, a bleak Edward Hopper environment, this is some of what is in *Family Album* (1988). My mother spoke often about the family; she had a terrific memory for the names of relatives and what they did; of course, poets can be interested in family and family history and never mention this in their poems. For me, beginning in my first

chapbook, *Poems of a Period* (1971), I wrote about family, I didn't choose this subject, it was given to me, and more is involved in this than grief. From when I was young I kept a diary and I wrote down what relatives told me about their lives and their memories of the past; I was always writing something. I felt there was heroism to everyday life and I worked to record what people did, what people said, and some of this went into what I wrote in poems. In fact, I have written on a lot more than grief, love poems for instance. And yet, grief is an emotion that we don't leave behind, it comes paired with other emotions and events in addition to losing someone; and while grief diminishes it doesn't go away. Remember Queen Elizabeth II's comment, "Grief is the price we pay for love."

4. You have said somewhere that Carl Jung influenced the Shadow Trilogy. J. Krishnamurti's influence on your previous titles is widely acknowledged. Can you say a bit more about these two influences? Do you see them as influences that compete with and balance each other or do you see them as complimentary?

I am not an expert or authority on the writings of C.G. Jung or the teachings of J. Krishnamurti and I am not a follower of any philosophy or any person's ideas about life. Jung's approach is to go deeply into one's psychology and he gives some terms that help one to do this; Krishnamurti's approach is to free oneself from preconceptions, he advises to question everything. In either instance the direction is towards thinking for oneself. The thing about Jung is that he affirms life, he says that the psyche has a natural affinity to wholeness, and I have experienced this in my life. Krishnamurti's teaching, very simplified, is to question everything including what is currently popular or fashionable, to be your own authority; he writes, "Truth is a pathless land." Jung and Krishnamurti are different but both have made enormous contributions to our attempt to understand ourselves.

5. Much like *Family Album*, *Girouard Avenue* is about family history. Could you speak a little on how and why family history plays such an important role in your work?

Family history, one's ancestors, is a part of our inner being, but many

people don't know the names of their grandparents, they know little about their family history. Everyone wants meaning and purpose in life, to connect with the past, with where we live, and to see ourselves as more than isolated people stranded in the present moment, but we are increasingly a people who have no history, no traditions, and who are part of a growing deracinated global population that doesn't care where they are living. I've spent a lot of time researching family history, it is something my brother and I have done together, and it is also a part of my spiritual journey.

6. What made you a poet?

"The Great Reconfiguration" is an essay in *The Green Archetypal Field of Poetry* (2022), and is about how a single event in one's life can be sudden and change a person to the roots of their being. I came from a middle class family, we had a nice home in a nice neighbourhood, we owned a car, we owned a country home, and my father had a good white collar job. All of that ended when I was six years old and my father died. Everything changed; we became a single parent family and my mother had to work; my brother, who was only ten years old, assumed adult responsibilities beyond what are expected of a child; and I was left to more or less fend for myself in an emotional sense, to deal with grief by myself. The death of my father is the Great Reconfiguration of my life, it is when everything changed in my life, and a few years later I met these changes by writing poems about my father, my family; and yet writing poetry was a calling, it was never a conscious decision on my part. The genesis of writing poetry began with my father's death, it set me apart from other people, it influenced my whole life and got me writing poetry; writing poetry actually saved my life.

7. What does it mean/suggest for you to think about your craft with each published work? If you were to associate an image with the development timeline of your writing craft what would that look like?

Each book is a part of a continuum, each book builds on the previous book and, when seen as a totality, a poet's books are the books of his or her life, they are the narrative of one's life. But as for

an image that represents this body of work, beginning with my first book, *The Trees of Unknowing* (1978), the single image would have to be the tree, the tree of life, the family tree, and the tree that is on the landscape or in one's backyard. It reaches into the sky, to the light, but its roots go deeply into the earth, into the darkness. Both the light of the sky and the darkness of what is below the surface of the earth are symbolized by trees—branches and roots—; one moves us upward and to being creative, and the other moves us downward, into Hades, and we know that this is also a place of great creativity. But I also love trees for themselves; we live in a small house but we have an apple tree, a sumac, a tamarack, a ginkgo, a maple tree, a fir tree, and a row of cedars, all on a small city lot.

8. What was the most satisfying aspect of your recently completed work?

My recently published work on poetics, *The Green Archetypal Field of Poetry* (2022), brings me a lot of satisfaction, a lot of happiness, it is a summing up of years of work, years of thinking about poetry, years of being a poet; it follows and develops on what I wrote in my previous book, *A Poet's Journey* (2019). Poets write poetry but part of being a poet is to write on poetics, to say why we write, what it means to write; writing on poetics isn't poetry but it explains something of the poet's vision. I suggest to young poets to go with their intuition, don't be afraid to theorize about poetry and to take risks, don't be afraid if your ideas are eccentric, non-conformist, or different from what everybody else is saying. Just go ahead and write them down, you may be on to something important.

9. What are you writing against or towards?

I have written about grief and regret, death and loss, but there is more to my writing than this; in fact, my writing has been an affirmation of life. The act of writing poems is an affirmation of the creative spirit. I am always writing towards affirming life.

10. What is your definition of a successful piece of writing? Who decides that?

I don't have a definition of a successful piece of writing, but a poem that doesn't work is easy to spot. That's part of the beauty of poetry, it is elusive, it changes, it is different according to various factors including the poet, when it was written, and what it is about. No single factor produces a poem that works, two poems may be successful for different reasons. As for the poem's critical success, T.S. Eliot wrote that time is the only real critic, or test, of poetry and he was right. Poets have no way to control which of their poems, if any, will be read, or discussed, and for how long.

Author Bio

Montreal-born poet Stephen Morrissey is the author of twelve books, including poetry and literary criticism. He graduated with a Bachelor of Arts degree, Honours in English with Distinction, from Sir George Williams University in 1973. In 1976 he graduated with a Master of Arts degree in English Literature from McGill University. In the 1970s Morrissey was associated with the Vehicule Poets. The Stephen Morrissey Fonds, 1963 - 2014, are housed at Rare Books and Special Collections of the McLennan Library at McGill University. Stephen Morrissey married poet Carolyn Zonailo in 1995.