

R. S. Edgecombe

## The Poetry of Edwin Morgan

In an essay entitled "A Glimpse of Petavius" Edwin Morgan argues for an integration of science and poetry able to register the texture of present (and as it happens) of possible future life:

...as X-rays enter the hospital ward or the comptometer enters the office or the television set enters the livingroom, then it will be the poet's job to bring these things into his poetry, and he will have (ideally) three tasks to fulfil - to seize their imaginative possibilities, to understand them as far as he can (so that he won't merely use science as a new springboard into the romantic), and to see how they fit into people's lives.<sup>1</sup>

Elements of this paragraph, detached from their context, might seem to have strayed in from a Futurist manifesto, but taken together they are much more carefully qualified than Marinetti's crass, anti-antiquarian paean to the motor car. The operative phrases, I think, are "imaginative possibilities" and "people's lives", for in these is contained a suggestion (which Morgan does not develop) that science is often forced methodologically to forego any imaginative speculation about its data, speculation which the imaginative artist is entitled to make. Also, perhaps, in its efforts to sterilise itself of human interference, science has sometimes been guilty of indifference to the impact of its findings upon man himself. Here the poet can enter as mediator and interpreter, attempting to fuse two cultures otherwise likely to remain locked in an impoverishing opposition to each other. And indeed it is as a mediant spokesman (not a facile celebrant) that Morgan functions in many of his poems.

Let us take for example *In Sobieski's Shield*,<sup>2</sup> a dramatic monologue spoken by a man who, with his family, has survived the extinction of the sun by transference to a new solar system in the Milky Way. Thus summarized, the poem would seem to be a jejeune piece of science fiction, marked by characteristically prurient glimpses of a technology that cannot bear a clear exposition, and the routine old apocalypse. Yet by dint of grasping its "imaginative possibilities" and its relevance

to "people's lives", Morgan forges from this unpromising material a meditation on man himself, his resourcefulness, and readiness to continue his perpetual quest. The poem's off-staged event of solar extinction is a scientific certainty, however remote in time, and its implications for the continuance of human civilisation accordingly demand serious consideration. This, I think, the poet provides. His choice of the dramatic monologue is very much to the point, for of all lyric forms it requires the heaviest investment of human personality. Hence the faint allusive penumbra of the opening line, "well the prophets were dancing in the end much", haunted by seemingly impertinent memories of *Ulysses* ("well the prophets" contingently summons up "It little profits") and *Dejection: An Ode*, with its exclamatory *in medias res* ("Well! If the Bard"). Both poems, as it happens, are about man's resolute attempts to break the confines of his experience, and the last statement of *In Sobieski's Shield* does indeed read like a science fictive paraphrase of "To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield", as witness its verb of obligation:

...but there's a new graveness of the second life that phrase again we go  
up together to the concave of the dome the environment after all has to  
be studied.<sup>3</sup>

Something likewise analogous to Coleridge's "stifled, drowsy, unimpassioned grief" can be found in the bland, uncountoured lineation of the monologue. By suspending all punctuation, Morgan creates an evenness untouched as yet by the flux of feeling as it colours words with human intonations. The reader's efforts to disengage the sentences from their inchoate matrix also to some extent parallel the speaker's attempt to refocus his vision. But the poem's humanity extends beyond a simple Pelagian trust in man's courageous adaptability - the transference to the constellation has resulted in a malformed hand and chest, which testify to *inescapable* deformities of the human lot, even in some astral refuge that technology has rendered possible. The tenderness, moreover, with which the husband draws his wife's head into his arms similarly affirms that a post-tellurian existence cannot destroy man's primaeval feelings. Throughout the poem there are recurring intimations that a life physically discontinuous with that on earth involves a kind of rebirth, a notion which keeps obtruding on the speaker's thoughts and which he records only half-comprehendingly. Referring to a disfigurement on his forearm caused by the movement to the Shield, he censors his immediate impulse to call it a birthmark, and then concedes its truth:

...and there's a sharp  
twinge I never had in my knee and one most curious  
I almost said birthmark and so it is in a sense<sup>4</sup>

Later still, the irrepressible racial memory prompts thought of renaissance again - a vegetation myth has been technologised, but in such a way as to affirm rather than sever its roots in human experience:

I draw her head into my arms and hide the sobbing shuddering first breaths of her second life I don't know what made me use that phrase who are we if we are not who we were we have only one life....<sup>5</sup>

Another more substantial poem, called *Memories of Earth*,<sup>6</sup> makes similar statements about man from a rather different point of vantage. It is also a monologue, but one in the form of tape recordings made by a member of some Titanic astral race sent to explore Earth. Once again, thus crudely encapsulated, the material sounds unpromising, and yet the poem seems to me to be a beautifully tempered achievement. Greater stress is laid on molecular reconstitution than the limited compass of *In Sobieski's Shield* allows, and yet Morgan mercifully makes no attempt at pseudo-scientific documentation, but rather offers a sportive play on scale that brings Marvell and Swift vividly to mind:

...We climb, squeeze in  
and one by one tramp through the galleries  
till we have reached the designated cavern,  
fan out on the dim rubbly floor, and wait.  
We shrink again - accelerated this time.  
The rubble's a mountain-range, the shallow roof  
a dark night sky in infinite soft distance.<sup>7</sup>

The calm, prosaic trudge of the blank verse helps create a tone of scientific reportage, and yet little reminiscences of the Burkian sublime (almost comic, certainly wry in view of their application to the interior of a pebble) allow a sense of Romantic awe to seep in through "dim ...floor" and "infinite soft distance". But, playful and imaginative though this is, it constitutes only a minor part of the poem's excellence. More central are the glimpses the explorers have of human pursuits (some revealing man's most mindless cruelty). Much falls outside their blank, passionless, utopian existence, but it affects the consciousness of at least two of the party. Here for example is their hideous glimpse of a concentration camp, and the response it evokes:

....A train  
of cattle-trucks has brought in new arrivals,  
two thousand perhaps, men, women, children,  
all ages, tired or apprehensive, joking,  
reassuring, glad to stretch their legs,  
filing into a hall with hooks for clothes.  
A sign says BATH AND DISINFECTION ROOM.

In ten minutes all are ready, the guards  
 herd them to the farther door, unscrewing  
 the strange wheel that is its handle, and  
 all troop into the disinfection room,  
 some driven struggling, the last few screaming  
 as the thick oak door is screwed smoothly shut.  
 The beating on the panels mounts, and dies.  
 A thin susurrus filters through a while  
 like what I've read of spirits suffering,  
 but nothing is in my understanding.  
 I stare at Baltaz, who has clung to me  
 as if she was a woman of the earth,  
 and nothing on her features is not pain.  
 We have no pain, we cannot suffer pain.  
 I have nothing I can say to her but  
 'I saw no bath or cloth or soap or tap.  
 There was nothing but cement walls and floor,  
 and perforated columns of sheet iron.  
 How do we know what earthmen do?' 'I know!'  
 she cries, 'I know what they do! Record it!  
 They make people into ash, turn babies  
 into smoke....'<sup>8</sup>

The horror (and the sympathy it implies) are here stated only provisionally ("as if she was a woman of the earth"), yet a *Miteinfühlung* still manages to enter the speaker's insulated hedonism. Those dogged affirmations of painlessness (twice over) are made to seem too protestant by far. The great Romantic concern with empathy, with the enlargement of the sympathies, has here been realised in a genre which at first glance might seem to be utterly hostile to preoccupations of this kind.

Empathy of a peculiarly quirkish variety can also be seen at work in "Thoughts of a Module",<sup>9</sup> which, re-activating the form of the Anglo-Saxon riddle, offers itself as the monologue of a lunar vehicle. Once again, what might initially seem trivial proves on inspection to have considerable imaginative power. The splayed feet of the object are analogically present in the jerking four square rhythm, two largely spondaic feet symmetrically planted on either side of an emphatic caesura. Also, the abrupt, rudimentary syntax, without momentum or process, has a trimness that convinces one, against one's sceptical better judgement, of its authenticity as module dialect. Here is a sampling:

It is black so. There is that dust.  
 My ladder in light. What are my men.  
 One is foot down. That is pack drill.  
 Black what is vizor. A hiss I heard.  
 The talks go up. Clump now but float.<sup>10</sup>

Other lyrics in which the poet's imagination convincingly enlivens the inanimate from within are gathered in a virtuoso sequence called *Three Trees*<sup>11</sup> where the rameal shapes of lightning, of water-skiers' wakes, and of an impacted windscreen all characterise themselves with a declaratory vividness that once more brings the Anglo-Saxon kenning to mind (and also Emily Dickinson's handling of the riddle). The improbable animation of an artefact lies at the heart of "The Computer's First Christmas Card".<sup>12</sup> One could even indeed speak of "humanisation" in this little jeu d'esprit, given Pope's observation on the humanity of error. The computer strives toward a clear Christmas greeting out of a cornucopious run of items (technologised as a print-out), but stumbles on a flower name instead, misled by its phonetic similarity. This appealing error has of course already been anticipated by the frantic neologisms forged by analogy from the standard words in the catalogue, and all conveying a sense of convivial tipsiness not very far removed from the spirit of a conventional Dickensian Christmas. I shall extract some representative sequences:

jollymerry  
hollyberry  
jollyberry  
merryholly  
happyjolly

\* \*

hoppyBarry  
heppyJarry  
boppyheppy  
berryjorry  
jorryjolly

\* \*

merrymerry  
merryChris  
ammerryasa  
Chrismerry  
ASMERRYCHR  
YSANTHEMUM

The intrusiveness of the human into machine-like perfection also occurs in *Memories of Earth*, with its irruptive bursts of feeling forbidden by the explorers' mandate, and the specific intrusiveness of error likewise features in many poems by Morgan besides the computer's dizzy struggle.

An almost obsessive fascination with errancy emerges in the essay "A Hantle of Howlers",<sup>13</sup> and that wonderful semi-absurdist poem, *An*

*Addition to the Family*,<sup>14</sup> full of N.F. Simpsonic, cross-purposed dialogue, turns on the vague confusion of "basset-horn" and "basset-hound". There is furthermore a whole sequence of poems in *From Glasgow to Saturn* aptly entitled *INTERFERENCES*,<sup>15</sup> some of which subvert the usual lyric strategy (preeminent in the English sonnet) of clarifying a poetic design with a revelatory statement, and offer pregnant error in its stead. The final poem for instance concludes with an "interference" which conveys the slow motion, distorted reproduction of a message from a failed space rocket, and "We do not have lift-off" becomes "wo de nat hove loftiff".<sup>16</sup>

Another feature "The Computer's First Christmas Card" shares with a good many Morgan poems is its permutative structure. Again and again we find the poet shuffling and systematically recasting a limited range of phonetic materials. Several lyrics begin with an apothegm characteristic of some great man and then, half anagrammatically, range phrases and sentences in vertical columns beneath the relevant letters. This careful programming can sometimes become frigid and tricky, and I myself do not set very much store by "Seven Headlines",<sup>17</sup> or "Lévi-Strauss and the Lie-detector",<sup>18</sup> or "Wittgenstein on Egdon Heath".<sup>19</sup> However, I do consider "Message Clear"<sup>20</sup> a perfect poem of its kind. This piece can be viewed as a kind of technopaegnon or shape poem insofar as the scatter of letters across the page evokes the image of a defective papyrus or some such Biblical manuscript, given, that is, the kernel sentence from the Gospel according to St. John. When it was first published in the *TLS* (3 February 1966) it drew a letter from Heather Bremer in which she regulated all the lines by gathering them together. Two of her groupings, "Am ere sect" and "am ere section" were corrected, interestingly enough, by the poet himself to "a mere sect" and "a mere section" (*TLS*, 10 February). The exchange dramatises the whole point of the poem's fragmentary appearance, for just as in *The Collar* Herbert's incoherent rage is being subtly controlled by the far-flung (but none the less inexorable) net of rhyme, the immanent *logos*, so in "Message Clear" we witness an unscrambling of chaos in which every interpretative mishap only confirms the difficulty of arriving at the clarity promised by the title. Morgan begins by inverting the great Hebraic "I am", and enhances the interrogative flavour with the contingency of "if i am". This he follows with a number of paradoxes (often obstacles to faith): the atonement ("hero hurt"), omnipresence and simultaneous incarnation ("rife in Sion"), the exclusiveness that is a corollary of revealed theology ("a mere section"). These accumulated doubts end at the world-weary volta of the poem ("i am the surd/at rest"), which ges-

tures both toward the irrational nature of faith, and also to what Stevie Smith in one of her verses recognises as the deafness of Christianity to human questioning. This exorcism done, the utterance begins to gather momentum, especially through its energetic surge of active verbs (“i act/i run/i meet/i tie/i stand”), and its confident, powerful assertions, one of which subsumes key Egyptian deities to Christ (“i am thoth/i am ra”), and another of which suggests both the divinity and the humanity of the Messiah through the word “erect” (resurrected deity, *homo erectus*). There is also a fine, plangent sequence of nouns (“a stone/a tread/a throne”), which enacts the easy transition from the sepulchre (Christ in quattrocento Resurrections is often depicted treading upon a sarcophagus) to glory. Before the final illuminating sun-burst (“i am the resurrection and the life”), the Judaic “I am” is allowed to sound forth without any of the dubieties that cloud the start of the poem.

The attentiveness to local effects that this kind of phonetically programmed poem entails does, I think, have a significant impact upon the poet’s pattern of thought. While “Message Clear” looks on the page like an unassembled mosaic, other poems by Morgan are less obviously but no less thoroughly based upon a principle of structural tessellation. Imagery is granulated to the smallest units, and presented, thus pulverised, for our inspection. Of the more connected kind of imagism there is plenty of evidence throughout the three collections. Let us take for example that memorably inconsequential poem, “Oban Girl”,<sup>21</sup> the subject of which seems to resemble a figure in Stevenson’s *Song at Dawn*:

A girl in a window eating a melon  
 eating a melon and painting a picture  
 painting a picture and humming Hey Jude  
 humming Hey Jude as the light was fading

In the autumn she’ll be married

Here the recourse to anadiplosis (recapitulations at the start of each phrase) gives a rapt, inevitable unity to the various details of the image. Only the little rider breaks the spell, admitting the future into present tense contemplativeness, fracturing that calm self-sufficiency with a rather casual promise of marriage. In all other respects the image has been firmly webbed and bound to create a haiku-like serenity.

Nothing could be further from the spirit and method of “Oban Girl” than “Starryveldt”, the pointillist format of which glitters with taut, angry feeling:



starryveldt  
   slave  
 southvenus  
   serve  
 SHARPEVILLE  
   shove  
 shriekvolley  
   swerve  
 shootvillage  
   save  
 spoorvengeance  
   stave  
 spadevoice  
   starve  
 strikevault  
   strive  
 subvert  
   starve  
 smashverwoerd  
   strive  
 scattervoortrekker  
   starve  
 spadevow  
   strive  
 sunvast  
   starve  
 survive  
   strive  
 SO: VAEVICTIS<sup>22</sup>

As in "Message Clear", and in the poetry of Eugen Gomringer (which Morgan has translated in *Rites of Passage*),<sup>23</sup> the focus is on words as imagistic capsules, tesserae which in this case are flung stingingly at the reader. The poet ensures against chaos, however, by relying on a permutative structure, the insistent return throughout the poem of compounds whose elements contain the letters S and V, consonants derived from "Sharpeville". There is a glimpse of Hardy's Drummer Hodge at the start of the poem, where the combination of stars and veld calls to mind the Anglo-Boer War, and the ironic attempt of the South African oppressors in turn to obtain their freedom. The neologism "southvenus", playing upon "parvenus", points to the cultural impoverishment of a regime which claims to be preserver of Western civilisation, just as "shootvillage" suggests the heartless extermination of rural values by brute force. Morgan interleaves these compounds with gritty monosyllables, some bleakly indicative ("starve", "serve"), some rousingly imperative ("strive"), a muttered bass to the implied antiphony of a work song. The result is immensely powerful, the best protest poem about South Africa that I know. And much of its potency can be traced back to its refractive technique, which gives the



emotion greater trenchancy than a poetry of statement would otherwise have allowed.

The tessellations upon which I have dwelling spring in part from the reification of words in concrete poetry (Edwin Morgan is an expert practitioner of the form). Yet this latent pictorialism need not necessarily make for stasis, as the buoyant elation of "Message Clear" and the barking energy of "Starryveldt" show. In one or two poems it becomes positively cinematic in its agitated visual cut and thrust, as witness this section of a poem in homage to Kurosawa:

Bent bow, man running.  
 Bent bow, body jumping.  
 Bent bow, neck streaming.  
 Bent bow, knees broken.  
 Bent bow, breast nailed.  
 Bent bow, bent bow.  
 Bent bow, bent bow.  
 Dust mounds, old wind.  
 Grave mounds, cold wind.<sup>24</sup>

Each tensile spondee in the first three lines, released as it is into a flurry of feminine rhyme, has the effect of filming the weapon and its missile in action, especially in the hysterical stretta of "Bent bow, bent bow.- / Bent bow, bent bow", and the sudden eerie recession into images of ordered burial.

In many of his essays, Edwin Morgan stresses the responsibility of the artist towards humanity, a fact I have already had cause to ponder apropos of the science fictive poetry. In his reflections on concrete verse, for instance, he pours gentle scorn on doctrinaire attempts to "purify" the form of its human content, remarking that "one cannot brush aside 'moral, social, and psychological values' so long as the medium in question is linguistic".<sup>25</sup> And indeed in many of his poems, Morgan shows an easy, unforced grasp of these values, bringing them to the foreground in such moving pieces as *In the Snack-bar*, a Glaswegian recapitulation, in a more searching, less complacent key, of Wordsworth's "Animal Tranquillity and Decay". Here is the coda:

Wherever he could go it would be dark  
 And yet he must trace men.  
 Without embarrassment or shame  
 he must announce his most pitiful needs  
 in a public place. No one sees his face.  
 Does he know how frightening he is in his strangeness  
 under his mountainous coat, his hands like wet leaves  
 stuck to the half-white stick?  
 His life depends on many who would evade him.  
 But he cannot reckon up the chances,  
 having one thing to do,

to haul his blind lump through these rains of August.  
Dear Christ, to be born for this."<sup>26</sup>

The subject of the poem remains inscrutable, and the poet's efforts to penetrate his consciousness rebound in bafflement. How poignant the reference to human freedom in the word "could", given the mocking sameness, the choicelessness of all experience for the blind man, and how moving his enforced, unquestioning trust in his all too unreliable fellow men. That "yet" cuts deep into the line. Much of this paragraph anticipates the spirit of *The Elephant Man*, especially in the way it withholds all reassuring evidences of humanity in the man - the facelessness of the figure, the way the hands themselves resemble the detritus through which his stick scuffs on the pavement, the purposeless instinctuality of his hauling his "blind lump through these rains of August" - only to insist on that very humanity in the final charged exclamation.

The same sympathy, much less complicated, pervades Edwin Morgan's love poems, some of which I judge to rank among the finest of the century. Those in *The Second Life* tend to celebrate a requited love, and are often tenderly reminiscient. In "One Cigarette", for example,<sup>27</sup> the speaker is left alone, and sees in the cigarette the lover has left burning, an improbably frail emblem of enormous feeling:

No smoke without you, my fire.  
After you left,  
your cigarette glowed on in my ashtray  
and sent up a long thread of such quiet gray  
I smiled to wonder who would believe its signal  
of so much love. One cigarette  
in the non-smoker's tray.

Here the conventional Petrarchan statements about burning love are quietly, unforcedly modernised, the paradoxicality and intensity still there, but interiorly so, and glimpsed only through the poet's smile. "When you go"<sup>28</sup> restates the situation of Auden's great berceuse, but does not stray speculatively beyond the bedroom walls as that poem does. The protectiveness of the vigilant speaker, the trustfulness of the beloved, the implicit affirmation of the redemptive power of love, and indeed of the redemptive power of the *memory* of love - all these help make this an extraordinarily moving lyric:

When you go,  
if you go,  
and I should want to die,  
there's nothing I'd be saved by  
more than the time  
you fell asleep in my arms

in a trust so gentle  
 I let the darkening room  
 drink up the evening, till  
 rest, or the new rain  
 lightly roused you awake.  
 I asked if you heard the rain in your dream  
 and half dreaming still you only said, I love you.

These recollective, semi-epistolary lyrics become more stringent in later collections. "The Divide"<sup>29</sup> centres on a love that is problematical, perhaps unfulfilled, and the spirit of Ovid's *Heroides* runs close to the surface of such lines as these:

I keep thinking of you - which is ridiculous.  
 These years between us like a sea.  
 Any dignity that came with growing older  
 would stop my pencil on the paper.

Alternative constructions are possible here - that the speaker has sacrificed his dignity to love, or that love has rejuvenated him - and both are kept in acerbic tension. But in the confession "I keep thinking" there is a vulnerable plaintiveness that the cancelling rider cannot efface, a plaintiveness the more poignant for our memories of Spender's memorial bravado in "I think continually".

Edwin Morgan has written poetry of such range and variety that I have been forced to consider only some aspects of his versatile talent in this essay. A complete account of his poetry would, amongst other things, have to encompass that rich, mystifying centenary of poems, *The New Divan*, with its fluid spatial, temporal and personal perspectives; his recurrent interest in the elegy (the elegiac suite for Veronica Forrest-Thomson strikes me as being especially fine); that Browningesque run of monologues, *Stobhill*, which gives differing points of vantage on the same event, and his renovatively casual yet formally exact sonnets.

"To write literature of any value one must somehow write about life"<sup>30</sup> - one of Edwin Morgan's uncompromising manifesto statements, and the empowering creed of his very considerable achievement. The "somehow" I think separates him from the extreme position of the Leavisites, whose leader he elsewhere satirises for his intolerance and bigotry. For, as I have attempted to show, in even the most brilliant and technically obsessive of Morgan's poems, human values slide in through the interstices of the art, and make of that art something much more deeply interfused.

## NOTES

1. Edwin Morgan, *essays* (Cheadle: Carcanet Press, 1974), p. 4. Henceforth "E".
2. Edwin Morgan, *The Second Life* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Univ. Press, 1968), pp. 78-9. Henceforth "SL".
3. *Ibid.*, p. 79.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 78.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 79.
6. Edwin Morgan, *The New Divan* (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1977), pp. 57-69. Henceforth "ND".
7. *Ibid.*, p. 58.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 63.
9. Edwin Morgan, *From Glasgow to Saturn* (Cheadle: Carcanet Press, 1973), p. 62. Henceforth "GS".
10. *Ibid.*, p. 62.
11. ND, pp. 80-1.
12. SL, p. 50.
13. E, p. 255.
14. SL, pp. 19-20.
15. GS, pp. 43-51.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 51.
17. SL, p. 49.
18. ND, p. 87.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 80.
20. SL, pp. 24-5.
21. GS, p. 16.
22. SL, p. 23.
23. Edwin Morgan, *Rites of Passage* (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1976), pp. 156-63.
24. ND, p. 99.
25. E, p. 24.
26. SL, p. 43.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 63.
28. SL, p. 29.
29. ND, p. 106.
30. E, p. 194.