"From Tourist Gaze to Liminal Persona: Sinéad Morrissey's Poetic Encounters with Japan" [1]

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Northern Irish poet Sinéad Morrissey's second volume of poetry, *Between Here and There* (2002), reflects on the impact two years living and teaching English in Japan had on her poetic voice. Although the title appears to suggest a division between the two spaces which inspired the poems, Morrissey explains in an interview that it was her experience of inhabiting a liminal space between home and away that inspired her: "It's being inbetween that counts. It's tolerance of transitions" (De Angelis 2005, 47)[2]. Morrissey's suggestion that her period in Japan allowed her to suspend her preconceived ideas and behaviours and learn to be open to new ways of doing things is very similar to Victor Turner's widely accepted celebration of liminality as an unstructured space where traditional certainties and hierarchies are suspended so that new perspectives can be developed (Turner 1969, 95-6). Turner suggests that travel is an intrinsically liminal experience, detaching the traveller from the structures of their normal lives and immersing them in an unfamiliar, perhaps even incomprehensible, environment. In his research into traditions of pilgrimage, he argues that the spiritual renewal sought by the pilgrims emerges not only through their suspension in unfamiliar spaces but through their willingness to embrace the different perspectives they encounter, thus expanding their minds: "pilgrimages are liminal phenomena….; they also exhibit in their social relations the quality of communitas" (Turner 1974, 166-7). *Communitas*, for Turner, is what occurs when those who cross into liminal spaces allow themselves to be transformed by the suspension of hierarchies and traditions that define such spaces. Benefitting from the exchange of ideas with others, liminal spaces become sites of significant resistance to authoritative narratives, and the new perspectives developed as a consequence of *communitas* are achieved through the accommodation of difference and alternative perspectives in a non-hierarchical structure: "Communitas does not merge identities; it liberates them from conformity to general norms" (Turner 1974, 274). Turner stresses the freedom that comes from embracing other ideas, arguing that allowing oneself to be influenced by another culture does not diminish one's own identity but rather expands it. Growing up in Belfast during the Troubles, Morrissey often writes about the many borders and restrictions that define identity and language in a divided society[3]. Deeply aware of the pressures that such contexts impose on our ways of viewing and interpreting the world, she consciously sets out to be open and receptive to her experiences in Japan, allowing herself to learn from the often indecipherable texts and practices without trying to impose her own interpretation on them. She does so by allowing herself to occupy a liminal space, both deeply absorbed in Japanese culture but respectful of the distance that remains between her own sensibility and its traditions.

Arnold van Gennep first proposed the significance of liminality for the harmonious functioning of societies in his 1906 book *The Rites of Passage.* He suggests that in all cultures, ceremonies are held to mark and facilitate the transition of an individual from one life stage to another. These ceremonies, often called rites of passage, are organized into three stages each with its

[1] This paper revisits earlier research conducted into Sinéad Morrissey's Japanese sequence of poems, published in *Otherness: Essays and Studies*, 8.3 (2021).

[2] For a comprehensive assessment of the strategies used by Morrissey to accommodate "otherness" in her poetic encounters with Japan, see Ní Éigeartaigh 2021.

[3] For a detailed analysis of Morrissey's critique of the deep-rooted sectarian divisions in Northern Ireland and their impact on the development of her poetic voice, see Ní Éigeartaigh 2017, 127-150.

own set of rituals: separation from a previous world or state (*preliminal rites*), the transitional stage (*liminal or threshold rites*) and incorporation into the new world (*post-liminal rites*) (van Gennep 1960, 11). Although primarily interested in the rituals surrounding death and burial, van Gennep extended his study of ritual to include travel, suggesting that all acts of frontier-crossing have "magico-religious" elements to them. Boundaries, whether they be local or national, are marked by objects or signs which make it clear to the traveller that they are passing from one defined territory to another: "When milestones or boundary signs….are ceremonially placed by a defined group on a delimited piece of earth, the group takes possession of it in such a way that a stranger who sets foot on it commits a sacrilege analogous to a profane person's entrance to a sacred forest or temple" (van Gennep 1960, 16). In order to pass safely and respectfully over the boundary, the traveller must engage in a form of ritual. At the state level, these rituals take the form of passports being checked or visas being approved. Van Gennep's interest lies more in the personal level, specifically in relation to the different stages that need to be completed before the traveller is welcomed into the host society. After an initial wariness towards the stranger and once it becomes clear that their visit does not pose a threat to the host society, they are ritually welcomed with symbolic practices such as the exchange of greetings or the sharing of food: "This preliminary stage….is followed by a transitional period consisting of such events as an exchange of gifts, an offer of food…The ceremony terminates in rites of incorporation – a formal entrance, a meal in common, an exchange of handclasps" (van Gennep 1960, 28). The traveller is thus separated from their normal life, undergoes rituals to mark their transition through the liminal space, before being incorporated into the host society, a tripartite structure that facilitates peaceful movement across political and cultural boundaries.

Travelling to different cultures has long been acknowledged as a means for the individual to expand their horizons, allowing for the development of what John McLeod calls: "new, dynamic ways of thinking about identity which go beyond older static models, such as national identity and the notion of 'rootedness'" (McLeod 2000, 216). This willingness to develop new perspectives is particularly important in the contemporary world, in which as James Conroy notes, healthy debate is being stifled by an increasingly narrow conception of individualism based on the silencing of alternative perspectives: "The tendency to occlude the voice of the other is particularly apparent with respect to the increasingly hegemonic claims of a globalized economy" (Conroy 2004, 24). In other words, globalization tends to make everyone more similar and compliant to the dominant western culture rather than more diverse. Wolfgang Welsch coined the term "transcultural" to suggest an ideal global citizen, who interacts with and absorbs other cultural influences (Welsch 1999, 199). However, he cautions against mistaking an ability to travel to another culture with the open-mindedness needed to embrace new cultural practices. In fact he argues that "multiculturalism", whereby a number of different – but not necessarily interacting – cultural groups coexist, often in a clear hierarchy, continues to be a more accurate reflection of many societies (Berg and Ní Éigeartaigh 2010, 10). This is particularly evident when the interaction is between a dominant culture and a more marginal one, resulting in what Edward Said suggests is the hegemony of the western gaze (Said 1978, 11). Said's point is that as long as western travellers continue to view other countries as "foreign", "exotic" and "other", they are maintaining the balance of power that puts the west in the position of influence. Tourists go to experience foreign cultures but end up imposing their expectations on what they see rather than allowing their own worldview to be transformed.

The extent to which the tourist gaze conflates an "authentic" experience with the pre-constructed expectations formed by guidebooks and other representations is the source of much critical debate. John Urry defines the tourist gaze as a set of expectations that tourists impose on other cultures and people, particularly when they visit cultural or heritage sites in an attempt

to experience what they perceive of as an "authentic" experience (Urry, 2002, 1-2). Moreover, he suggests that the tourist gaze is "constructed through difference", so that instead of experiencing a foreign culture on its own terms, the tourist will tend to focus in on those aspects of culture that are different to their own, ensuring a clear binary between everyday life and their holiday. This enables the tourist to experience a break from routine, a clear departure from the spaces and practices of their everyday lives: "Such practices involve the notion of 'departure', of a limited breaking with established routines and practices of everyday life and allowing one's senses to engage with a set of stimuli that contrast with the everyday and the mundane" (Urry 2002, 2). What is unclear is whether these tourists undergo transformation as a result of their encounters with other cultures – or whether exposure to an unfamiliar culture merely affirms for the traveller the superiority of their own "normality".

Dean McCannell suggests that tourism is often interpreted as a quest for authenticity, likening the contemporary tourist to a pilgrim who seeks revelation in spaces and time periods that are outside ordinary life: "To be *alive*, as opposed to merely existing or 'surviving', it is necessary to be open to excitement, new prospects, to be attracted to difference, to break free of routines, to have an adventure, to change scenes and think new thoughts, to take a chance, and to have something new to say" (MacCannell 2013, xxii). However, this potential to absorb new experiences is not always seized by the tourist, who may mistake the prepackaged and commodified images of culture for the culture itself and thus fail to ever emerge from "his own prison house of signs" (MacCannell 2013, xxxiii). In order for the tourist to undergo transformation as a consequence of encounters with another culture, they must be willing to encounter the other on equal terms:

> Whether or not tourism…can ever be a "utopia of difference", ultimately depends on its capacity to recognize and accept *otherness* as radically other. To me, this means the possibility of recognizing and attempting to enter into a dialogue, on an equal footing, with forms of intelligence absolutely different from my own (MacCannell 2013, xxxiii).

As Turner also emphasizes, *communitas* is predicated on acknowledging the differences between cultures in a respectful, egalitarian setting, with subjects willing to learn and transform their own perspectives as a result of their interactions with others.

Morrissey's poem "Before and After" offers an insight into both the preconceptions that can impede one's embrace of a new culture and the tripartite process of liminality cited above by van Gennep. The poem reflects on a three-week secondment from her regular teaching post in Gifu City to an agricultural high school, a placement she notes would be considered "the ultimate punishment" for a Japanese teacher (Suhr-Sytsma 2010, 269). The first section of the poem compiles numerous warnings issued to Morrissey about the students she can expect to encounter: "Agricultural high schools are the worst high schools in Japan" (Morrissey 2002, 44). The expected deviant behaviour of the students is declaimed in dramatic language, which the poet gently mocks through her use of deliberately offensive and exaggerated stereotypes of unevolved, subnormal physical and behavioural characteristics:

> The kids who swing through locked windows in Junior High
> and masturbate in class come here, or ones not retarded
>
> severely enough to merit a home for the disabled,
> all teeth and slurred speech nonetheless (Morrissey 2002, 44).

The role of the teachers, she is assured, is to protect the rest of society from these students by containing them in school for as long as possible. Certainly no effort should be expended on trying to educate or inspire them:

> We're a thin membrane,
> the box that holds the anger and the danger from the academic schools,
> and the last cradle also. You can't *teach* here (Morrissey 2002, 44).

The definite, authoritative language, and the quotation marks that enclose the litany of accusations, emphasize that this is the received wisdom on the students in the school and that no alternative perspective will be entertained. In the second section of the poem, however, Morrissey takes control of the narrative, calmly recounting her own impressions:

> I come back from school with baskets of persimmons, flowers
> sometimes, a bucket of miso, my head full of people vibrant and broken somewhere
> I can't see: all presents I hope I can carry (Morrissey 2002, 44).

The repeated reference to her own narrative voice in these lines signifies her determination not to allow her expectations to be shaped by preconceived ideas. This ability to see beyond manufactured assumptions, she suggests, is the most important gift immersion in another culture will teach her. The lines also demonstrate Morrissey's empathy and willingness to accept her partial understanding of Japanese culture. She has no need to forensically dissect the lives of the local people, their kindness to her is all she needs to know about them:

> At the Agricultural High School near Ogaki City, kindness falls over me
> more than anywhere. Like the persimmons in your garden by Yoro Hill –
> enough colour in the mouth of winter to stop the cold (Morrissey 2002, 44).

These lines suggest that Morrissey has been accepted by the students and their families because she has in turn engaged with them without prejudice. Her acceptance is, as van Gennep suggests, marked with the exchange of gifts. The reader can appreciate this beautiful evocation of kindness as a burst of unexpected colour which can enliven the gloom of winter. However, Suhr-Sytsma notes that Morrissey also encodes her own deepening affinity with Japanese culture in her poem in ways that may be too subtle for her readers to understand without assistance. Only because she is immersed in Japanese culture does she fully "appreciate the seasonal significance of ripening persimmons, a popular Autumn fruit known in Japanese as *kaki*" (Suhr-Sytsma 2010, 270). The persimmon, in Japanese culture, is a symbol of good luck and longevity, appearing in many prints and haikus. Corinne Kennedy notes that it is often used in New Year celebrations and decorations, symbolizing a period of transition (Kennedy 2019). Morrissey's use of the persimmon thus functions as a tangible sign not only of appreciation for the generosity of her students but for her own deepening understanding of the nuances of Japanese culture and the transformation she is experiencing as a consequence.

Tolerance of and empathy for the other are central to the liminal perspective adopted by Morrissey in *Between Here and There* (2002). The poems reflect her conscious refusal to interpret her experience through the lens of her western gaze, embracing the expansion of her poetic voice that results from her "experience of total strangeness" (Suhr-Sytsma 2010, 266). In fact, she admits in an interview that she chose Japan as the location for her teaching exchange specifically because she believed it was more "culturally remote" than the other countries involved in the programme (Suhr-Sytsma 2010, 261). It is perhaps ironic that notwithstanding the impenetrability of many of its cultural practices, including its language and the *kanji* or characters in which it is written, Japanese culture has long been packaged into the neat forms

and iconic images familiar to most western audiences: "throughout the twentieth century established Irish poets have persisted in associating Japan with a particular aesthetic derived from woodblock prints and translations of haiku" (Suhr-Sytsma 2010, 246). Morrissey's encounters with Japanese culture thus require both the willingness to accept attitudes and customs she may not understand and the conscious effort not to reduce all of its complexity to the easily consumed images so beloved of western audiences.

This dual obligation is perhaps most clearly detailed in "February", in which she struggles to adopt the non-judgemental gaze that is central to the embrace of liminality. The poem evokes liminality in a number of ways. It is set in February, itself a liminal month, where one can feel caught in a no-man's land between Winter and Spring. The poet's tone of exhaustion evokes the seemingly endless greyness of February very effectively:

> There is no kindness in me here. I ache to be kind, but the weather
> Makes me worse. I burrow and sneer (Morrissey 2002, 56).

The "burrowing" reflects her animal instinct to avoid any more of the winter, but her "sneer" has a different source. Suhr-Sytsma notes that the poem was written during her second year in Japan "after the cultural honeymoon had ended" and that it clearly "embodies her struggle to control more negative perceptions" (Suhr-Sytsma 2010, 271). The source of the poet's frustration becomes clear: the view from her window signifies the rapacious growth of consumerism at the expense of the natural environment:

> Each field is marked
>
> For the administering of cement, this month or the next (Morrissey 2002, 56).

The pause between the lines here reflects Morrissey's sigh of despair at the decimation of the landscape. She explains in an interview that this disrespect of the environment was one of the things she found most difficult to reconcile, particularly as it seemed to contradict the veneration of nature in iconic Japanese prints and poems: "There was a tension there, not wanting to be continually judging a foreign culture based on my idea of what is right and wrong, and still feeling outraged and annoyed" (Meade 2002-3). Here she acknowledges the tendency of tourists to impose their own cultural expectations on what they encounter, retreating to the perceived superiority of the western gaze in their reactions.

She is particularly struck by how industrial progress is facilitated at the expense of history and landscape, noting that the mountain that features prominently in historical images of the city will, by the time Spring arrives, be no more. Mountains are, of course, synonymous with western ideas about Japan so its decimation is particularly troubling for her:

> Factories chew through a mountain beyond my window
> and each time I look at it it's less.
> [….]
> When all the fields are town,
> the mountain stones, it will be spring, and I'll be called on
>
> to be generous (Morrissey 2002, 56).

The pause before the final words in the sentence indicates the effort it takes her not to be critical in her reaction to the conversion of the mountain to building materials. Morrissey is not alone in her dismay in finding that the widely touted veneration of Japan's mountains in prints by

Hokusai and Hiroshige does not reflect the subordination of the natural landscape to urban growth. Irish poet Joseph Woods, who like Morrissey spent two years teaching in Japan, also identifies the disrespect of the landscape as one of the aspects of life in Japan he found hardest to reconcile with his expectations (Ohno 2002, 29). It is with a similar determination not to judge but instead to appreciate beauty wherever it can be found that changes the tone of the poem:

> There will be days when fruit trees, like veterans
> Left standing here and there in pools of shade, will forget about use and bloom (Morrissey 2002, 56).

Although the season of the cherry blossom is brief, it is glorious and may perhaps be sufficient after all to mitigate against the greying industrialization of the landscape. There is great resilience suggested in the final image of the cherry blossoms not just surviving but blooming amidst the industrial landscape. This optimistic ending to the poem reflects Morrissey's ability to accept other perspectives. Her receptiveness to new insights gained during her years in Japan are due to her willingness to occupy a liminal position, happy to accept that there are some elements of Japanese culture she cannot understand because of the limitations of her western gaze. Although some elements of Japanese culture and language remain impenetrable to the outsider, her empathy and openness to the strangeness of the texts and practices she encounters enables her to develop a nuanced and flexible poetic voice.

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