



THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

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Doctorate of Philosophy
In Creative Writing

The Green Dress Whose Girl is Sleeping

And

Broken Wor(I)ds:

Edwin Morgan's Science Fiction Poems

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Doctorate of Philosophy
The University of Edinburgh
2014

Declaration

I declare that this thesis is my own work and effort and that it has not been submitted anywhere for any other degree or professional qualification. Where other sources of information have been used, they have been acknowledged.

Signed: _____

Dated: _____

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Abstract

The Green Dress Whose Girl is Sleeping is a collection of poetry written over a five year period, which demonstrates my interests in formal and linguistic experiment through the themes of death and love. The speakers frequently struggle to accept either, with many of the love poems maintaining a sense of anticipated loss, and many of the death poems reverting to memory and joy as an expression of grief. At the centre of the collection is a series of sonnets, "Our Terraced Hum", which creates a narrative of observed experience through the premise that the speaker is watching people from a neighbouring block of terraced flats. Meanwhile several science fiction poems permeate the collection, universalising experiences such as love and death to develop a sense of shared experience throughout human histories and territories.

In particular, poems such as "Nan, Come from the Water" and "On Her Return from Afghanistan" maintain an autobiographical element to explore the personal impact of a family death, and the varying coping mechanisms people create. The deaths of strangers and animals are also prominent in a number of pieces in this collection, as found in poems such as "How to Kill a Blackbird" and "Heading to a Corner Shop on a Winter's Day", whilst major global disasters such as the 2011 tsunami in Japan, and the 2001 attacks on the World Trade Centre in New York city are the focus of "Sendai-shi" and "Towers". Poems such as "Kiting", "House Plant" and "Ghazal Jigsaw" interrogate love as a form of power struggle in romantic relationships, whilst experimentations in form and language become a medium for aesthetic and intellectual stimulation in pieces such as "Star", "The Promise" and "26 One Word Poems". A focus on specific events and reactions through varying poetic structures and tropes – surreal, autobiographic, fantastic or otherwise – I hope amalgamates to form a more complete and inclusive sense of collective, complex experience.

The critical element, entitled "Broken Wor(l)ds: Edwin Morgan's Science Fiction Poems", explores processes of estrangement and uncertainty as vehicles for promoting change throughout Edwin Morgan's science fiction poems. Chapter one focuses on Morgan's computer poems, chapter two looks at his space poems, chapter three examines the poem "In Sobieski's Shield" and chapter four considers Morgan's dystopian poems. It demonstrates that Morgan deconstructed and rebuilt poetic structure, language and genre as a way of rejecting parochialism and insisting on a progressive poetry which engaged with the modern world.

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The Green Dress Whose Girl is Sleeping

A Poetry Collection

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God Has Still Not Appeared to the Birds

In Boston we kept a jar
of eggs, thought nothing
of the life

cracked onto the waffle iron.
This palm shook, rattled out
a yolk. At the window

starlings – I think they were –
flew by us. Do you think
they saw

my shudder, my shell,
my hands? A knuckle
remembers

the old wounds it gave,
the eggs it's beaten
and God

has still not appeared
to the birds. These hands
are my knives, my gut,

they have tasted things.
Think about that
chick

that hit the thud window
like a wet sponge and let out
its first

and final choke of a song.
These hands
took it,

they have felt things
breathe, life flap in the smallest
wings. God

has still not
appeared
to the birds.

Apparition in a Storm

There's a speck on your tail
that might say something

about you. We're in the daisies,
next to no daffodils, waiting

for the clouds to pass
across us, between us.

Are you watching
too? We perch

by that towering statue
and the world is falling.

Watch the leaf tumble,
the breeze die. What an air

to throw. You ask for the earth
to break and it does.

I'll stay with you, then,
as the statue

is painted darker by the rain
for a darker world.

How to Kill a Blackbird

I think I saw a blackbird in your eyes.
Not a reflection but the real thing.
I traced it with a black line: black wings,
razor-beak, two coals set straight
for me, and the flash
of its breast-black streak.

Shriek and you're a blackbird.
You will be for tails
and skies, so I'll be dull.
I will walk incognito
until that coarse caw
and I am given away.

Let me clip those wings from you
and spray your feathers like road tar.
Let me tear your narrow legs away
with my fingers, meet your skull
with my human heel, feed on
your onyx vocal chords like canapés.

The remains of a blackbird
are not the remains of me.
I will take the corpse
and burn it for you
so it is carbon
and blacker than before.

Down on the Beach

and now we go in hands
across the rocks of the coast on toes
barefoot eyes down mouths open
sucking that sweet salt air

as we edge the sand we glance up
to the horizon let out a ghoul
of a cry so white we seem transparent
we hold our breaths

there by the rotting breaker
a mass of flesh choking
gagging inebriated
on that pitch black surf

and the sea rolls black
and forward catching it
bill wide for air
but filled with that sinister rainbow

almost beautiful in its end
as the water strips away
its feathers to make a coat
flapping in the wind

we watch the light die as it fails
to dive to float to fly to fight
its robust call wanes under
our slick dark gaze until
its sharp movements slow
shake and sink and stop
beak down eye wide
and white and we
stand there
watching

Toro

Flat out and book-black,
my bull lies like a gospel.
It has no name, but horns
because it is a bull.

It lumbers up, snorts,
lowers its head as though
praying;
grinds
a rear hoof
against Spain.

It hollers like a steam train
and bullets forward.

Black. Red. Black. Red.
Red. Black. Red. Black.
Black. Red. Black. Red.
Red. Black. Red. Black.
Black. Red. Black. Red.

My bull dances,
it finds my sword.

My bull is dying
and kicking like a child.
Thick
heart,
all beast.
Dead.

Because it is a bull
I name it flat out:
Toro. It lies in the sun.
I close its mouth.

Remembrance

Whose mind is yours? I see
your jaw clap closed, eyes strained
with each morning. I bring you
the small relief of tea and toast.
You make a smile for a stranger.

On Sunday you shat on the kitchen floor
and blamed the cat. Its size was the giveaway,
and that you've not owned a cat in twelve years.

It's both easier and more devastating to joke
than to reveal myself, to say you're sick
rather than dying. I avoid the lounge
where you sit reminding me to check the porch
light, check the porch light, to check the porch light,
to check that I am not wanted in your house.

In youth you sold antiques, played cricket,
imported tea. The house is arranged by relic:
the unchanging glare of portraiture, framed liner
tickets to mark each year spent at sea, your captain's cap,
hand-crafted bat resting in the living room.

And in the hall you stand mesmerised
by the grandfather clock, its face watching yours,
face watching face watching face watching face
until I lay my hand on your shoulder, recognition
finding me in you for a brief moment
when I take your arm in mine
and we return together.

Salvage crew

Won't you remember me
in the garden, the bright birds
bending the sky
toward us?

Remember the night our eyes played
on the vista, how our lips flew
in the warm evening

and if you remember the horizon
then place my silhouette
beside you.

The flowers are closing, this day's
roots are withdrawing and we
are the last of the light
on its petals.

Nan, Come from the Water

It's strange how I think of you
more often now, since we sent you
 away. Now sometimes you
are swimming in my mind, in your kitchen you
spout water from a cosie, slice moist cake, you
 wash your working, lively hands as you
hang translucent, angelic. If you
could be here I'd take you
 aside, ask to relive the times you
walked us through your wild garden, how you
plucked beans with us, cleaned with us until you
 had made a meal, a family you
could live for, good enough to eat, head high as you
emerge through us, rippling . Nan, you
 are more than just you,
you are the myth and the memory –

On Her Return from Afghanistan

My sister told me how she'd sewn
the stomachs of two boys who set off
a land mine whilst playing football near the market;
removed the overcooked
skin, tendons, muscle and cartilage
from the legs of a woman trying to save
her photos during a house fire;
administered the drugs to a man
she had eaten eggs with, knowing
his death was certain.

At my mum's wedding she was hit by a tirade of
Oh how do you do it?
smiled, told them it was a job, that she just
pulled the theatre curtain, hovered
in helicopters, let the bullets fly
as she loaded them onto the stretcher,
that you become immune, just a robot, just a doctor.

During the wedding reception we sat in the drum
of the disco and wept
because neither of us had said goodbye
to our Nan before she died.

Chromosome Medley

2052 - choices for the unconceived

Baby blue or baby brown as Bombay
mix, bark, a chest of drawers.

What's hereditary? Remove the walrus
from the walrus. Your mother's snout

needn't be yours. Here, take this flawless
mandible, push the outy inny, avoid

that fleshy, cankerous, cancerous brick
gifted by daddy. Who said God?

Every choice made for us
is every choice made for us.

1984 – one case example

Dad shaves, showers in cologne,
doesn't comb his hair for fashion.

Mum shaves, washes her hair,
detonates her eyelashes.

Dad drives, drinks, walks, jokes,
uses his one chat-up line on complexion.

Mum walks, drinks, sings, smokes,
eyes, trousers her way to conception.

0008 – the human race

Tongue-quick, word-quick, spermatozoa-quick,
a thousand generations bang their head

on a charged urethra. Carry the messages
of ancestry, little single-cell, carry

the burden and the brilliance of homosapientry
and plant it deep as the corpses, wide as the world.

A light of life flickers like a first word,
two caveats merge, two eyes piece together

under the auditorium. Darkness cannot determine
the bright mind but the dull sound - thrump thrump -

of war drums, the gentle burn of morning song
can. And food is what feeds: a yearning

for crushed grass, charcoal, daisy petals,
a hen's carcass, peas. There aren't always choices

but there are always decisions. The baby won't be born
with a book but it may still read.

The blue eye may be clearer
than the brown but both will see.

The First Kiss

What a disappointment. Nothing like the movies,
nothing like the mind. A mass of muscles writhing,
an awkward hand on a tightened arse
at the under-sixteens "Angel and Demon Night"

What a farce. Is this the limbo
stick for life? Where are the fireworks,
the butterflies, the butterflies exploding
like fireworks into a glorious rainbow
of wings and ash?

My son will sit with me and I'll tell him
the truth that there is no word to fit
a feeling of lust and immediate unrest.
Or the lingering taste, the pleasure, the alien
of a first kiss. There's no word, I'll tell him,
for the particular fullness that breaks through
the lungs and fills you with the breath
of their hair, for the sudden rush of two hands
clambering until the fingers find
each other and grip. Grip to that, I'll tell him
and be thankful for the imperfection
of love and that the first kiss is nothing
like you expected.

Lament for a Lost Son

my boss visits her son's grave
every night, lights a candle
in his memory
in her memory

I watch as she punches
holes, stacks papers,
parts of her
in the cemetery

the dead, like so many
rays of light
have passed
through our fingers

Haunting

It's only in you that I re-live,
re-die at my roadside
on loop, round about,
like a campaign video.
Don't maintain the vigil
to prove something: that the dying

morning must take you with it.
Those garage bouquets strung
to the lamppost, that headstone
is not me. I am nothing like the everlasting
white noise of my life,
the thought of my body lifting
and lifting and falling over
a car bonnet at midnight. I am not a placard,
a rainbow, a respirator, I am not
a mound. You are one of many
in their homes, a decade of parents poring
over the vistas, longing for something
more than the shadows to return
in the red evening. Let that pass.
Those bodies of memory are just
memories of the body, straggling

fawns at a dead end.
Don't think so negative,
so photographic. Do not think of me
as unmade, unkissed, unchanging,
unfaltering, unhated, unloved.

Sendai-shi

Sachie will still marry; her children will see
her past through the family album
that she will keep wrapped in linen,
bring out on occasion. She will pore over
her life with them, the places that are gone,
the days she spent growing by the sea
that are now taken by it, and those that were
ripped away by the wave. She will stream
through the blur that is her life in Sendai,
the green city whose ghosts are forever drowning
under the households of the tsunami.
Her children will read about it in school textbooks
and in their mother's face, they will see
the sorrow running through her slowly wash away
as the city regrows, recovers and learns to live on.

Towers

What they came for
not answered by the hurricane
The machine that defied
the gravity of belief
the panes and concrete
still as the dust outruns
in a hotel room, nursing
for a latte bought a day earlier
Now he has it tacked to his office door
but pass it and remember
of paper that escaped

is another question
of the explosion.
humanity,
smashes through
like water. A globe stands
the feet. My dad sits
his sick wife and a receipt
from the top floor cafe.
so he can't help
those burning flocks
the high windows

The Forest

Where are the city and its people locked together? Not in monuments or stone effigies, not in the solid slab of steps and spires, not in newly furnished apartment blocks but in sound, earthly noise. They come together like a web of roots, a radical spread, a flurry of leaves urging growth in something greater than themselves; together in the timbre of one tune, one voice, one trunk armoured by the bark of many.

When a tree falls and thousands are there to hear it, it makes a sound: cast out the saw for song. If we refuse to be pierced then show us the vibration of the very air we defy; the slow, low hum rising like a flock of wood pigeons at the crack of a gun. Watch the ground fly and the branches shatter. We will reek of its sap and taste the oil of the upheaval.

Night Camp

There we were in the goat's field,
you checking for ticks and me guessing
at good wood for midnight's fire,
our sun withering as we pelted ahead
with the final preparations:
to put four posters under the sky.

We took the timber saw between us,
held it tight along the oldest tree we could find.
Back and forward, perfectly synchronised,
spitting dust. By its last creak night was nearly on us.

You pulled the mattress from the undergrowth,
arms rippling in the half-moon. I climbed barefoot
and brought down the blankets of canopy.
We stood in the absolute darkness of the country,
drafted a fire, stripped down to nothing but shadows.

Fastening the drapes around us we lay back
on the dying ferns, tiny insect eyes
probing from the frame as we slipped,
still, between dreams.

Blue Planet

Thinking futuristic, I see a flash
in the starlight: green, perhaps Jupiter
on a vacation from invisibility.
No. It expands in a curious mangle
like no simplistic hunk of rock;
a species gazing downwards
on a strange blue planet.

I wonder what they'd translate
from that distance, if they saw us
like a gemstone laid out on a pitch
velvet display. On earth we are the mine,
the miner, pick-axe and cutter,
expert, assessor. We are the jewellers.

That emerald glow might sweep us
up like a grainy imperfection
on the immaculate night, recalling,
when we're long gone, how our waves
swerved and our apes walked upright.

Star

	end	end
	then	then
	a din	a din
	ending	ending
	in a din	in a din
	a dim din	a dim din
	ending dim	ending dim
	dim dimmer	dim dimmer
ending in a then and then and then and a din	ending in a then and then and then and a din	ending in a then and then and then and a din
a din ending in a dim din din din	a din ending in a dim din din din	a din ending in a dim din din din
the dim is ending in a dim	the dim is ending in a dim	the dim is ending in a dim
dart a dim dart again	dart a dim dart again	dart a dim dart again
again dim dimmer	again dim dimmer	again dim dimmer
a gain in dints	a gain in dints	a gain in dints
and in darts	and in darts	and in darts
in darts it	in darts it	in darts it
starts in	starts in	starts in
stints in	stints in	stints in
stints it	stints it	stints it
starts	starts	starts

The Bang

Alice and Atlas: Opposing Protons in the Large Hadron Collider

Alice: Pretty naked, pretty fast. For the sake of staying positive, call me Alice.

Atlas: < flexing his quarks> And me, Atlas.

Alice: Pleased to meet you at last. So this is magnetism. Can I ask –

Atlas: Oh baby, do.

Alice: What are we doing here? For what cause?

Atlas: We're on course.

Alice: Yes, but for what? To charge? To sing? To spin?

Atlas: The truth is in the name. Not Hadron, but Collider. We're set for, done for.

Alice: But we've this time at least. <Enthused, charged> How romantic!

Atlas: Well let's be quick about it.

Alice: Can we kiss?

Atlas: We can collide.

Alice: Has it always been? You seem something of an opportunist.

Atlas: I am.

Alice: It's not how I dreamt it, but I admit the motion takes me.

Atlas: Come closer, my sweet Alice.

<Atlas and Alice approach each other at 299.8 million metres per second>

Alice: I'm split; Atlas, I'm not sure I've anything for you.

Atlas: I adore you.

Alice: Well, perhaps –

Atlas: Perhaps?

Alice: Perhaps.

My Adoration of Tiramisu

When the evening curls by and the streets shush,
when I think of unfolding from beneath you
towards the kitchen, fingering your lips to a hush;
when I turn from your eyes and those few
noisy glances, when you reconsider
where our romance is

I'll return with spoons
and, tuneless, place one quiet bowl before us.
I will wrap my words and whispers around.
I'll be kind, I will be generous
and even when we envy the ease of sound
I will resist and, in defiance, feed us.

Body Rub

On Sunday I roll over
your back with my knuckles.
You're not dough and kneading,
but hazelnut butter, slowly melting
into my palms. Higher, deeper, you say.

I take breaths to remember the delicate recipe.
For a while we're silent and I'm baking
my finger tips in to your shoulder blades.
You've a duck egg in your spine,
brown sugars along your left side.

Eventually we must end
but as I rise up you whisper Not yet.
Lower, slower. And I return to work.

girl.drm

Lie back, jack in. This dream is electric
was my reality and tonight you'll see
it too: the shadow below her,
the phosphorescence that hangs above
my girl can be yours.

You can share her: tongue the ice-cream
from her midriff. Steal her fingertips, suck
the drowsy breath from her lips.
That sand she's lying on for you
was for me. The ocean that absorbs her toes
was from our first summer by the sea.

Dream carefully. When she's curious she smiles,
she avoids apology, never lets on
that she's afraid of the shifting darkness,
the cold breeze. She is a phantom
of memory but you will never know
her outside this moment, so remember

as my mind drifts,
as my vision closes,
so will yours.

The Electric

Officially, she was possessed,
under the control of Daemons;
couldn't bear to hear
the Lord's name

one more time

Fine. Threw her a Qur'an,
Adi Granth, Tantra, Sutra,
knocked her sideways with
the line-up for AC Milan.

the kid's sick

She's thick, won't listen, can't see
her fingers for her hand,
hasn't seen the light.
She says, switch on the bulb.

That Song

not her swelter, her pinkie
not her morning breath, her peppermint purse
not her gravel, her linguini
not her zane, her overt ordinariness in public
not her intricate dental routine, her mink
not her sausage and eggs, her thigh
not her towel, her unsustainability
not her one summer shoe, her horizon
not her teeter, her titter
not her bargain hunt, her poacher's eyes
not her quiver, her taste for a good sunrise
not her, her absence

but that song
but that song
but that song
but that song
but that song
but that song
but that song
but that song
but that song
but that song
but that song
but that song
but that song

Our Terraced Hum

I: Studio, 4 a.m.

She has the quickness of the hour: pot purged,
brush brandished before sunrise. What wrath!
What ferocious speed! What power! Submerged
in the curtain of night she postures, laughs,
aglow, her head thrown back apropos.
She watches the paint dry. In the morning
she will rise, shower, butter toast and go
to work. She will bake bread in the evening,
run a bath for her children, please her man.
Which of us has the canvas for dreaming?
I sit watching the lives of others, fan
whirring, reeling in the sweaty cling
of life. Our terraced hum is an echo
heard vicariously through the shadows.

IV: The Flat Opposite

He watches the television at night,
absorbed as she strolls behind him
cradling a dozen tea-candles, alight
in the washroom. She sets them on the rim
of a drawn bath, steam silhouetting her
in the frost of the jarred window. She strips,
the small lights dancing on her skin, a blur
of dreams as she arches, lowers her hips,
breasts, her neck beneath the surface. One hour
passes without consequence until she blows
out the flames and dresses in the flowers
of white smoke. She stops at the door, frozen,
flawless. He flicks through channels as though
he's never seen the goddess through my window.

Vb: Basement Beneath the Corner Shop

He's made himself the castle of his dreams:
the landfill lord, a tin can Midas
moated by nine months of debris. He beams
in the grit of his homemade fortress
because nothing outside can finger through
the pizza-box walls cracked by arrow loops,
his cardboard curtain. The hullabaloo
of reality is cut by his coup
d'état, cartons stacked, wrappers tacked, intact
in the order of chaos. Passersby
glee in, hands fanned over their eyes, retract,
shake their faces at the teem of house flies.
They mark him the idol of their own disgust
when in public but, privately, they lust.

VII: Garden State

Old guy finds peace in posies, a tall mug
of whisky. He kneels with his eyes screwed shut,
nostrils wide as roses; surrounded, rug
to hearth to ceiling by wildflowers cut
that morning. What a state he's built himself
from Aaron's Rod, Allgood, Adam's Needle,
Alexander's Black Lovage, Aneth.

A mass of gnomes sit in this wild city, all
facing him as though he is their god,
rod-hands together in prayer. A light smacks
the lord, grows bright, burning, blinding, good.
Then he smiles, naked chest sculpted, bold, black
and one knowing eye winks as our worlds swim
in the rainbow of life that surrounds him.

VIII: Above the "100% Human Hair Extensions" Beauty Salon

We could never call those eyes listless, boy,
at the speed they study the streets: hot rod
bawling down the road and into the sky,
a gaggle of drunks who whoop at girls,
singing brotherhood hymns from the football grounds.
What angels those pigeons make through your mind,
trash glittering in great whirls of colour,
painted hurricanes that wake and whizz.
The clamorous reek of a chip supper
and road fumes ignite in the breath
of a dragon that soars, flips and roars.
You clamber onto her back, right leg
following left, stroking her well worn
wings as you whisper your destination –

XIII: Open Window, Toilet Room Suicide

Is it ill instinct that grasps this one gull?
An open port is too much to resist.
He staggers across the sill in full
view, colony screeching. Is it a twist
of nature that takes his sharp foot inside?
He ponders the sink as he walks the tiles.
He takes to the toilet to check the tide:
still as clockwork. Is it vastness, the miles
of flight that make the saltwater so sweet?
The routine is tested, ancient and wise.
He leaps to the cistern, surveys the seat,
yanks the chain with his beak. He drowns the cries
outside, screeching, swirling on a throne
of wild cataracts until he is gone.

XVII: The Call

They are not back yet. She hovers over the hob, half-dancing. Is it the telephone? She moves to answer. Takes the receiver. She says hello. Yes. She sits down, moans, puts a hand over her eyes, breathes, shakes. The handset's wet, she yanks it from the wall, slams it on the kitchen table. It breaks. She is silent for a long moment, bawls until her eyes and lips are raw. She stops. She stands and takes a knife from the side drawer, a loaf from the cupboard, butter. She drops what she's doing to clear the phone from the floor. The front door opens and her boys enter. She smiles, greets them and serves the dinner.

XVIII: Study, Siblings

He's on the top rung, her on tippytoes:
sprites of possession hauling their mother's
tomes to the floor. They lay them out in rows
of fascination: Pickling for Larders,
Advanced Mathematics for Beginners,
A History of the World, Spring Seeding,
Plato's Question, The Good Home: A Winner's
Guidebook to Genetic Engineering.
But the ache of the child is in design:
they clasp the pages between them and pull
leaves from limb, shred the sheets from their spine.
In the mirage of devastation all
pages swarm as one. Through this new release
they revel in the wholeness of the pieces.

XX: Reflections on the Dog House

It's too late but summer never lets up:
the stoned streets are bright and brash. We glare
in sweat and silence, each with his nose up
at the bare pane; chimeras in the glare
of one another. That slump of a hound
paws the glass, eyes sated from the lack of sleep
and the grind of an empty house. I hound
the window and howl, chase my tail, whine. Sleep,
let us dogs lie in a cradle of stars –
we will never again slash up the lounge
or pull on the carpet. We will be stars,
soundless, sated and serene as we lounge
in the diamond of your darkness. Let us
lose the sight of reflection . Please, let us.

XXII: Loft Conversion, The Smoking Gallery

His cigar smoke lingers like the old ghost
of his gun, whose muzzle shot the jaw off
a red stag in '37. He toasts:
to love and life, to port and sport. His loft
is a haven of eyes in the desert
of a blind city. I watch his glass grind
along the rim of his teeth as he skirts
his tar-nails through the drinks cabinet. Mind
and man meet in the memory
of the chase: an antler, a hoof, a tail
for eternity, for taxidermy.
What forgotten things he finds in a trail
through the hills of youth. But what's undone
remains in the art of preservation.

Breathing Space

Stars, don't start.
Leave me to everything.
Burn away. Your glimmers
have made their point
though it's lost.

Let me freewheel
in your distant light,
handstanding, vaulting
through the folds
of your surveillance.

If we'd wanted to see you
every minute of every night
we'd not have built houses,
built factories to drab your sky.
This is our canopy, our cloth
between your vastness
and the immediate universe
of our eyes.

Gaze

In a glance the night sky recalls
the bright sparks that began
our planet's overture: diamonds
veined through the earth,
blue cheese, a marble floor,
volcanic coughs and iron birds,
a declining sundial, the supernova
that birthed bright pearls of human song.

But it surrenders nothing that is not earned.
Rome rises, swords charge, a leech
suckles, a bed of periwinkles multiplies,
an ape stands for the first time and walks.
And no slim telescope will show it all,

two eyes cannot see a million others,
one man cannot have a million lovers
as one flower does not aspire to be a meadow.

House Plant

She had tomatoes growing
in the living room, too

precious, those fat rubies,
for what nature intended.
You're never to eat them,
she insisted, never. So I

didn't, and we watched
them grow like children.
The sunlight made them
lean to the window, leaves

fingering the glass
until the stem bent

under the weight of the fruit,
until those gems broke free
from the purse, scattered,
turned black. We left them,

let them rot on the carpet.
I didn't say a thing,

but I should have, I ought to
have taken the plant out
to know the garden, to let
the whitefly ravish it.

There Wasn't Anybody Else

Just that one silhouette, man-shaped
and calling out to the spit-slick ocean.
No-one would hear what he might
have said, his resident voice.
He sent it out, a hopeless dinghy
in a hurricane, cracked mast, tangled rope.
No-one would hear him explain
the tilt of his tongue that groped
the buck of his teeth, the dirty wash.
He wanted silence, or the brush
of the water's song, or his yelp
to mingle with the outdoors;
to soak frustration, drown a temper,
skim love about like a pebble.
Just that one silhouette, man-shaped
until morning; then just one voice.

The Insider

The sun comes before the morning
and a man puts the ground to his ear.

At the party the green dress dances
so wild that her hips shake the atmosphere.

Our songs are rising as our dead crumble
back into the earth where we lose them.

And the morning sun lights up the sequins
of the green dress whose girl is sleeping.

Hanging Out the Washing at Night

What a snail you make
pulling the ocean from a sheet
flapping it in the wind
like it was nothing. The world
unravels in your hands
as you clip clothes to the line
like stars winking
in their place, transfixed
by you in your nightie
between the shuffle of trees
and a dog's distant growl.

My eyes flicker
between the tenement
shadow and your silhouette
stretching over the bed sheets.
You bend down for the final
piece, your slender legs
shuddering in the chilling darkness
and I think
of that bold look you gave
before you took the night in
your empty basket
and returned to the house.

The Chase

Where the point and the surface meet: this is how I think
of her as she crosses the street, hand in her bag, foot from the floor,
a real torpedo. When our eyes hanker for proximity like the poles
of a magnet I know I'm beat. She darts behind a two storey
bus, other-worldly for that brief acceleration, and then mine again.
My legs can carry the city's grace, the National Gallery, the chirp
of a starling in one stride and within twenty I'm beside her,
looking at her, seeing through her. What do you want? she asks,
the wind on her tongue. You, I say as my breath meets hers.

The National Portrait Gallery

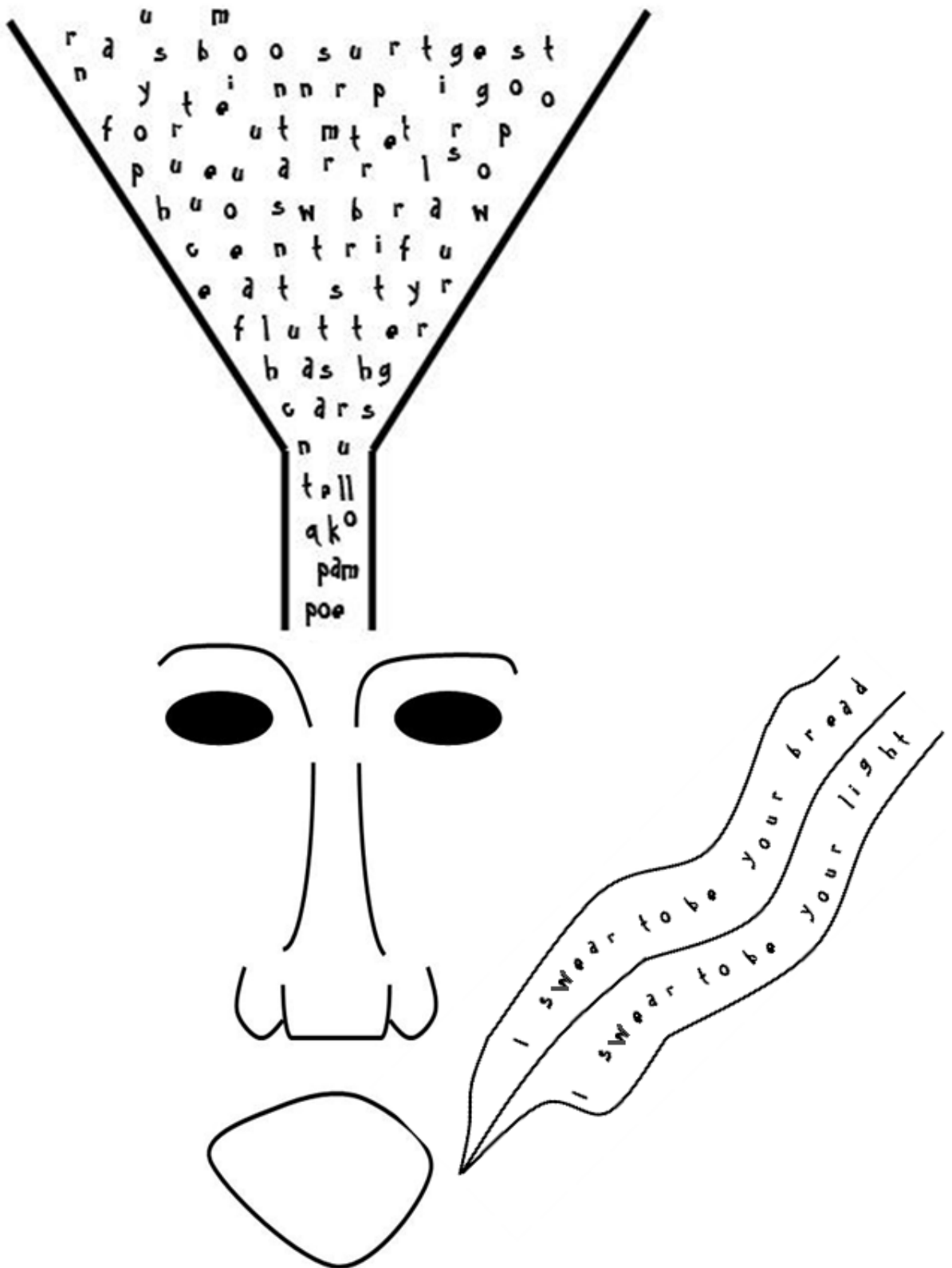
A frame to the country? Pff!
When you come to see me
you see something of me,
my fat face thinned, shaven
clean for your visit. My eyes
are not history, the lochs,
my hair has no connection
to heather, though I've smelt it.

I am a moment. A posture.
When the cleaners kill
the roaring vacuums, put out
the lights, we are all in the
death of darkness. It is only you,
who comes here and stares,
that is the portrait.

Bring the world to me, to us,
our catalogue of depiction.
We need something other
than ourselves, for your frame
to extend ours, the wind
that opens the door, the road
fumes, your whining, running
children to clear the fust
of our corridors.

In this place you hang
with us, your moment
reflecting in our painted eyes.

The Promise



The Woman with a Rabbit Sitting on her Cardigan

He'll be your mouthful, your pot.
Take him now, cuddle him, say your goodbyes.
The rabbit shuffles as if he knows
that your eyes have designs for him.

Don't shuffle, don't spill your tea.
He knows more than he's letting you know.
See his neck snap like a drawer shuts
on its hinges, his eyes whiten, the pot boil.

The Fly

Everything seems to be with toast lately.
Another fly thumps into the window.
It can't escape without me
and it buzzes impatiently
at the glass.

I could open it,
let the poor bastard out.
Out there that fly is a goner,
so I keep it in with me, flying
in my web of cigarette smoke. It watches me

watching it. I butter toast. The sweat
of heat drawing it close,
closer, too close.
Does the fly think
I am pathetic?

It must
because it lands,
rubs its hands like
it's buttering the bread
that's beneath it. I am nothing

to this fly and am broken between
putting it out and letting it die.
That piece is for the fly now,
I'll make another on the grill,
keep the window shut.

The Elephant Wash

They're not elephant enough.
Tusks sawn back, legs chained, led
into the water where they're beaten
to lie, half submerged, islands of flesh
and heads, the occasional eye.

When the washers whip
the elephants' scarred backs
a few of us flinch. We watch
in the reek of dung,
the thick yellow soap is acrid.

An Aussie says This is old school
animal training, adjusts
his camera lens, takes a photo
with his kids. The workers thrash
sticks across their trunks,
we're not sure why. They plough
sharpened coconut husks
over and over and over
the rawing fields of skin.
One woman says she's
had enough of this
and leaves.

As we lose interest
we follow the small herd
to the taxi rank
where a shrivelled
grey woman is begging,
arm stretched out like a weak trunk,
fingering for our change.

Hunger

In the frequent stumble of a cider night,
homeward, an uneasy rumble grows, a tight

growl. The chippy's closed. The 24 hour petrol shop
has shut down. When'd that happen? I stop

and push my pale face against the Chinese
like an orphaned boy in a Christmas Special. Please

let the Turkish meat emporium be open. No.
I know the curry house is closed for diwali, so

sit in the street, clumsily roll and light
a cigarette to cage the appetite.

A bird pecks at nothing. A man shoos
his dog from my feet. A fat couple enter the public loos

and don't come out for a quarter of an hour.
I piss across a storm-beaten tree. The glower

of time has taken its toll. Can a man
eat a stone? A stick? A half-empty soda can?

I dance to the meadow, where mushrooms grow
and I know there are few poisonous kinds so

pull them up. They give themselves
so easily and I delve

deeper into the forestry, picking up
pace. This woodland is my deli: a buttercup,

a dandelion clock, and under a rock behind a bush
a menagerie of scuttling amuse-bouche

for my eager mouth. I throw them in, incessantly,
their tiny heads popping, bodies throbbing, bobbing in a sea

of yellow blood and saliva. So deep now
I can barely see the tree for the woods, how

the moon fights away the stars, can barely
feel the wind, the night on my skin clearly.

A new spirit takes me: cast away
the blockades of clothing! Today

the sun rises on a new man, a beast, a lark
flying out to meet a new sun, out from the dark.

Cast out that shell of the city and into the new, the now, the stark!
I wake up hours later: 5am, half naked, half hammered, in the park.

26 One Word Poems

Another Bite and Then the Diet Starts
Appetizer

Boyhood Dream, Male Reality (Unfortunately They're His Own)
Boobs

Chrissy, 48, Loves Cats, Hates Cheaters, Smoker
Cat-as-trophe?

Darlin' It's Not You...
Delusion

ENTER IF YOU DARE!!!
Exit

Folk These Days Don't Know They're Born
Fuddy-duddy

Gravediggings for Breakfast
Granola

Have You Trouble Hearing?
Herring?

Icarus, Fresh from an Afternoon Dreaming, Strode Forward with His Hands in His
Pockets, Harked "I've an all-inclusive booked in Majorca, paid on the plastic. Onward!"
Imbecile

Jagged Winter with a Terrifying Spring
Jaberwocky

Kafuffle of Love / Art is Misunderstanding / Death is Song and Dance
Kabuki

Leaves Blow in the Long Wind of Spring
Lenten

Magniiiiification
mnmalsm

Nay! Neigh!
Nag

Onomatopoeia Walks Into a Bar: thunk
One-liner

Petite Bundles
Pic can inn ies

Quality Engagement and Wedding Bands at LOW LOW Prices, Mail Order NOW
Quartz

Rolling into an Etch of the Mind
REM

Speaking of Sin
sssssssssssssssex

Tobacco, Tequila and Karaoke Friday
Tracheotomy

Unborn Clings to the Mic
Ultrasound

Versa
Vice

What You See Is What You Get
WYSIWYG

X-Ray Dept./ CT Suite ; Orthopaedic and Fracture ; Males Only Ward
Xanthippe

Yaddah Yaddah Yaddahaaahahahaeeee
Yak

Zealot Packs His Trolley Full of Cold Meats
Zombie

Apologies to My Body

Body, I'm sorry. Sincerely. I'm sorry
for the pounds of flesh
I put in, put on. I'm sorry
for midnight's sofa, for lying in.
I'm sorry about the beer – I couldn't help
myself. I'm sorry for all the cider, too,
for Sherry, vodka, Tequila.
Sunrise is something we've seen
too little of and, for that, Body, I apologise.
Body, I'm sorry for our eyes,
that I dismissed the gravity of mountains,
have not set them sailing enough.
Tell the ears that I'm sorry about Hanson's MmmBop.
They deserved Rachmaninoff.
Body, I'm sorry for the scars I got as a child,
for the disappointing nights with women I barely knew.
You have been good to me, body, and I've been
- let's face it - worse to you.
Body, I'm sorry we don't go out more,
that our piano fingers have memorised
the QWERTY keyboard instead of scores.
I'm sorry that exercise became a chore.
When we were seventeen we were pristine.
Body, I'm sorry we only see abdomens in magazines.
But we've time, Body, and heart. I should mention
cigarettes, kebab 'meat', colonic 'upsets', the sweats,
the blues, dry lips, man-tits and, yes, the tattoos.
And love never helped us, did it? It left us
quaking in the dark binge of my room.
But Body, there's something to us,
something flaccid, fragile, something
near-marvellous. Let's go now,
Body, round and viscous:
it's last orders
and we've work to do.

Outside the Pub, Hurricane Bawbag

rips the street, takes mothers
off their feet, police off the beat
but as I wither with a dozen smokers
trying to catch a flame between us
a man in his seventies, half bent,
muttering, struggling but intent
pushes an empty wheelchair
up the road to the peak, stops, checks
the decline, shuffles into the seat
and lets the wind take him

A Veteran

Your first steady step is clean: a left,
left, left, right, left, your skirmish green
suit, pinned and proper, regimented red
pom-pommed beret, straight firesnap spine.

You take the seat in front of mine.
Your smoke lingers, chokes
the atmosphere and without apology
you sleeve away a silent tear.

It could be Veterans Day, it could be
another farewell ceremony. You start
a slow vibration, like a laugh building
in to the shudder of artillery and I hope

you won't look at me as you quicken
in your place. I hope your hand settles
on the trigger and your body stiffens.
You stand steady, your first step is clean.

Last Stop

Half man, half whisky, he staggers
the train-side one malt at a time,
slumps against the train's outer skin,
peers in to distil a view. He gets a taste
for designated seating, swaggers in.

Reservation tickets meet him:
Queensferry to Glasgow,
a return from Shotts, a window
seat through Paisley. He stumbles,
limbs splashed out to catch

himself, and like Vitruvian man
he stands sketch-still as though bound
by the will of the station. In a moment
of clarity he takes the tickets,
rips them, wild but steady,

hurls them high above the seats.
They hit the luggage hold and fall
like carriage snow. He drifts back,
sits back, lets everything rest
in his confetti.

Last Orders

Chuckling out time, not quite Baltic.
You're on the edge of devastation. It's clear
through the whisky in your eyes, something
under your breath. You murmur on
about heroin and suicide, that you were
Gonna be a daddy, eh. Gonna be a daddy, eh.
Aye, a daddy, how your dad took you aside,
shook your hand; congratulations, for once.

We ask where you're going
tonight, if you've someone to see,
somewhere to stay other than under
another doorway. But we are ghosts
whose voices cannot penetrate through
the loss, and you tell us you were gonna be
a daddy. My dad shook my hand, aye a daddy.
It's nae-one's right tae terminate.

Tonight, she'd bought you drinks,
fed you as she sipped on water
after water (to make it easier?), told you
she didn't want to bring another bairn
to this terrible world. You ran to the toilet,
cried your eyes out, hurled.

Eventually our voices settle with your eyes
and we agree on a quiet place to think
and sleep. You've a pal a way away,
so we wait for the bus, push two pounds
into your palm for chips, tell you
It'll be okay, you're doing well
and you hold us to you, tell us
he shook my hand.

You stagger aboard, sit, your eyes still
shaken, contemplating the night
as the bus departs and you give
a vacant smile, a thumbs up and we go
back to the pub for one more.

On Waiting for Milk

Lost in the start of this winter morning
through a city fog. Like drums in the snow,
I hear two milk boys come, briskly walking
through a motionless, calcium veil. Now

I hear their bottles turning, I invent
the hunch of their delivery. I create
an image of the duo twice-bent,
lifting a fresh dawn through their milking crate.

Then a change of light: I graze the pathway,
cream my tongue for the voice of morning work,

take a tone for enough bottle to say
something meaningful as they lift and walk.

They pass, hoof-footed, cold and unsurprised.

I say nothing, move nothing, go inside.

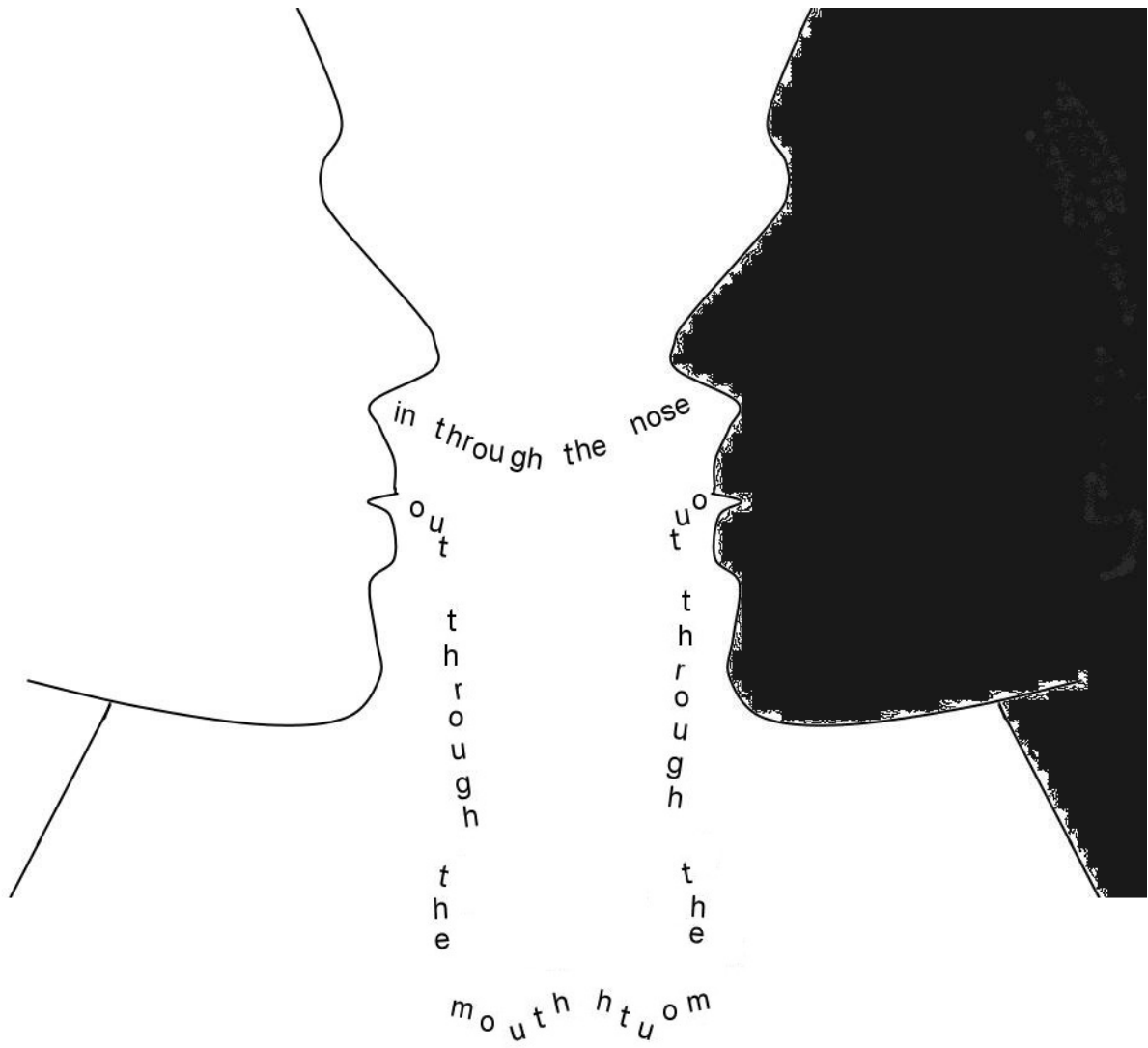
Heading to the Corner Shop on a Winter's Day

The air shattered
in a scream which I followed, pounding,
and found a woman lying
snow-angel still on the ice
repeating, half choking, half heaving,
my baby, my baby –

Two men lifted her forward, slowly
unfastened the sling from her shoulders, held her
away from the crushed sack of limbs
as we telephoned.

It was something none of us could take
or leave, so we stood
together, separate
in a limbo of stillness and dread
until the useless immediacy of the ambulance arrived
and we were relieved.

Breathe



My Secrets as a God

Whoever says omnipotence is good
is as bad as his word. Truth is I've seen
too much. I've watched deserts flood,
cities tumble, women burn, I've stood
with the kind, the godly, the downright mean.

When civilisations charged into battle
I was necessary, I was there, I was the gleam
and the darkness on their mantle,
a dead man's word, hallucinatory babble,
his flash of white, his nightmare, his dark dream.

I've secrets I'm bound to keep and yet
there's nothing of you that I've not gleaned,
heard, felt. I know you, your loss, regrets,
the sting of your love, how you begged to forget
that smell, that silent sun, so changed routine.

If there's something I could pray for
I'd choose confession: that velvet screen
between us. I'd whisper the door
down, call it a miracle. And more
than anything I would ask for your forgiveness.

In the Classroom

Children are gods too.
In this room one teenager stands
and cracks his knuckles through
long division, puts his hand

up, asks to be let out.
He leaves, quite calm, for a quiet
minute, then screams FUCK IT.
The class are on the verge of riot

and no-noise-astonishment.
I let them blether,
call for management,
pull myself together.

This morning
his dad didn't come back
again. Mum was smoking
her last brick, told her son That prick

better no come back, ken,
I'll do him in. When the boy was six
– he stayed with gran then –
he was a fuck, a fix

for someone, no name,
says the report we have squeezed
in our filing cabinet. He's taken home,
mum's gone, but he has the keys.

Random Sample from the School Career Library Classification Index

Dairy worker
Dietician
Diamond cutter
Design technician

Offshore rigger
Oral advisor
Organic gardener
Organiser

Lane sweeper
Librarian
Lighthouse keeper
Linguist: Bulgarian

Educator
Estimator
Explosives expert
Exterminator

Red Squirrel

I watched you find the places hidden by the snow,
dig up those old plots that went remembered.
Diligent, you let the empty spaces go.

The spirit is harder than the soil.
This deep winter is littered with holes.
I've nothing to do, nowhere to go, but with you.

You make a joke: You must be nuts. I groan.
But you reveal the secrets of your wild, anyway.
There must be something wrong,

I know but I can't change.
You look at the boy I am, underneath,
a lost little thing to put into the ground.

You've put your paw on that, I realise. I take
what we have in my clumsy hands,
shoo you away and rebury it.

Backlash

The Nose

The Mind

The Eye

My first girlfriend's foundation

Plasticine
Clotted cream
Unwashed towels
Mace

Wolverhampton back alleys,
discount gin
and the trepidation
of hands

A block of lavender soap
held in marigolds
by an attractive lady
from a shopping
magazine

Snow

A Fox's Glacier
A Fisherman's Friend
A Shot of chilled vodka
Road Fumes

Waiting for the car,
I fall in, ask how you're doing,
chirp. We drive
in the accepted peace of the radio

A gob of mouthwash
in a clean porcelain sink

Love

Cherry Bakewell
The debris of a firework
Citrus fruits

Away from the world,
a haze of cocktails and takeaways,
two nocturnals

Paint hurled
against a magnolia wall

The doctor's surgery

Piss
Bleach
Morning breath

Somewhere that I was not
as you lay dying

A tortoise in a box
in a shed in a garden
where runner beans grow

Poetry

Chips and sauce, a gherkin
Washing Powder
A Sunday Roast
Smoke
from a blown out candle

The rattle and murmur
of everything

A cosmonaut
pedalling the vacuum
towards their nearest star

Kiting

No angel is safe.
We fire our flimsy diamond
into the summer
night. You rush

to catch it – no not it –
its bravado, its promise
that we will never end
the flight together.
It's here to tell you

it's inevitable, as inevitable
as its string dancing
in the chaos of itself.
We'll cast that chaos
back, pick the knots out

until feathers fall
from the clouds.
Then we can build ourselves
the wings we need

to chase
that dance
into the ravel
of the night.

Kingfisher

I was in the 39 degree winter of Kochi.

The water was sleeping,
we were riding on its dream.

Suddenly, led by the changing shadows,
he flashed through the warm breeze,
plummeted into that second world.

He had barely left me
but his dive filled the river.
Not a drop of movement on the surface
but his image hung, ablaze,

his wings like cloaks of energy.
His tail was a bolt of topaz.
His beak was sunlight, mango, flame.
His feet were origami

folded from the backwaters of India
and in his hunter's eyes precision shone.
In the silence, in the centre
of the season he was a vein,

a quick beating rhythm.
He came back empty
but time snapped

and was reborn
in his dance

of light and fire and ice.

Selection from a Summer Set

I

High white emerges,
surf-boy hovers on his board.
Nature is captured.

IV

Cliffs hold the winter
shades near. Birds cross the evening,
slow and silently.

V

A warm sun welcomes
the morning. Schoolboys scatter
like clouds of minnows.

IX

Whale men watch women
for calendar legs. Ice-cream
is reality.

Whale

It has stopped.
It is waiting to make
an island.
It is drifting
at near stillness,
mouth bound,
tongue hung,
blowhole beat.
It is waiting
for you to stroll,
from your boat,
along its back
and think
it is dead.
It will be
a fat corpse.
It will be
flesh.
It will be
what you expect.
You will hum
its deep song
and think
it is harmless.
It is here
to eat
and it will eat.
It is here
to rise
and it will rise.
It will respond
as you sink
your flag through
its skin
and as it bites
you will think
it lives.

On Old Fishmarket Close

The old men appear, they know their place,
which fish to sell from their trawler baskets.
They hold them out like their children, mouths gaped
in the humming sun, scales shifting. Look, you'll miss it
if your mind flails, if your gaze swims too much
in the anchor of today. Let their tales, their voices pick
through the bones of history and find you hunched
among the bright, the new, the old and blackened brick.
I am smoking on the porch of a chic cafe,
splashing into anchovy butter, a bundle of bread sticks;
tourists streaming like salmon up the steep throughway
for something to snap, something ancient, unique.
I pack the poem, clear the air, scatty from the salt and smoke,
the fish lingering, old men evaporating, as I leave the close.

Ghazal Jigsaw

From the small, closed window by our study table the stars are set
like the pieces of your space jigsaw. I ask if you're any closer. The stars are set

you mutter as you slot another nook into the realised corner, and yet
you seem unsure which cosmos you've pieced together. The stars are set

upon like foxes: your hands are hungry dogs. Your eyes are ready trumpets.
Your mind is a nebula and then aha, you've a northern glow and the stars are set

in their place with a satisfying click. Another, two more and you're a puzzle-rocket.
They look so still and steady with you, but through our study window the stars are set

in more dimension than just those two. You drop a red dwarf and I reach for it.
You continue. I open the window and, like the sails of a ship, the stars are set.

Re-entry

we were burned up on re-entry
burned up and cast out like ashes
ashes in an instant in a flash
a flash of separation in one body
one body thudding against another
another body and we embraced
embraced between the atoms
between the atoms and smiled stupid
stupid as death was imminent
imminent and we knew it
we knew it but we smiled as the earth
the earth honed into view blue
blue and devastating
devastating but beautiful
beautiful as the temperature grew
grew so quickly we were vapour
vaporised and cast out like ashes
ashes burned up and voyaging
voyaging together at last
at last in vacuum

Broken Wor(l)ds: Edwin Morgan's Science Fiction Poems

Preface

Edwin Morgan (1920 - 2010) has been described as “the most dynamic, brilliant, freewheeling poet around, endlessly accessible and inventive, glorious refreshment.” (Carcamet, “Catalogue” 38) He is renowned for his experimentations in poetic forms such as sonnet sequences, concrete, sound, colour, dialogue and code poetry, with much of his published work exploring science fictional tropes and ideas.

My interest in the science fiction poetry genre began through reading Morgan’s poems and through having the opportunity to interview him about his interest in science fiction, but this has since migrated into my own work as a writer and editor. I have published two collections of science fiction poems since this project began, and edited an anthology of contemporary science fiction poems from the UK which includes four poems from Morgan. During this time I have come to realise the importance of Morgan’s writing in introducing audiences to new ways of thinking about and approaching poetry, and the general appeal of his science fictions among readers. As a poet I am interested not only in what his science fiction poems attempt to achieve, but also how they attempt to do so. It is from this practical position that I approach my analysis of Morgan’s work. The popularity of poems such as “In Sobieski’s Shield” (*CP* 196-197) and “The First Men on Mercury” (*CP* 267-268), which have been reproduced as a short movie and a cartoon strip,¹ demonstrate a growing interest in the science fictional elements of Morgan’s poetry. However, whilst there are several notable documents written on Morgan’s science

¹ A short movie based on “In Sobieski’s Shield” was produced by Edinburgh film-maker Dan Warren, screened in 2010. Metaphrog produced a comic version of “The First Men on Mercury” in 2009.

fiction poems² they have not been given the full critical attention that they require as a substantial and popular proportion of his work.

The creative and critical elements of this thesis each rely on and explore notions of cosmopolitanism through their examination of city lives and science fictional concepts. Their interest in structural and linguistic experiment is symbolic of a forward-thinking, anti-parochial approach to poetry as a critique of social, moral and artistic concerns in the modern technological world. Subsequently thematic and stylistic links between the two sections are apparent, particularly my poem “Re-entry”, which reverses the outward trajectory of Morgan’s galactic travellers in his poem “A Home in Space” whilst echoing his use of space iconography and phonic repetition. My sonnet collection, “Our Terraced Hum”, which imagines the various landscapes and residents of a block of Edinburgh terraced flats, utilises a similar poetic form and imaginary process as Morgan’s “Sonnets from Scotland.” These links not only reflect Morgan’s impact on my own creative output, but also the relevance of his poetic approaches to modern poets and readers more widely.

Science fiction poetry provided Morgan with a genre with few limitations, through which his interests and concerns could be projected into far futures and distant spaces, allowing him to reflect on his present day. Whilst he criticised a number of his peers for not truly engaging with the reality of contemporary life, science fiction allowed Morgan to ask questions about what it meant to be human and to respond to the concerns of his time, particularly in an age when science and technology were increasingly becoming integrated parts of modern life. As will be discussed, Morgan’s science fiction poems also demonstrate various tensions within his work, particularly between the acceptance and rejection of tradition, and between his apparent optimism for human survival and his awareness of the possibility that humanity may bring about its own annihilation. Primarily though, Morgan’s

² Namely, Colin Nicholson’s “Remembering the Future”; Hamish Whyte’s “The Milk of Space”; Marco Fazzini’s “Alterities from Outer Space”, Alan Riach’s “Science Fiction and Scottish Poetry” and Marshall Walker’s “The Voyage Out and the Favoured Place”

experiments in breaking from linguistic, formal and thematic poetic traditions are indicative of his insistence on progress and change within the arts, societies and as a species.

This critical section will explore Morgan's science fiction poems with a particular interest in his linguistic and structural experiments. It will consider the importance of ambiguity in his work, as a key feature used to destabilise expectation and subsequently encourage the reader into a new ways of thinking about humanity's past, present and potential futures.

Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used throughout this critical section:

AEM refers to *About Edwin Morgan* (ed. Crawford, Whyte)

BTLD refers to *Beyond the Last Dragon* (McGonigal)

CP refers to *Collected Poems* (Morgan)

IOM refers to *Inventions of Modernity* (Nicholson)

NNGM refers to *Nothing Not Giving Messages* (ed. Whyte)

Chapter 1

Inspirational Errors - Morgan's Computer Poems

"I would like to see a poet who could somehow put the machine in its full human context, but not just keep saying 'Down with the machine' as so many poets have done" - Edwin Morgan

(*NNGM* 65)

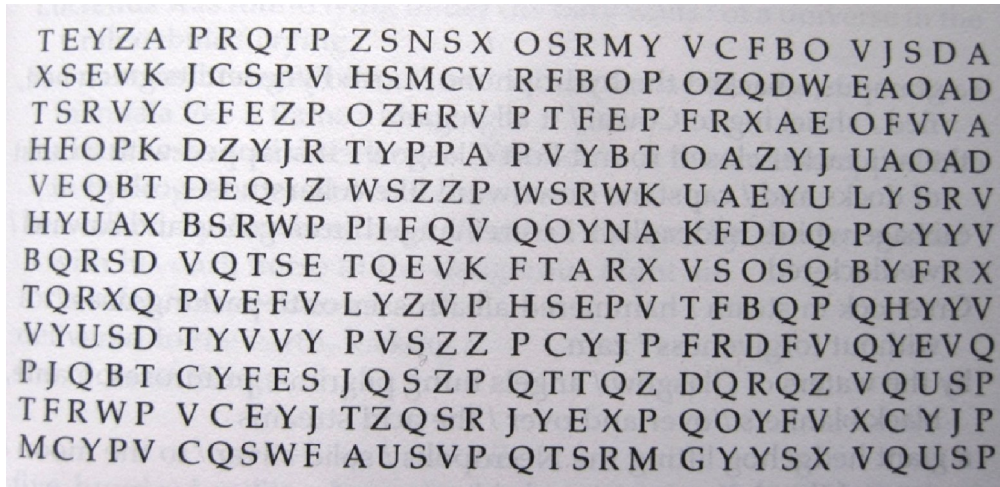
In "Poetry and Virtual Realities", Edwin Morgan wrote explicitly about his creative interest in computers. He explained that "the computer threw out challenges in many directions" to human inventiveness that he was "happily exploring" during the 1950s and 1960s. (37) Such explorations into the ramifications of computer technologies continued throughout his poetic career, from early poems such as "The Whittrick, Dialogue VIII" (*CP* 111-116) written in 1957, in which neurophysiologist Grey Walter and poet John Cocteau debate their opposing views on the nature of human creativity when presented with an intelligent robot life form, to Morgan's 2007 poem "A Sputnik's Tale" (*A Book of Lives* 40) in which an omnipotent entity speaks with the Russian Sputnik satellite during its orbit around the Earth.

Whilst Iain Crichton Smith argued that "Morgan is not at his best when he is being realistic" ("Public and Private" 44) and Morgan's computer poems are often speculative – seeing through the eyes and minds of imagined machines or considering the implications of advancing computer technologies on human life – they mostly follow the trajectory of technological advances of their time. This is a trend that is reflected in Morgan's view that poetry is "bound up not with the slowly

evolving nature of man but also with the very quickly evolving relation of man with his environment.” (Essays 14-15) This chapter will subsequently demonstrate that the experiments in poetic form and the incorporation of language errors in Morgan’s computer poems mimic those of genuine contemporary computer technologies as a way of imaginatively engaging with the modern world and avoiding parochialism. It will posit that the computer therefore becomes a symbol for change in Morgan’s work, in which contemporary and potential future technological developments are intrinsically bound with rapid changes in humanity’s environment and perspective.

Further evidence of Morgan’s “new-toy optimism about computer potential” (Morgan, “Poetry and Virtual Realities” 37) is to be found in the cybernetics collection which he began in 1949, containing materials (press cuttings, articles relating to computers, texts of a talk and a BBC broadcast, plus a few letters) relating to computers and poetry up until the 1980s (Morgan, “Cybernetics File”). He also had contacts within the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), the Cambridge Language Research Unit and the Computing Laboratory at Glasgow University. James McGonigal notes an optimism “regarding urban life, technological change and the interface of human minds and machine intelligence” in Morgan’s work that was “established in him from an early age” (26) though Morgan’s life-long interest in computer technologies was more a fascination with “the computer’s creative possibilities” (Morgan, “Virtual Realities” 37) than their practical applications. Despite Morgan’s research efforts, the “new toy” was not always fully understood, a potential failing that materialised in the form of several unintended errors in the first print of “The Computer’s First Code Poem” (CP 277) in *From Glasgow to Saturn*, published in 1973. The misprints were identified by a friend of Morgan who had cracked the poem and Morgan subsequently asked for the misprints to be “corrected in the

second edition.” (BTLD 237) The poem, printed below with Morgan’s subsequent corrections, combines authentic computer code with “what is claimed to be a sort of poetry that could not be created in any other way, and the reader is invited to decide whether this is the case” (Morgan, “Virtual Realities” 37):



TEYZA PRQTP ZSNSX OSRMY VCFBO VJSDA
XSEVK JCSPV HSMCV RFBOP OZQDW EAOAD
TSRVY CFEZP OZFRV PTFEP FRXAE OFVVA
HFOPK DZYJR TYPPA PVYBT OAZYJ UAOAD
VEQBT DEQJZ WSZZP WSRWK UAEYU LYSRV
HYUAX BSRWP PIFQV QOYNA KFDDQ PCYYV
BQRSD VQTSE TQEVK FTARX VSOSQ BYFRX
TQRXQ PVEFV LYZVP HSEPV TFBQP QHYYV
VYUSD TYVVY PVSZZ PCYJP FRDFV QYEVQ
PJQBT CYFES JQSZP QTTQZ DQRQZ VQUSP
TFRWP VCEYJ TZQSR JYEXP QOYFV XCYJP
MCYPV CQSWF AUSVP QTSRM GYYSX VQUSP

Even Morgan’s biographer and close friend James McGonigal never “persevered to the end”, suspecting that “the intellectual effort is meant to be its own reward.” (237) The poem may simply be too obscure for most readers, though some attempts have been made to consider its potential relevance as an intellectual piece. Colin Nicholson suggests that the poem “locks its information delivery away from immediate access and thus serves as metaphor for poem as coded message” (IOM 98) whilst, in the 1974 second issue of *Poetry Nation*, John Kease writes: “[the poem is] printed in non-machine language characters and it may be supposed (in absence of data to the contrary) that in this instance Man has been selected as intermediary, his place between machine and machine – an ambulant Rosetta stone.” (135) Despite its computer language errors the poem may engage the reader in an intellectual pursuit to decrypt its meaning, the reader becoming a mediator between

machine and human mind; a process akin to the cryptography and machine translation that computers were exploring at the time Morgan began his cybernetics clippings collection in 1949.

“The artist is partly there like the shaman of the tribe to record what is happening, telling the tribe's history” (*NNGM* 66) Morgan explained, and by bringing poetry and contemporary technologies together, he assumed the roles of pioneer and history-keeper. His poems consider the impact of then-present and future developments in areas such as robotics, virtual reality, broadcasting and communications, space travel technologies and cybernetics, ranging Morgan against a number of his key contemporaries (an issue which will be discussed in greater detail towards the end of the chapter). He wrote in favour of poets such as Ian Hamilton Finlay, applauding his “insistence on the value and importance of the work at hand in one’s immediate environment” (*Essays* 22) and demanding that “man must react, as man, to his whole environment.” (*Essays* 14) Engaging with modern computer technologies became necessary, then, “when it became clear that cultural ramifications, and not only scientific advances, were involved.” (Morgan, “Virtual Realities” 36)

In a 1996 interview with Marco Fazzini, Morgan emphasised a link between the development of computer technology and the emergence of concrete poetry in Europe, stating that “the element of combination or recombination of elements is quite strong in concrete poetry and it began to be written at the very time when computers began to be used.” (Fazzini, “Two Interviews” 48) Morgan’s Christmas card poems, “The Computer’s First Christmas Card” (*CP* 177) from *The Second Life*, and “The Computer’s Second Christmas Card” (*CP* 142) from *Gnomes*, both

published in 1968, embody this relationship. In these poems his use of concrete form emulates the layout of computer programming punched cards used up until the 1980s³ to create the visual impression that the poems have been written by computers that have translated numeric programming information into English. This concrete form also allows Morgan to deconstruct and reshape language as a way of exploring the creative possibilities brought about by interferences in the reading process. He achieves this by repeating, compounding or splitting words and arranging them into regular structures:

Extract from “The Computer’s First Christmas Card”

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j o l l y m e r r y
h o l l y b e r r y
j o l l y b e r r y
m e r r y h o l l y
h a p p y j o l l y
j o l l y j e l l y
j e l l y b e l l y
b e r r y m e r r y
h o l l y h e p p y
j o l l y M o l l y
m a r r y J e r r y
m e r r y H a r r y
h o p p y B a r r y

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Extract from “The Computer’s Second Christmas Card”

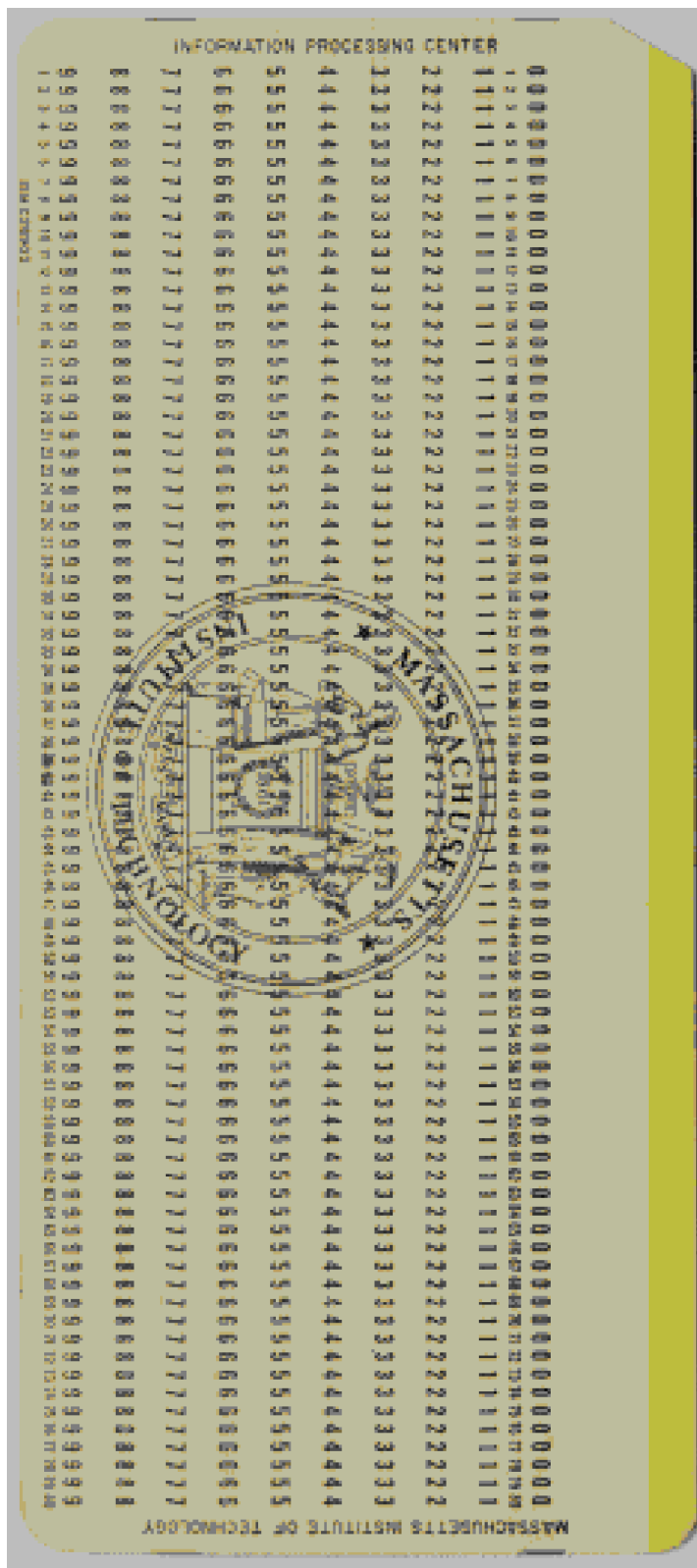
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goodk kkkkk unjam ingwe nches lass? start again goodk
lassw enche sking start again kings tart! again sorry
goodk ingwe ncesl ooked outas thef? unmix asloo kedou
tonth effff rewri tenow goodk ingwe ncesl asloo kedou
tonth effff fffff unjam feast ofsai ntste venstefanc

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³ These punched cards were thin slips of card with rows of numbers printed on them. Operators (computer programmers) would punch holes into the cards, cutting out particular numbers, using a typewriter-like machine known as a keypunch. The card would then be fed into a computer and subsequently stored in duplicate decks or on magnetic tapes.

A punched card used by MIT (c.1965) (MIT "Punched Card")



In both poems Morgan removes the spaces that we would expect to find (spaces which distinguish separate words) to create visual and linguistic mergers. He simultaneously regulates the letter-spaces and tracking of lines so that they appear to consume the same space. The overt regularity of the line lengths in each poem creates a tangible perimeter of right angles and straight sides, first drawing the eye to the poem's silhouette rather than its internal features. Each is uncommonly – and therefore noticeably – almost perfectly rectangular, “The Computer's First Christmas Card” appearing as a straight column running down the centre of the page and “The Computer's Second Christmas Card” doing so horizontally. This ‘perimeter shaping’, giving the poems a mechanised appearance, is achieved through small typographic changes that cause uniformity in line lengths. The full visual impact of these typographic changes can be easily observed when several lines are typed without them, in ragged right alignment:

happy jolly		kkkkk	<u>unjam</u>	ingwe
jolly jelly		enche	sking	<u>start</u>
jelly belly		ingwe	ncesl	ooked
berry merry		effff	<u>rewri</u>	<u>tenow</u>
		effff	fffff	unjam

These changes reinforce the poems' fictional premise of a computerised speaker by replacing more familiar (and one might argue 'organic') varied line lengths and letter-spaces with the inorganic grid-like structure of programming punched cards. The poems' concrete forms also make use of the structural elements of repetition and precise counts of verbal, typographical or phonic components that Morgan identified as “recognizable though not readily definable links with the cybernetic age.” (“Virtual Realities” 38) However, the overly-regular construction of

these poems interfere with the reading process as words are unnaturally spaced, running into other words, or are broken apart by interjections (such as “unjam” or “ffff”). Reading the poems for meaning by examining each word or phrase is complicated; instead the reader is made to focus on their aural and visual qualities, a characteristic of visual poetry that Eleanor Berry argues has the potential to “heighten the reader’s awareness of the reading process.” (1365) Consequently the reader is made aware of the artifice and construction of the poem, the various linguistic and typographic ‘errors’ mirroring the frequent errors caused by paper jams or by the punched card operators, after which “the operator is obliged to punch a new one.” (Deming 525)

Morgan explores the errors brought about by these structural and linguistic interferences as sources of linguistic revitalisation rather than failure. His use of repetition adds humour and energy to the poems that sustains an aural, as well as visual, quality. Roderick Watson writes that “even individual isolated letters, and especially the spaces (or absences) between them, become an eloquent and expressive force in their own right ... in order to liberate phrases, words, morphemes and ultimately phonemes from their conventional semantic sequences.” (175, 177) The computer therefore becomes a vehicle to distance or “liberate” language from its dictionary definition, challenging conventional use of structure and syntax to generate “creative confrontations on the use of language, sign, metaphor, typography and space” (Morgan, *Essays* 32), key features of the concrete movement that Morgan highlights in his essay “Into the Constellation: Some Thoughts on the Origin and Nature of Concrete Poetry”. (*Essays* 20-34) Interfering with the natural pace and process of reading causes the reader to stagger, at first mimicking the computers’ disjointed attempts to write Christmas cards using a vocabulary it does

not understand, and then requiring the reader to reinterpret the poem to derive meaning. Reading subsequently becomes an active process of mending fragments of language in an attempt to discern meaning.

In "Scotland Was found on Jupiter" Ian Gregson argues that Morgan "has drawn attention to poetic artifice" (7), noting that "when he treats poetry and language like a machine (as he does in his sound and concrete poems) [he does so] in a celebratory way." (8) Gregson likens Morgan's structural and linguistic reconstructions to "a mechanistic analogy" through which "the metaphor of dismantling implies the activity of a machine." (8) This metaphor is reflective of a rejection of immobility in the pursuit of change, a motivation embodied by Morgan's computer poems, in which the speakers are, like form and language, capable of being taken apart, upgraded and rebuilt. These mechanistic analogies enable Morgan to disrupt any thematic, structural and linguistic expectations by utilising unfamiliar points of entry: his speakers are not human, not bound by traditional poetic form and are using language in a way that challenges convention. The computers' structural and linguistic errors subsequently encourage changes in perspective whereby small adaptations manage to develop multiple interpretations in reading. In "The Computer's Second Christmas Card" (a poem in which the computer attempts to write out the Christmas carol 'Good King Wenceslas'), for example, the phrase "kings tart!" might be read as either 'king's tart!' or 'king start!' In the first example "tart" assumes a double meaning (a pastry dessert or a promiscuous sexual partner possessed by the king) and in the latter example "king" retains the song's original image of male royalty whilst also seeming to express exasperation over being unable to fix various paper jams, a common malfunction of the punched card system: (fuc)"king start!" As such, any proverbial 'Christmas'

connotations are broken down so that traditional language use is challenged and redefined. In contrast with Max Bill's assertion that concrete art "must be clear, unambiguous and aim at perfection" (Morgan, *Essays* 21) Morgan's computer poems aspire to imperfection to emphasise that language error can be a creative, rather than a reductive, source.

Just one year after Morgan had published his Christmas card computer poems, humans had reached the moon, and by 1973 Morgan was publishing poems which explored their past and potential future voyages into outer space in his collection *From Glasgow to Saturn* (CP 233-292). "Thoughts of a Module" (CP 266-267), samples of which are quoted below, recounts the 1969 moon landing from the perspective of the Apollo 11 command module used on the mission:

It is black so. There is that dust.

My ladder is light. What are my men.

...

No move yon flag. Which voice comes down.

White house thanks all. Command module man not.

Is kangaroo hop around. I think moon dance.

Or white bird is. Good oxygen I heard.

...

An end I think. How men go.

The talks come down. The ladder I shake.

To leave that bright. Space dark I see.

Is my men last. Men are that first.

That moon is here. They have some dust.

Is home they know. Blue earth I think.

I lift I see. It is that command.

My men go back. I leave that here.

It is bright so.

The technological achievements of the space race, and the imaginative boundaries those achievements widened, are reflected in the module's more sophisticated (when compared to the Christmas card computers') syntax, vocabulary and cognition. The mechanical structure of the Christmas card poems has been replaced by the familiar ragged right appearance, allowing a more natural reading of the poem that draws less attention to the poem's structural features, lessening the gap between human and computerised speech patterns. The language here, although still limited, has become increasingly poetic as the speaker creates imagistic metaphors to link its new surroundings with its existing databank of vocabulary, comparing the astronauts' low-gravity walk to "kangaroo hop around. I think moon dance. / Or white bird". Morgan's use of the first person account ("I Think. / I lift. I see"), reminiscent of Descartes' proclamation, "I think therefore I am", indicates a self-awareness that denotes intelligence, and whilst grammatical inconsistencies are still frequent – the module rarely uses a complete sentence – they cause less of an immediate interference when reading the poem. It is, however, these small interferences that bring about a change in the reader's perception of the events described.

With the exception of the last line of the poem, Morgan splits each line into two separate statements by placing full stops after every fourth word. These short sentences, combined with grammatical errors and a limited vocabulary, maintain a

sense of the rigidity of the Christmas card computers, but also adopt a child-like voice that seems to continually pause, as though struggling to communicate the events it is witnessing. These pauses in communication also mirror the regular quindar tones (beeps) heard interjecting during transmissions between the American astronauts, the Apollo 11 Capsule communicator and the remote transmitters on Earth during the 1969 moon landing. As with quindar tones, Morgan's regular use of full stops causes disruptions in communication, the effect of which is to create uncertainty as to the intention, clarity and transmission of each line. A small extract of the poem reads:

The talks come down. The ladder I shake.
To leave that bright. Space dark I see.

In this irregular form the reader naturally reconstructs the lines. Altering the position of the pause has a meaningful effect:

The talks come down the ladder. I shake
to leave that bright space dark. I see.

Or perhaps:

The talks come. Down the ladder I shake.
To leave that bright space. Dark I see.

Just as the new landscape of the moon requires the computer to assimilate a new way of thinking and a new mode of expression, so Morgan's use of unfamiliar

sentence structures tempt the reader to reconstruct the poem's syntax, generating new and varied meanings. Though we might expect a computer's account of events to be merely factual, the poem simultaneously preserves and disputes the particularities of the moon landing by combining a documentary account of actual events as we know them ("White house thanks all", referring to President Nixon's congratulations to the Apollo 11 crew when they landed) with a personal reflective tone ("Command module not man"). As such, Morgan's use of a first person narrative, enforced by his repetition of "I", implies that our understanding of events is not absolute but rather a matter of perspective, and that our interpretation of them is dependent on the tools (computerised sensors, human memory, pen and paper) we use to record and present them. Computers become one of those tools, as does the poem. In "Four Glasgow Writers" Morgan explains:

I think of poetry partly as an instrument of exploration, like a spaceship, into new fields of feeling or experience (or old fields which become new in new contexts or environments) and partly a special way of recording moments or events. (Maclaren 32)

"Thoughts of a Module" presents a very new "field of experience" at the time of its publication: space travel. The computer viewpoint offers a "new context" and the ambiguity of meaning created through the poem's use of pauses offers a special interpretative method of recording the moments described, in which the reader becomes an active participant in deciding which interpretation(s) of the poem they accept. Whilst computer narratives allow Morgan to re-examine events from a non-human perspective, his incorporation of a more natural line length and language (which more closely resembles patterns of human speech when compared with

computer languages) and the development of a sense of personality in the computer module (rather than remaining unbiased and factual) links the experience of the machine directly to human experience. Subsequently the poem encourages us to consider the importance of language and technology in altering our perception of events. The imagined mind of the Apollo 11 command module is particularly relevant as it represents one of the most technologically advanced machines of the age, and links the poem's ideas on perspective to the moon landing, an event that all of Morgan's readers would have been a witness to and affected by.

Morgan's technique of incorporating interferences into the computer's accounts of the moon landing has direct links to the transmissions made from the moon on July 20th 1969. On this day The New York Times quoted Armstrong's infamous speech: "That's one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind." Grammatical debates ensued, but in numerous interviews and in his official biography, *First Man: The Life of Neil A. Armstrong* (Hansen) Armstrong remained adamant that the ungrammatical phrase "one small step for man" was simply a faulty transmission and that he had actually spoken the definite article, 'a', into his microphone, saying "one small step for a man". The supposed technical interference during Armstrong's speech alters interpretation in a similar way to the interferences to the computer's account of the moon landing in "Thoughts of a Module". Armstrong's apparent small grammatical 'error' varies the meaning of his words and subsequently the public's perception of the phrase that encapsulates one of the most important events in human history. "One small step for man" is inclusive of all of mankind, whereas "one small step for a man" seems to refer to a singular person, himself. In October 2006 the BBC ("Armstrong 'got Moon quote right'") reported that a "new analysis of the tapes has proved Mr Armstrong right." Computer programmer Peter Shann Ford had

used audio software to analyse the sound recording from 1969 to show that “the missing “a” was indeed blotted out by transmission static.” Despite Armstrong’s claims of a transmission fault and subsequent evidence proving him right, the original broadcasted grammatical error is the version that remains etched into the public consciousness. As with “Thoughts of a Module”, small linguistic miscommunications brought about by computer errors have a potentially large impact on human perception.

Whilst a discussion of the poem’s language structure may highlight connections between the module’s account and human speech patterns, the module’s aesthetic appreciation of the landing is in stark contrast to the pragmatic activity of the astronauts, who seem preoccupied with collecting “some dust”. The module’s more contemplative appreciation of the moon landing proves to be most affective as its frequent references to “dark” and “light” suggest a developing insight and revelation that is realised in the poem’s closing lines:

Is home they know. Blue earth I think.

I lift I see. It is that command.

My men go back. I leave that here.

It is bright so.

“It is bright so” evokes the poem’s opening line (“It is black so. There is that dust.”) but symbolises the internal change of the module, in which darkness (“It is black”) has been replaced by brightness (“It is bright”). Morgan’s use of an indefinite ending – we might expect something to follow “so”, given that it is a modifier – and a noticeable white space lends the poem a sense of incompleteness so as to suggest

a possible continuation or a new beginning (a regular feature of his work which will be discussed in detail in chapter 3). This white space interrupts the poem's established structure, replacing the black ink of the previous lines with the white of the page; a visual 'brightening' that denotes a definite and unalterable change in perspective from the "black" of the opening line. The astronauts' accepted understanding of "home", the "blue earth", is challenged by Morgan's use of contrasting perceived knowledge ("they know") with uncertainty ("I think"), as if to suggest that the "home they know" has also been changed by the moon landing since mankind's future environments and opportunities now conceivably extend beyond the Earth's atmosphere. Referring to a portion of the Apollo 11 module which was left on the moon's surface, the phrase "I leave that here" epitomises Morgan's supreme graffito, "CHANGE RULES!" by suggesting that changes in perspective require us to abandon old ways of thinking and that once change has occurred there is no going back. A sense of optimism persists in the sudden introduction of colour as the module lifts to see the Earth, its descriptions changing from just "black" and "white" to "blue" as it sets off for the return journey with a newly transformed (or even 'coloured') sense of possibility for the future.

Whilst maintaining a sense of optimism for the future, brought about by human-machine space exploration, moon landings take on a distinctly science fictional taste in a poem from Morgan's 1979 *Star Gate: Science Fiction Poems* (CP 381-394) collection. In January 1973 the Russian Lunokhod-2 ('Moon Walker 2') began collecting images of the lunar surface, a subject which became the focus of

INSTAMATIC THE MOON FEBRUARY 1973". (CP 383) ⁴ Here, the Lunokhod-2
scours the moon, finding a monolith on its surface:

At the edge of the Sea of Serenity,
where the grey dust rises into foothills
of the Taurus Mountains, a confrontation
takes place. An unmanned, eight-wheeled steam pram,
Lunokhod-2, sophisticatedly clumsy as an
Emmet velocipede, has stopped its trundle
faced by a large, hard, blank, slab-like stone.
Busily it winks, and scans the monolith,
registering back to Tass
an impossible smoothness.
What crater could eject this unpitted stele
that stands marking nothing?
Too much simplicity is a headache for lunokhods,
and the moonrover has focused, in its frenzy for data,
on a spider-web of shadows and scratches at the base of the slab
which imagination might just read in Ventris mood
as K space BRI query space K query.

⁴ "Instamatic" refers to a popular inexpensive camera made by Kodak since 1963. Morgan's 1972 series of "Instamatic Poems" are described by him as: "short poems which were directly about events which I had either read about or seen in newspapers or on television. So it's a poetry which is very closely related to real life in that sense, but I gave myself the kind of restriction that the poem must be presented in such a way as to give a visual picture of this event, whatever it was, as if somebody had been there with an Instamatic camera and had just very quickly snapped it." (Morgan, NNGM 26-27)

Unlike the previous computer poems discussed, the majority of “INSTAMATIC THE MOON FEBRUARY 1973” circumvents structural or syntactic interferences, instead employing subtle narrative, linguistic and thematic inconsistencies to break down distinctions between fact and fiction. Through setting up and then contradicting expectations of the poem’s content, the reader is made to question the validity of its account and their own perception of historic and potential future events. Blurring the lines between science fiction and science fact is a key component to this: the poem is set one month after the actual Lunokhod-2 moon landings and takes a science fictional hypothesis (‘what might happen if the moon rover discovered something which could not have naturally originated on the moon?’) whilst initially presenting a series of simple geographical images to emulate a photographic description or factual report. The supposed realism of the poem’s matter-of-fact title – its capitalised font and use of a date imitating the title of an official news or data report – is challenged by the collection’s assertion that its contents are “science fiction poems”. The inclusion of the well-documented excursion of the Lunokhod-2 moon rover and familiar lunar references such as the “Sea of Serenity” also lend the poem a sense of authenticity, which is later disrupted by the appearance of a science-fiction-esque monolith with an “impossible smoothness” that is reminiscent of the obelisk in Arthur C. Clark’s *A Space Odyssey*⁵ and Stanley Kubrick’s movie version of Clark’s text, first shown in 1968.

Whilst Morgan combines science fictional elements with contemporary scientific news, he also develops a series of inconsistencies in the poem’s language and narrative, a technique which challenges the reliability and possibility of the events described. In the opening lines Morgan creates a tension by placing

⁵ in which a large monoliths appear on Earth, granting apes new knowledge and affecting human evolution.

“Serenity” within close proximity of “confrontation”, at one moment suggesting peace and at the next suggesting conflict. The poem opens with images of the moon’s surface, as we might expect of an “instamatic” poem, but soon shifts its focus to the Lunokhod-2 so that the intended recording device becomes the subject of enquiry. Contrary to the idea of the ‘snapshot’ moment suggested by the poem’s “instamatic” title, are the “winks, and scans” of the rover, which has “stopped its trundle”, implying movement over space and time. The effect is to problematise the poem’s premise that it is capturing an instant, photographic moment as it alternates between stationary images and a progressive narrative. The poem’s narration is further complicated as it slips between third person omniscience (“it winks, and scans the monolith, / registering back to Tass”) and a contemplative narrative voice that seems to explore the internal ponderings of the Lunokhod-2: “What crater could eject this unpitted stele / that stands marking nothing?” This narrative shift unusually positions the reader as both an outside observer of the moon rover’s activities and as a witness to its thoughts, blending seemingly-factual accounts with speculation as its mechanical appearance (“An unmanned, eight-wheeled steam pram”) embodies currently-unreal human characteristics (“Too much simplicity is a headache for lunokhods”).

This technique of building up particular expectations of the poem – that it will present a freeze-frame image of the moon, or will be written from the perspective of the moon rover, or that the Lunokhod-2 is simply a non-sentient machine– and then implying otherwise develops a series of uncertainties to speculate about possibilities outside of the Lunokhod-2’s documented findings. The traditional understanding of machines as ‘mindless’ human constructs is maintained and challenged by Morgan’s choice of ambiguous language, as he describes how “the moonrover has focused, in

its frenzy for data". Morgan's use of the word "focused" is indefinite in proving or disproving the machine's sentience, making no clear distinction between the mechanical processes of focussing a camera lens and a focussing of the mind. A similar comparison can be made with the phrase "Busily it winks", which seems to capture the mechanical flashes of the rover's lights whilst also implying the characteristics of a human eye through its use of "winks" rather than 'flashes'. More conclusive, perhaps, is the line, "Too much simplicity is a headache for lunokhods" which, despite its humour, seems to assert that the machine feels anxiety over "too much simplicity". Pluralising "Lunokhod" to "lunokhods" hints that several variants of the same machine exist and share common traits, a concept made more poignant through Morgan's use of a lowercase "l" to label a group or species (such as the lowercase h of 'human') rather than the name or model of an individual (as is suggested by the uppercase L of "Lunokhod-2" or the name Edwin). Through these subtle humanising effects Morgan might encourage his reader to care about machines as they might a person, yet the nature of the Lunokhod-2's conscious remains questionable and the variety of contradictions and ambiguities created by Morgan's use of inconsistencies gives few tangible answers.

Eroding distinctions between science fiction and factual accounts of the Lunokhod-2's surveillance of the moon is brought into focus by Morgan's direct reference to *2001: A Space Odyssey* in the moon rover's examination of the monolith. The monolith's "impossible smoothness", contradictory given that its smoothness is described and so is not "impossible", and unnatural occurrence on the moon is further mystified in the poem's final lines:

and the moonrover has focused, in its frenzy for data,
on a spider-web of shadows and scratches at the base of the slab
which imagination might just read in Ventris mood
as K space BRI query space K query.

Firstly, it is unclear whether “scratches” refers to pre-existing etches at the base of the monolith, or whether the moon rover has vandalised the monolith with an inscription. If the first option is accepted then the implication is that an intelligent life form had visited the location previously, written in English and had an interest in Kubrick (the capital letters in the final line nearly spelling ‘Kubrick’). Alternatively, if “scratches” is an active verb, the moon rover is inscribing the monolith with a science fiction allusion, or recording its activity of expanding the human domain by marking an alien object, as a human might in planting their nation’s flag on non-terrestrial rock. “Ventris” likely refers to Michael Ventris, an English architect who is famed for deciphering Linear B, an ancient Bronze Age syllabic script thought to be the earliest form of Greek, known as Mycenaean Greek. (“Michael Ventris”) Ventris’ findings suggested that a Greek-speaking and writing culture existed approximately 600 years before it was previously thought, and Linear B has since been added to the Unicode standard, a system used for decrypting and deciphering human and computer languages. Morgan’s inclusion of Ventris acts as a subtle reference to Linear B through which we might consider the likelihood of an ancient intelligence having ventured to the moon, but also a link to contemporary developments in programming and linguistics. In a 1956 volume of *The Journal of Hellenic Studies*, A.J. Beattie writes that Ventris claimed:

By studying the way in which the syllabic signs are used (their frequency, position in the word, combination of one sign with another, etc.) and by inferring the content of the documents from certain signs which are not syllabic but ideographic, it is possible to discover the phonetic value of most of the syllabic signs. (1)

A similar process takes place when deciphering the code on the poem's monolith, in which the reader is encouraged to solve a visual, rather than phonic, puzzle by removing the "space" and "query" interjections to discover the majority of Kubrick's name "KBRIK"). The combination of Kubrick with Ventris links the poem's science fictional premise with contemporary linguistic discovery, and whilst the final line acts as a literal "space query" it also has a flavour of the command lines used by typical computer interfaces in the 1970s when "space" and "query" are replaced by their ideographic symbols: K BRI? K?

This command line, we might speculate, is about copying or moving data into the moon rover: in programming terms, if "BRI" is short for 'bring', and "query" ("?") is read as 'unknown' (and by implication, 'any' or 'all'), "K" could be a location symbol.⁶ So, we might read the line as roughly:

BRIng into K all data from all K

Which we might interpret as, among other things:

Bring into me all knowledge from all sources

⁶ Discussed in email communications with Donald Gibson, University of St. Andrews, 2013

Accurate or not, there is a clear implication towards a need for decoding, in which an understanding of contemporary computer technology and popular science fiction provide varied opportunities for interpretation. Morgan's suggestion that the "imagination might just read" a message in the scratches makes the idea that the message exists uncertain, instead encouraging the reader to find patterns and meaning from seemingly-random shapes. The imagination therefore becomes a necessary tool in rationalising or making sense of new or 'alien' encounters which might be relevant to human experiences in the ever-increasing human domain as it expands beyond the boundaries of the Earth. Ian Gregson considers the "science fictional element" of Morgan's work to be a means through which Morgan is "redefining what it is to be human living now on earth by juxtaposing that experience with the idea of what it would be to be an alien or to be human living in the future and/or on other planets." ("Scotland was found on Jupiter" 7) The "juxtaposition" manifests here through the inclusion of code that requires the reader to 'translate' the monolith's scratches as a computer might. Just as the monoliths in *2001: A Space Odyssey* brought about new knowledge and ways of thinking, so the monolith in "INSTAMATIC THE MOON FEBRUARY 1973" encourages the reader to break down distinctions between fact and fiction, and challenges them to speculate about scenarios and worlds different to our own. As such, whilst the monolith seems to be "marking nothing" it actual becomes a metaphor for new times and landscapes in which computer technology allows mankind to further spread its reach in a universe where seemingly-innocuous "scratches" can become relevant messages if examined with enough determination, insight and imagination. Iain Crichton Smith argued that "Morgan is not at his best when he is being realistic. He needs a certain slantness, a certain imaginative freedom and oddness, a certain amplification of his linguistic resources." ("Public and Private" 44) Being able to venture into realms that humans

cannot, computer technologies provide Morgan with an imagined physical 'body' to explore unknown places, to move away from and question reality by blending contemporary events with fictions as a way of exploring the possible relationships between computer technologies and the human imagination in the modern world.

If we accept a link between computer technology and human interest in Morgan's work, we might also consider the origin, as well as the product, of the apparent errors in the computers' accounts: the imagined computer must have an imagined programmer, and as such any linguistic, structural or narrative errors are an inheritance of human miscalculation. Human language therefore has a direct effect on computer output, which in turn causes a shift in perspective. The implication is that human-computer relationships (linguistic, cultural, scientific or otherwise) are symbiotic, each reacting to the other. Morgan's belief that poetry ought to consider "man within his whole environment: not just the drop of dew; the rose, the lock of hair, but the orbiting rocket in Anselm Hollo, the laboratory in Allen Ginsberg, the lunar mountains in Hugh Mae" (Gregson, "Metamorphoses" 8) is substantiated by his decision to write about the possibilities and implications brought about by advancing contemporary technologies. "More than the work of most poets", writes Iain Crichton Smith, Morgan's poetry "welcomes the 20th century, with its gadgets, its paradoxes, graffiti, new languages ... the language of the computer." ("Vintage Morgan" 13) It is these "gadgets" (computers, robots and technologies) and "new languages" (incorporating modern vocabulary from science and technology elsewhere in Morgan's work but here emerging as language variations that destabilise the hegemony of standard English), that frame Morgan as a poet whose work "responds to a sense of its period as quickly-changing" (Gregson, "Metamorphoses" 7).

The computers in Morgan's poetry become a metaphor for this sense of rapid social and technological change, reflected by their increasing sophistication in his work. It is precisely the lack of response to the technological developments of the modern world that Morgan disapproved of in poets such as W.B. Yeats, T.S. Eliot, Wallace Stevens and Edwin Muir. In 1975, when asked by Hamish Whyte, "Do you think it is quite fair to write disapprovingly of the Yeats-Eliot-Stevens axis in terms of their failure to respond to technological revolution and to seem to imply that this was in some deep sense an evasion of the real?" Morgan responds:

I was using them as outstanding figures who have been regarded as the main poets of their time and almost without exception have taken up this attitude [of 'Down with the machine'] ... I was only writing about this one aspect of their work, only saying that in this one thing they all seem to turn their backs. I'm not saying that what they do write about is bad or unreal. ... But even in 'The Waste Land' I find I have a very double reaction: as a person who uses words I obviously get a lot from it, admire and like it considerably, but taking it as a whole I do find a considerable element of repulsion in the view of life taken in the poem. ... There's so much in it that is there to be admired and learned from if you are a poet yourself and at the same time it is something that I cannot accept or like. This is true even more of the view of life I detect in Yeats. (NNGM 66)

Morgan appears to associate Eliot and Yeats' failure to "respond to technological revolution" with a restrictive and objectionable view of life, an outlook that is in sharp contrast with his declaration that "poetry needs greater humanity; but

it must be humanity of man within his whole environment.” (Gregson, “Metamorphoses” 8) Morgan’s poetic subject matter is ambitious, and no topic is off limits. Morgan claimed: “You can write poetry about anything ... the world, history, society, everything in it pleads to become a voice, voices” (Herbert, *Gairfish* 58) and though no individual poem or poet could hope to respond to the “whole environment” of mankind, Morgan’s computer poems expand the boundaries of human territory by speculating about experiences outside of common, or even human, experience. Morgan’s Christmas card poems explore the implications of a then-present or near-future in which “human brain-circuits might be challenged” (Morgan, “Virtual Realities” 38) whilst “Thoughts of a Module” and “INSTAMATIC THE MOON FEBRUARY 1973” literally expand the human environment by locating humans and human technologies on new and distant territories. A focus on computer, rather than human, perspectives is a direct response to the “technological revolution” that Morgan accused Eliot and Yeats of failing to respond to, not only to challenge the “down with the machine” (Morgan, *NNGM* 65) approach of his contemporaries and predecessors, but to embrace technology optimistically, as a vital contributing component to modern human experience. McGonigal writes:

the characteristic optimism in EM’s poetry regarding urban life, technological change, and the interface of human minds and machine intelligence was established in him from an early age. This positive attitude to the modern world distinguished him from other modernist poets who more often view the city as a place of alienation, and new technologies as tending to distort human values
(*BTLD* 26)

Jupiter” 7) and by addressing the impact and potential implications of technology on our understanding of art and humanity, Morgan’s computer poems actively avoid parochialism and the narrowing of his art by maintaining a relationship with some of the occupations and interests of his time.

Chapter 2

Communication Problems - Morgan's Space Poems

"when space explorations began to be possible, when they began to be part of human experience and not just science fictions as they had been when I was a boy, I started to write about these things" – Edwin Morgan

(Fazzini, "Two Interviews" 49)

In "The Milk of Space" Hamish Whyte explains that "among Edwin Morgan's favourite authors in his 1920s and 1930s childhood and teenage years ... were Jules Verne, Rider Haggard, H.G. Wells, G.A. Henty, Edgar Rice Burroughs and Arthur Conan Doyle. He couldn't get enough of their tales of adventure, fantasy and exploration." (1) Morgan's scrapbooks also reveal space to be a lifelong interest, their pages peppered with news clippings, satellite images and pictures of alien landscapes, whilst Robert Crawford, a previous student of Morgan's at The University of Glasgow, recalls Professor Morgan's unusual choice of office decor:

The most arresting of his posters was that of a space-suited man on the moon with earth in the background. I can remember various members of the tutorial discussing that, both because it was an unusual thing to find on a lecturer's wall, and because it clearly related to Morgan's poetic interests ("Morgan's Ludic Explorations" 22)

It is therefore no surprise that outer space is a recurrent setting for Morgan's poetry, in which his narrators are frequently voyaging out in search of adventure and

alternative ways of living and thinking. This chapter will consider how Morgan's space poems explore communication as a vehicle to enact change and the roles that outer space plays as extended metaphors for liberation and opportunity in his work. It will also explore the tension between cultural liberation and an active maintenance of tradition in Morgan's space poems to suggest that his work struggles to sustain a cohesive stance on the value of tradition and past experience.

"A Home in Space", (CP 387-388) from Morgan's 1979 collection *Star Gate: Science Fiction Poems*, follows a group of astronauts as they break communications with their Earth base and set out on a journey through space:

Laid-back in orbit, they found their minds
They found their minds were very clean and clear.
Clear crystals in swarms outside were their fireflies and larks.
Larks they were in lift-off, swallows in soaring.
Soaring metal is flight and nest together.
Together they must hatch.
Hatches let the welders out.
Out went the whitesuit riggers with frames as light as air.
Air was millions under lock and key.
Key-ins had computers wild on Saturday nights.
Nights, days, months, years they lived in space.
Space shone black in their eyes.
Eyes, hands, food-tubes, screens, lenses, keys were one.
One night - or day - or month - or year - they all -
all gathered at the panel and agreed -

agreed to cut communication with -
with the earth base - and it must be said they were -
were cool and clear as they dismantled the station and -
and gave their capsule such power that -
that they launched themselves outwards -
outwards in an impeccable trajectory, that band -
that band of tranquil defiers, not to plant any -
any home with roots but to keep a -
a voyaging generation voyaging, and as far -
as far as there would ever be a home in space -
space that needs time and time that needs life.

Here, Morgan explores the idea of separating from the past and accepting nescience as a means of reinvigoration and self reinvention. In “Scottish Poetry as Science Fiction” Alan Riach describes the poem as a “quintessential depiction of the rootless, wandering, restless instinct that seemed native to many children of the 1960s.” (133) Morgan constructs this “restless instinct” through his use of repetition, building an “incantatory pressure” (Walker 56) which accelerates as the poem progresses. Whilst Denise Leverton describes the effects of repetition as an “impulse to tie things together. If one feels them to be at all tied together, one wants to get into the structure, instead of things flowing along to the point where they slip out of your fingers” (Packard 46-47) Morgan’s repetitions entice meaning to “slip out of your fingers” by linking the end of one line to the beginning of the next, encouraging the reader’s eye to continuously run on and not pause to allow the reader to reflect on each line as a unit. In the first half of the poem – with the exception of the first line –

the repetitions are used to present double meanings in separate self-contained sentences:

Together they must hatch.

Hatches let the welders out.

In the first instance “hatch” is used to describe an emergence or rebirth, or potentially to “hatch” a plan for change. In the second line “hatch” changes meaning to depict a door or device through which welders are released. Approximately half way through the poem, however, when “One night - or day - or month - or year - they all - / all gathered at the panel and agreed - / agreed to cut communication”, the lines are also “cut”, ending in mid-sentence:

any home with roots but to keep a -
a voyaging generation voyaging, and as far -
as far as there would ever be a home in space -

Morgan’s repetitions create breaks in communication with the reader by purposefully failing to complete a sentence, ending each line as though the sentence is spilling over onto the next line. The repetition of short sounds (“a” sounds in particular, in this extract: “keep a - / “a voyaging generataion voyaging”, “and as far / as far as”) sustains a soft echo-like aural quality that causes words to sound like utterances or incantations rather than complete, clear and fully comprehensible parts of sentences. The change in punctuation, replacing full stops with hyphens, gives the impression that the line has not ended or has been interrupted. This acts as a lure to read the next line in order to make better sense of the previous one, and

subsequently develops a sense of ambiguity and uncertainty that encourages the reader to continue through the poem rather than to stop and reflect on each line's potential meaning. The effect is to accelerate the reader's pace of reading, enticing them to scan quickly (or "restless[ly]") through the second half of the poem in order to reach its conclusion. Just like the space station being described, the poem is "dismantled" as Morgan's repetitions cause the lines to seem increasingly fractured. By repeating words that denote movement ("voyaging", "far", "space" and "time") and quickening the reader's pace, a sense of motion is created that reinforces the "restless instinct [of the] voyaging generation" (Riach, "Scottish Poetry as Science Fiction" 133) whilst also underpinning the poem's central concept: that serenity and progress are brought about by moving beyond what we know, breaking communications with those things we rely on ("the earth base", "home", "roots"), and choosing to embrace voyages of change.

McGonigal writes that "broken communication is, of course, another theme in [Morgan's] poetry, and some of his best known poems exploit it." (*BTL D* 29) In "A Home in Space", "broken communication" becomes a literal device of severance and rebirth. Once the astronauts have "cut communication" and "dismantled the station" they set out on an "impeccable trajectory" as "tranquil defiers". There is a sense of admiration in their defiance, the "impeccable" or flawless nature of their voyage seeming to offer "mental clarity." (Walker 56) Outer space becomes a metaphor for an ultimate separation from familiarity, a literal expanse of nothingness and newness with no connection to the past; a completely new realm as it appeared – and arguably still appears – during the space race (c. 1957-1975). It is this separation from the past that keeps each "voyaging generation voyaging" and subsequently plotting their own trajectories. Kevin McCarra explains:

Childhood and adolescence left Morgan with the conviction that the future should be something more than a continuation of the past. In a 1987 interview he remarked, 'I don't think we should just be curators, tending the buildings erected in the past. Each generation ought to have a chance of fulfilling its ambitions and shaping the world in its own way. I don't like to think of people in the future wondering why we never achieved anything' ("Lives and Work" 3)

Morgan's "tranquil defiers" actively dismantle, rather than maintain "the buildings [stations] erected in the past". The "voyaging generation" is Morgan's own generation, in which outer space became one of the key identifying accomplishments of his time, but the poem also acts as a message to future generations, whose pioneers are instructed not to "plant any - / any home with roots", and to expand the boundaries of human experience through exploring the unknown, to keep moving rather than relying on the past and remaining stagnant.

"A Home in Space" exemplifies Morgan's apparent rejection of stagnancy through the iconography of spatial journeys. "What seems to me most valuable in Morgan's work", argues Robert Crawford, "is a sense of forward-looking excitement, rather than abandon, the poetry's willingness to take on board, examine, and redeploy new ideas and techniques without becoming enslaved to them." ("Morgan's Ludic Explorations" 24) We might therefore consider the poem to be less a rejection of the past and more a celebration of the humanity's potential to reinvent itself, which Colin Nicholson calls a "suspicion of representational fixality." (*IOM* 107) Morgan expressed a penchant for human transformation, stating that "it's maybe a kind of dislike or fear of the stable state ... I would tend to be more suspicious of the periods

when there is a great deal of order and I would tend to like and be attracted by the obvious hazards that there are in the periods of even quite violent change” (*NNGM* 36). The dismantling of the space station in “A Home in Space” and the transformation of the poem’s pace and structure – from self-contained sentences to the accelerating run-on lines – act to disassemble order in favour of the potential hazards of the unknown: uncharted space and unusual poetic form. These spatial journeys take on a liberating quality, in which explorations provide a release from the potentially detrimental effects of order and stability, a concept which Morgan revisited in 2000, in his poem “At Eighty” (*Unknown Is Best*):

Push the boat out, compañeros,
push the boat out, whatever the sea.
Who says we cannot guide ourselves
through the boiling reefs, black as they are
...
push it out into the unknown!
Unknown is best

“Whatever the sea”, with its “boiling reefs, black as they are” paints a surrealist alien landscape in which the “boat” can easily be read as a space rocket, or simply as a metaphor for inventiveness. The poem acts as a meditation on experimentalism, its repeated use of “push the boat out” suggesting the need for increased generosity of human spirit (the colloquialism “push the boat out” is often used to imply spending more than is usually accustomed) and a greater sense of adventure. “Unknown is best” also encapsulates Morgan’s attraction to poetic

experimentation, a move away from logical constancy and towards potential trepidation in the search for ingenuity.

Morgan's use of non-traditional poetic form and experiments in the science fiction genre are reflective of his affinity for risk-taking. Morgan said that he had "always liked the idea ... that things are always on a knife edge, and always change, and are always in danger ... of transformation" (*NNGM* 36) and that towards the end of the 1930s there was "a great deal of discussion of a poetry that enjoyed calling up irrational elements." (*IOM* 23) Nicholson draws a comparison between this view and "surrealism's assumption that logic invites disillusion" (*IOM* 107), whilst arguing that surrealism's "restoration of desire in a demand for maximum liberty in every field" (*IOM* 107) might appeal to Morgan's sense of the liberating effects of poetic experimentation. In one of Morgan's many scrapbooks ("Scrapbook 12"), a quote from American painter, Mark Rothko, who was also attracted to surrealism, sits amongst images of obscure alien-esque skies and landscapes. The quotation is clipped from "The Romantics were Prompted", published in *Possibilities* (Winter 1947-1948), and seems to suggest something of Morgan's proclivity for dismantling familiarity in favour of exploring the unknown. The quote from Rothko reads: "The familiar identity of things has to be pulverized in order to destroy the fixed association with which our society increasingly enshrouds every aspect of our environment." ("Scrapbook 12" 2301) Likewise, McGonigal links much of the surrealist content of Morgan's scrapbooks with being "able to identify with anything he happened to see, and appropriate it with himself." ("Links with Surrealism") Surrealist artist Salvador Dali, whose painting "Christ of Saint John on the Cross"

became the topic of Morgan's poem of the same name⁷ (*Beyond the Sun* 27) made similar assertions which Morgan's work seems to adopt through its rejection of fixality, Dali stating that "surrealism is destructive, but it destroys only what it considers to be shackles limiting our vision." ("Liquid Desire" 1) In "A Home in Space", the dismantling of the space station as a way to "cut communication with - / with the earth base" becomes a metaphor for this surrealist (and one might argue, illogical) destructive imperative that brings about tranquillity and clarity of thought as the astronauts "found their minds were very clean and clear." The idea of destroying "fixed association" (Rothko) seem particularly relevant to Morgan's space poems, which frequently undermine ideas of permanence through their promotion of nescience (an absence of knowledge) as a possible tool for demolishing the "shackles limiting our vision." (Dali 1)

One of Morgan's most playful and surreal space poems, "Travellers (1)", (*CP* 447) bounces its speaker between the Earth and outer space. Morgan captures a similar energy of restlessness as in "A Home in Space", but rather than creating this sense of restlessness through using repetition to accelerate the pace of reading and implying that the past should be moved away from, Morgan's use of the sonnet form in "Travellers (1)" creates a tension between rejecting and maintaining a link with the past. Douglas Dunn describes the sonnet as "High culture, in one of its most precious forms" (75) and so Morgan's combination of the sonnet – a keystone of western poetic tradition – with non-traditional science fictional elements might be viewed as a challenge to that "High culture". Discussing Morgan's "Glasgow Sonnets" (*CP* 289-292) Dunn explains:

⁷ In which the unseen and the unknown take on particular importance in scrutinising accepted understandings of reality: "It is not of this world, and yet it is, / And that is how it should be. ... Coming from where we cannot see, / Ought not to see, another dimension"

Considering the myth of Glasgow ... the title [Glasgow Sonnets] is almost an oxymoron. Form by itself asks questions, makes statements, and lays down challenges; 'Inappropriate? – But why do you think so?' Or 'Appropriate! – But why do you think it isn't? (75)

Whilst these questions might be appropriate, in "Travellers (1)" the sonnet/sci-fi blend questions the important links between the intrinsic influence of the past (through reference to Scottish geography in the sonnet form), and the exploratory possibilities of poetry and the imagination. A tension between moving away from the past and maintaining a link with it is also achieved through Morgan's repetition of "The universe is like a trampoline." and "The universe is like a tambourine." at regular intervals (A) in the sonnet's rhyme scheme (ABBA CDDC AEF AEF), which build the impression that the speaker is bouncing away from the Earth, and then returning to it, whilst combining descriptions of outer space with references to Scottish history and geography. The first 8 lines read:

The universe is like a trampoline.

We chose a springy clump near Arrochar
and with the first jump shot past Barnard's Star.

The universe is like a tambourine.

We clashed a brace of planets as we swung
some rolling unknown ringing system up
above our heads and kicked it too. To sup,
sleep, recoup, we dropped to the House of Tongue.

“The universe is like a [trampoline / tambourine]” (A) repeats four times through the sonnet. Unlike “A Home in Space”, in which Morgan’s use of repetition encourages the reader to quickly scan to the next line, the repeated phrases in “Travellers (1)”, each ending with a full stop, slow the reader’s pace by creating a definite pause. These pauses act as individual voltas: “The universe is like a trampoline.” precedes the speaker’s ‘lift off’ from Earth whilst “The universe is like a tambourine.” marks their return to Earth and incorporates words that denote sound to lend the poem a clamorous energy. These dramatic turns also mark changes in the poem’s semantic fields:

The universe is like a trampoline.

We chose a springy clump near Arrochar

and with the first jump shot past Barnard’s Star.

In the first tercet (above) Morgan describes the speaker’s movement upwards (“springy”, “jump”, “shot”, “past”), away from Earth, to develop the simile of the universe being “like a trampoline” and to depict the speaker’s acceleration into outer space. Breaking the momentum of the opening tercet, line four (“The universe is like a tambourine.”) marks a point of linguistic change in which noise (“we clashed”, “ringing”) adds to the poem’s sense of energy and unrest. The full stop of “tambourine.” also signals the pinnacle of the speaker’s bounce, a physical pause before their decent back to Earth in order to “sup, / sleep, recoup” and drop “to the House of Tongue”, before bouncing again:

The Universe is like a trampoline.

Tongue threw us into a satellite bank.

We photographed a mole; a broch; the moon.

The universe is like a tambourine.

We stretched out, shook Saturn, its jangles sank

and leapt till it was neither night nor noon.

In the opening octet, lines 2 and 3 form one sentence (“We chose a springy clump near Arrochar / and with the first jump shot past Barnard’s Star.”) – increasing the reader’s pace and mimicking the speaker’s increased velocity – and employ the sonnet’s rhyme scheme to “establish equivalences and [allow] for the compounding of meaning.” (Brogan, “Rhyme” 1060) As such rhyming “Arrochar” with “Barnard’s Star” in close proximity links the two locations phonically to suggest that the imaginary journey between them was rapid, particularly as the voyage between Arrochar and Barnard’s Star (approximately six light years apart from one another) is complete within two lines of the poem and is accomplished easily “with the first jump”. There is an implicit suggestion, through these highly fictional particularities, that the imagination is a key component to human expansion and perception, yet Morgan’s reference to Arrochar, a Scottish village that was home to an operating torpedo testing facility from 1912 until 1986, is a subtle allusion to past and then-contemporary experiments in propulsion. Morgan combines the imaginary, the contemporary and the historic through his further reference to the “House of Tongue” and then “a broch”⁸ to intimate that physical locations, and our perception of them, are bound by our current understating of the universe and our willingness to

⁸ The House of Tongue likely refers to Tongue House, the seat of the Mackay clan (from the mid-16th century), which was burned down and rebuilt in the mid-late 17th century. “Broch” is a Scottish Iron Age drystone hollow-walled structure.

reassess that understanding from new and imaginative positions. For the poem's speaker, Arrochar and the House of Tongue become literal launching pads into imaginative realms, as if to suggest that an explorative mind is not restricted by one's geographic location and history, but by their aptitude for creative thinking.

McGonigal argues that "in the sonnet form, as in any traditional music, variation and improvisation on one basic and memorable shape is a way of linking the community of generations, the living and the dead" (*BTL D* 216) and accordingly Morgan's use of the sonnet seems to suggest a link between the past (through his use of traditional form and historic references) and future (incorporating science fictional topics into High Art form to explore the potential voyages of future generations). Bouncing between the two allows a panoramic view of them both, in which human history and geography are repeatedly distanced from and returned to, but never abandoned. The spatial voyage acts as a means of re-examining the importance of the past and the role it plays in shaping our future. As with "A Home in Space", distance (by which we might assume 'difference') adds new perspective, yet in contrast "Travellers (1)" places a greater importance on maintaining a connection with the past as a way of moving beyond it. Morgan's "dislike or fear of the stable state" (*NNGM* 36) is again made apparent, but through a reassessment of the past and its influence on the imagination, rather than focussing solely on the liberating effects of "cutting communications" ("A Home in Space") with our past.

Broken communications become a means of exploring contemporary language concerns in "The First Men on Mercury", (*CP* 267-268) published in 1973, in which human explorers meet intelligent alien life forms and incorrectly assume that they are the superior species:

– We come in peace from the third planet.

Would you take us to your leader?

– Bawr stretter! Bawr. Bawr. Stretterhaw!

– This is a little plastic model
of the solar system, with working parts.
You are here and we are there and we
are now here with you, is this clear?

This assumed superiority is short lived. As the discussion continues each species
exchanges languages with the other until the Mercurians finally tell the humans:

– No. You must go back to your planet.
Go back in peace, take what you have gained
but quickly.

– Stretterworra gawl, gawl...

– Of course, but nothing is ever the same,
now is it? You'll remember Mercury.

The poem is comedic through its unusual appearance on the page and strange sound quality when read aloud, playfully introducing more serious underlying messages. A reader might see the Earthmen as over eager and overly self-confident explorers who are ultimately humbled by the encounter, and one might

understandably consider the poem to be a comment on, and rejection of, any assumed authority of one species or race over another. Equally, the poem may be viewed as a discussion on the intermingling of languages and the potential communication difficulties one might encounter when meeting an individual or species they had not met before. These dominant readings are sufficient in gaining an understanding of the core concepts of the poem, though a closer examination of the Mercurian language as mimicry of Earthly dialects develops alternative interpretations. W.N. Herbert argues that the poem “satisfies a Scottish fantasy; the Earthmen are condescending and imperialist dolts, outwitted by some power of the enigmatic, anti-authoritarian Mercurians that they cannot even comprehend.” (“Morgan’s Words” 67) Comparisons can be made between the humans’ assumed hierarchy of language in “The First Men on Mercury” and the “troublesome interface between [Scotland’s] two main vocabularies, Scots and English” (Herbert, “Morgan’s Words” 66) as Morgan’s direct reference to this “troublesome interface” manifests through his inclusion of Scots-sounding words in the Mercurian language:

– Bawr stretter! Bawr. Bawr. Stretterhaw!

With Scots in mind, this potential mimicking takes on new meanings: The Mercurian / Scots word “Bawr” translates into standard English as practical joke; “stretter” closely resembles ‘strett’, meaning straight, or ‘straits’, which are narrow or constrictive limits; and “haw!” bears a close resemblance to ‘haw’, a Scots interjection to attract attention which also translates as livid or pale and is sometimes associated with animals that have a mottled-gray hide. (Warrack, *The Concise Scots Dictionary*) In Scots translation the Mercurians’ first words can be read as dismissive, regarding the humans’ perceived dominance as joke worthy and comparing their

appearance to that of a primitive animal species with a limited understanding of their situation. Morgan's presentation of Scots as alien and alienating may be seen as a response to contemporary debates over its use and general exclusion from the hegemony of Standard English. At the same time that several important developments in the promotion of Scots language were made during the 1970s⁹ Morgan was writing that "the MacDiarmid 'renaissance' of a general synthetic Scots fifty years ago can still be felt, and learned from, but the move should now be towards the honesty of actual speech." ("Scottish Poetry in the 1960s" 178) The Scots in "The First Men on Mercury" does not adhere to the "honesty of actual speech" that Morgan felt poetry ought to move towards but rather Morgan syntheticises Scots by presenting it as a fictional, humorous, alien voice. Indeed much of the poem's humour is derived from its alienating effect on a listening audience; its more obviously-serious messages being written most accessibly in English at the end of the poem. The effect is to simultaneously universalise the key concerns of the poem – such as wrongfully perceived intellectual, cultural and linguistic supremacy – by making them accessible whilst acknowledging the particular relevance of those issues to any sense of personal, local, national, international and potential intergalactic identity through the inclusion of dialect.

Morgan was attracted to the idea of "a common literary language" for Scotland, believing it to be "an excellent [idea] in a country with so many dialects." ("When poets get up into space" 19) "The First Men on Mercury" realises this desire through the blending of human and Mercurian words to develop a hybrid universal language, in which linguistic exchange provides opportunities for human

⁹ Including the formation of the Scots Language Society, conferences on Scots Language being held by the Association for Scottish Literary Studies, and the creation of Radio Shetland, one of very few stations using local Scottish dialects in publically transmitted discussion and debate.

development. The broken communications between the two species provide a chance for attempts at linguistic reconciliation and the subsequent exchange of ideas, whereby each alien is forced to listen, learn and adapt to the speech of the other. Morgan explained his view on the importance of such multilingualism in expanding human potential and understanding:

I think it may be important not to close the gate on things that are not understood yet but could possibly be understood. And one is maybe enlightened by science and scientific experiment, and this can also be done through language and through extending what we think that language can do. Any one language cannot do everything. We can learn from other languages and perhaps extend the possibilities of English, in our case. ("Interviewed by Russell Jones" 32)

Morgan's hypothesis that countries which speak multiple dialects (which is to say most countries) may benefit from "a common literary language" ("When poets get up into space" 19) and that "one may be enlightened ... by language" (Morgan, "Interviewed by Russell Jones" 32) is tested in "The First Men on Mercury", in which language exchange and homogenisation become vital to humanity's ability to adapt and survive in a changing and expanding human environment. Morgan's use of real and invented language, reminiscent of his sound poetry, encourages curiosity and openness towards alternative, unfamiliar means of transcultural communication. Whilst Nicholson argues that Morgan's concrete poetry "connect[s] visual effect with semantic transmission", (*IOM* 92) "The First Men on Mercury" establishes a similar "transmission" to a reader or audience member by its use of linguistic alienation, through which messages may be perceived or implicitly understood even if much of

the vocabulary in the poem is not. Language is both a catalyst for change and reactive to change: just as the Earthmen in “The First Men on Mercury” are enlightened through the adoption of a new language for their new environment, poetry must, according to Morgan, also offer new ways of describing human experience whilst actively responding to new environments and contemporary concerns.

Locating the poem on Mercury, one might posit that Morgan universalises linguistic and cultural presumptions by dismembering Scots language from its geographic source. Although we might legitimately read “The First Men on Mercury” as an exploration of the “troublesome interface between ... Scots and English” (Herbert, “Morgan’s Words” 66) the science-fictional premise acts to generalise, rather than localise, any cultural themes: the men are not representative of any particular institution, government or nation, but describe themselves as “earthmen.” As such any messages to be taken away from the poem are not only English-Scots-specific, but relevant to various different nations, cultures and languages. Whilst Roderick Watson’s assertion that “Modern Scottish writing in Scots has been characterised by two apparently contradictory impulses: an interest in direct and demotic utterance, and a move towards a degree of linguistic estrangement” (“Alien Voices from the Street” 141) might be true of Morgan’s use of Scots in “The First Men on Mercury”, Crawford explains that “The First Men on Mercury”, “wittily models cultural crossover, the moving from one language community and the assumptions which it invites into another different one – a theme that is ... very relevant to any multicultural, multilinguistic society” (“The Whole Morgan” 17-18) Likewise, Nicholson argues that “other speech communities might take comfort from the Mercurians

dispatching their uninvited visitors with a flea in their ear (and another language learned)” (*IOM* 112)

Morgan’s frequent use of fictional voices (be they alien, computer or future-human) provide a distancing mechanism whereby his poetry can “engage with possibilities in the real world, unconstrained by predetermination or outcomes that might seem inevitable” (Riach, “Scottish Fiction and Scottish Poetry” 147) His blending of linguistic alienation and semantic ambiguity, underpinned by humour, challenges an assured parochial nation-centred reading in favour of more universal human-centred concerns. In a very real sense the Scots spoken in “The First Men on Mercury” is not Scots at all, it is Mercurian. The written form of the Mercurian language bears relatively little visual resemblance to Scots;¹⁰ rather it is the listener’s presumption – perhaps based on Morgan’s nationality, or their aural preference towards ‘hearing’ Scots words in the poem because it sounds similar to their own dialect – that lead to a Scots-English interpretation. By way of example, given the colonial themes one might read in “The First Men on Mercury” and Morgan’s direct references to South Africa in poems such as “Starryveld”,¹¹ (*CP* 157) echoes of South African history and Afrikaans speech might also be detected:

- Thmen? Thmen? Bawr. Bawrhossop.

Yuleeda tan hanna. Harrabost yuleeda.

- I am the yuleeda. You see my hands,

we carry no benner, we come in peace.

¹⁰ Although it is generally accepted that most Scots words have no standardised spelling.

¹¹ A political concrete poem about the Sharpeville massacre in 1960 in South Africa. Police opened fire on demonstrators against the South African Pass Laws and strict apartheid policies

With Afrikaans in mind, links to white aggression in South Africa permeate the poem: read aloud, “Bawr” sounds similar to Boer, a potential reference to the Boer Wars fought in South Africa between the British Empire and Dutch emigrants during the late 19th and early 20th century. The Earthmen are asserting their assumed dominance as they state “I am the yuleeda” (I am the/your leader), whilst claiming that they “carry no benner” (banner or flag hung in public or carried in a demonstration) and that they “come in peace” as if to suggest that violence is a possibility. “Hanna” also shares phonic similarities with the African Hausa word ‘hana’, meaning prevent, refuse or forbid (Bargery, “hana”) and so themes of protest and migration may be reasonably inferred. The poem actively encourages the reader or listener to attempt to translate the Mercurian language so that they become, like the Earthmen, participants in the exchange.

As with “A Home in Space” and “Travellers (1)”, the physical journey through outer space becomes one of re-education and internal metamorphoses. Each speaker gains insight from experiences of alienation, and space becomes the chrysalis for their rebirth. In “The First Men on Mercury”, translation, as Crawford explains, “is a crossover, a change, a rite of passage into something other.” (“The Whole Morgan” 17) That “something other” may be the manifestation of Morgan’s “suspicion of representational fixality” (Nicholson, *IOM* 107) and “dislike or fear of the stable state” (Morgan, *NNGM* 36) which holds a mirror against us to ask what it means to be human and “is there anything really alien or are we meant to educate ourselves to make it less alien, to become really involved communicators?” (Morgan, “Interviewed by Russell Jones” 31) Ian Gregson describes how Morgan “consistently looked for the unexpected point of entry into his subject matter,” using science fictional elements to redefine “what it is to be human living on earth by juxtaposing

that experience with the idea of what it would be to be an alien.” (“Scotland was found on Jupiter” 7) Morgan’s use of an actual alien life form is meant as a counterbalance then, to de-alienate the core concepts of the poem by asserting our similarity, rather than difference, to beings and cultures which we might assume are hugely different to our own. Outer space offers a geographic distance from cultural references to universalise the idea that positive change is brought about through hard work (be it dismantling a space station, bouncing across the universe, or translating an alien language), remaining open to new ways of thinking and staying optimistic about humanity’s potential.

In an interview with Marshall Walker in 1975, Morgan explained his optimistic outlook and sense of sustained hope for the human species beyond our own planet, suggesting that “the survival instinct is something that is basic to all life but in man is fully conscious ... he is capable of overcoming even very great disasters.” He continued:

It seems to me that is the great thing about the human species, it now knows how flexible it is and how much power it can eventually have over a wide range of environments including non-terrestrial environments. I think it goes without saying that we shall go to other environments and adapt ... I’m quite convinced that we do have a very distant future ahead of us. (Morgan, “Let’s Go” 85)

Human flexibility, seemingly the key to Morgan’s optimism for human expansion and survival, is perhaps best seen in his space poems, in which distance becomes a metaphor for opportunity and the poems’ endings are frequently presented as new

beginnings (a vital theme which we shall return to in chapter 3). MacDiarmid's attitude that an artist is "someone creating for and in a sense truly creating, the future" (Morgan, "Joyce and MacDiarmid" 216) is literally realised as Morgan speculates about potential futures of the species. But survival is not simply a product of luck in Morgan's work, human ingenuity must be met with a tenacious will to survive and adapt to new environments. Wallace Stevens' assertion that "our revelations are not the revelations of belief, but the precious portent of our own powers" (750) is also reflected in the practical adaptability of Morgan's characters: in "A Home in Space" a physical and internal dismantling is necessary for achieving communicative separation from "the earth base" so as to keep "a voyaging generation voyaging" into new and hopeful realms; in "The First Men on Mercury" the earthmen must work hard at understanding their hosts before they "go back to [their] planet", taking what they have gained as the Mercurians remind them, "nothing is ever the same, / now". Similarly, in "On the Way to Barnard's Star" (*A Book of Lives* 43), a band of explorers, potentially terra formers of newly discovered planets, engage on a six year voyage where "Meteors swept past us like battle-shot" to save a dying planet, the speaker instructing their crew to "help it" and "open the hatch". The end of each of these space poems hints towards a continuation, a sustained belief in human survival and evolution that Morgan described as "a partially rational faith" that he felt came from "an objective reading of history" ("Let's Go" 84) throughout which humans have faced and overcome countless threats to their continued existence.

One might justifiably argue that Morgan's optimistic belief in humanity's future, based on historic evidence, is simply naive. After all, what about the millions who have – and will – die from disease, starvation, war and natural disaster? He must

have been keenly aware of the self-destructive nature of the human species from his own experiences in the military during the Second World War, and the real threat of annihilation that came with the invention and use of the hydrogen bomb. Such concerns become the focus of a number of his poems, which is the focus of chapter 4, yet the potential futures presented in his space poems more frequently assume that the human species, by virtue of man being “fully conscious that he is himself putting obstacles in the way of survival by developments like the hydrogen bomb,” (Morgan, “Let’s Go” 84) will ultimately be able to prevent human extinction and expand into the reaches of outer space. There is a tension between rejecting and maintaining a link with the past in Morgan’s work which seems at odds with his denunciation of parochialism, however his space poems highlight a need to learn from our experiences as a way to advance as a species. The “precious portent of our own powers” (Stevens, 750) that Stevens asserted were the source of “our revelations” materialise as a will for survival in Morgan’s work, the contemporary and future powers of humankind being a self-conscious and self-preserving relationship with science and technology.

Chapter 3

Strands of Myth and Borrowed Memories - "In Sobieski's Shield"

"there is an interest in somehow trying to find a kind of web of myth that will draw various strands of one's reactions to humanity together" - Edwin Morgan

(*NNGM* 33)

Sustained optimism for the preservation of the human species through technological innovation and intergalactic travel comes to a forefront in "In Sobieski's Shield" (*CP* 196-198), from Morgan's 1968 collection, *The Second Life*. However this is also a poem about the effects of trauma and the persistence of the human spirit, a subject which links closely to Morgan's own life experiences, particularly during the Second World War, as will be examined in this chapter. "In Sobieski's Shield" takes the form of a long monologue (approximately 100 lines), spoken by an evacuee who has been "dematerialised the day before solar withdrawal" and "rematerialized / ... on a minor planet / of a sun in Sobieski's Shield", assumedly using an advanced technology, with his son, wife and "the rest of the laboratory". It begins:

well the prophets were dancing in the end
much good it did them and the sun didn't rise at all
anywhere but we weren't among the frozen
we had been dematerialised the day before solar withdrawal
in a hurry its true but by the best technique
who said only technique well anyhow the best
available and here we are now rematerialized

to the best of my knowledge on a minor planet
of a sun in Sobieski's Shield in our right mind I hope
approximately though not unshaken and admittedly
not precisely those who set out

The speaker's predicament is quickly realised through the matter of fact delivery, uncomplicated by metaphor so as to quickly establish the story. Morgan's use of *medias res* also creates a sense of immediacy that draws the reader into the narrative through creating intrigue as to the details of the events that preceded. The speaker is humanised to provoke an emotional reaction and to "exploit but overshoot the merely fantastic, carrying us quickly into a sympathetic regard for the narrator in his predicament" (Walker 59) in several ways: the poem's idiomatic opening ("well", "much good it did them") and the narrator's flippant, jokey remarks at his situation ("we were dematerialised ... by the best technique / who said only technique") present a likeable everyman, struggling to understand his new environment. Sympathy is further developed as the narrator appears to be shaken and unsure of his location ("to the best of my knowledge on a minor planet") and his condition ("in our right mind I hope") but retains admirable human qualities as he cares for his family: "I draw her [his wife's] head into my arms and hide the sobbing / shuddering first breaths of her second life". Morgan explained that "In Sobieski's Shield" was meant to be "about shock ... submitting the human being to an extraordinarily traumatic experience – really *using* the word 'trauma'" ("Let's Go" 83) and through Morgan's use of poetic monologue the reader is able to quickly access, and potentially associate with, the physical and emotional trauma of the speaker as he documents the first few moments on the planet.

One might argue that the poem is unclear and made unnecessarily difficult to read through its lack of punctuation, however the effect is to linguistically recreate a sense of the narrator's confusion, to make the account seem hazy and unclear, unsettling the reader's ability to fully comprehend what is being described. Similarly, as the poem continues the landscape of the planet is slowly revealed, building an increasingly lucid image as the narrator's mind and vision clear, as if the reader were experiencing the events through his eyes:

is that a lake of mercury I can't quite see
through the smoke of the fumarole it's lifting now
but there's something puzzling even when I
my memory of mercury seems to be confused with
what is it blood no no mercury's not like blood

The poem's initial ambiguity creates a sense of restless distress in which the narrator's confused stream of consciousness-like account of their surroundings is made more confusing by the poem's lack of punctuation. As with "A Home in Space" (CP 387-388) Morgan purposefully disrupts standard sentence structures to create ambiguity, the narrator's separate phrases seeming to seep into one another to become abstract and unclear. Just as the narrator is trying to clarify and make sense of his surroundings, the reader is encouraged to reconfigure the poem to ascertain meaning:

is that a lake of mercury I can't quite see
through the smoke of the fumarole it's lifting now

might be read as:

is that a lake of mercury? I can't quite see.

Through the smoke of the fumarole it's lifting now.

Or:

is that a lake of mercury I can't quite see?

Through the smoke of the fumarole it's lifting now.

Or:

is that a lake of mercury? I can't quite see

through the smoke of the fumarole. It's lifting now.

Although the scenario described is highly fictional, an emotional connection between the reader and narrator may be developed through encouraging them to engage with the poem's language and sympathise with the narrator's situation. Whether or not this emotional connection is achieved is debatable, particularly as the poem's storyline may seem too unrealistic for many readers. Regarding the potential for science fictional poems to create a detrimental disassociation with the reader, since the scenarios described are currently outside of human experience, Morgan explained:

I think there must be some connection, though it may be very very far fetched or unusual. But I think that a science fiction poem which doesn't really work is usually one which has no connection that you can see in any reality at all and it wouldn't help if it did.

(“Interviewed by Russell Jones” 30)

The impossible reality of “In Sobieski’s Shield” makes such connections difficult, yet the poem’s allusions to the First World War “[acknowledge] a new connectedness to the past” (Cockburn) that Morgan’s contemporary audience – the European consciousness still affected by the suffering and destruction of the First and Second World Wars – might associate with. The “lake of mercury” spurs memories of trench warfare in the narrator, “a graft of war and ancient agony” that he believes have been assimilated from a “dead helper” during the rematerialisation process: “a shell-hole filled with rain water ... craters waterlogged with rain mud blood ... a stark hand brandishing nothing through placid scum”. The evacuation has left the narrator with only four fingers, yet he has gained fragments of ancient memories and a second birthmark “shaped like a crazy heart spreading / across [his] right forearm”. With his mind absorbed with images from someone else’s life – seemingly in the trenches of war-devastated France – the alterations to his arm appear to be borrowed wounds from a long-dead soldier, his “dead helper”, with the heart shape of the “birthmark” acting as a potential reference to the Purple Heart medal, America’s oldest military decoration, formally the Badge of Military Merit, (Raymond 1) which was awarded to American soldiers who were wounded or killed during the First World War.

In an interview with Marshall Walker, Morgan explained that “the bit where you have a kind of flashback to the First World War is meant to show this kind of continuing resilience of the human race through its various tragedies ... brought into the life of one man and his friends and wife ... you are meant to have the feeling of a kind of continuance through terrible circumstances”. (*AEM* 83) Concurrently, the borrowed memories seem to grant the narrator a new courage in facing his tentative and likely-hazardous future as the poem ends:

we shall live in the rings of this chain the jeremiahs
who said nothing human would stand are confounded if I cry
even the dry tear in my heart that I cannot
stop if laugh to think they thought they
could divide the indivisible the old moon's in
the new moon's arms let's take our second
like out first life out from the dome are the suits
ready the mineral storm is quieter it's hard
to go let's go.

Regarding the poem's form, as in “Thoughts of a Module” (see chapter 1) Morgan's use of a noticeable white space in the final line lends the poem a sense of incompleteness so as to suggest a possible continuation or a new beginning. Similarly, this white space interrupts the poem's established structure to imply change and uncertainty, but the final words, “let's go.”, given emphasis by the visual change of the line, whilst implying determination through Morgan's use of a full stop (so as to assert a finality in his decision), epitomise a pragmatic optimism, an “acceptance of the environment and going out into it, into further dangers – and a

kind of acceptance of the unknown.” (Morgan, *NNGM* 83) The white space therefore becomes a visual metaphor for “the unknown”, an unseen ending to the narrative which is captured by the absence of a conclusive end. As with “Travellers (1)” (*CP* 447) and “The First Men on Mercury” (*CP* 267-268) there is the implication that our understanding of the future is implicitly bound to our understanding of the past. Each of these poems affirms that past experience can provide an imperative to move forwards whilst acknowledging the importance of the past in creating a sense of who we are and who we, as individuals and as a species, might become in the future.

Nicholson postulates that the flashbacks in “In Sobieski’s Shield” are “possibly ironising the most popular poem of the first world war, the Canadian John McCrae’s ‘In Flander’s Fields’¹²” (*IOM* 118) and so Morgan’s literary allusions raise questions as to the importance of art, and therefore the artist, in documenting historic events for contemporary and future generations. Morgan’s claim that “The artist is partly there like the shaman of the tribe to record what is happening, telling the tribe’s history” (*NNGM* 66) perhaps seems appropriate to “In Sobieski’s Shield” but it is also puzzling that Morgan actively avoids any attempt to “[tell] the tribe’s history” of the Second World War in the poem, given his involvement in the war when stationed in Africa during the 1940s. In “Roof of Fireflies”, written in 1999, Morgan explains:

I have to say that I felt I must ask myself, and did ask myself, why I was not writing poetry about the Second World War at the time when I was engaged in it ... If Owen and Rosenberg, whom I much admired, could do

¹² The narrator of “In Sobieski’s Shield” recalls: “I know that landscape too / one of the wars far back twentieth century I think the / great war was it called France Flanders fields I remember / reading”

it in the First War, why could I not do it in the Second? I knew the situations were different, both because the apocalyptic surprise and horror of trench warfare in France, with its intense emotional involvement, could not be matched in the African desert campaign of the 1940s and also because I belonged to a hospital unit which by its nature had to be some distance behind the front line. For all that, I felt guilty, and angry with myself, at least during the times when I had leisure to reflect. Did something tell me, or was something trying to tell me, that it didn't matter? That there is no pattern in the poetic life which decrees one must write about the immediacy of forceful or strident events? ... my instinct about subterranean workings preferred to leave them in the limbo of memory.

(191)

From this account we might theorise that Morgan's guilt over the "distance" of his role in the war made him unable, or unwilling, to associate it with the "extraordinarily traumatic experience" ("Let's Go" 83) of the narrator and his family in "In Sobieski's Shield". The First World War, which he saw as "far more terrible than the Second World War in some ways", (*NNGM* 83) might have seemed a more suitable comparison for the physical and emotional "shock ... involving millions of people." (*NNGM* 83) In *The Great War and Modern Memory* Paul Fussell describes the difficulty of many soldiers who fought in the Second World War in accurately portraying their experiences in writing,¹³ explaining that "the further personal written

¹³ In Morgan's biography, McGonigal describes the 1950s as Morgan's "bleakest" years, in which he "considered suicide" (BTLD 92), going on to describe that Morgan's "frustration in constructing a poetic role for himself ran parallel with the halting reconstruction of Scotland after the war" (BTLD 108). War seemingly had a dampening effect on Morgan's ability to think hopefully and creatively: "Experience of war had unsettled him ... After being mostly in the open air and doing physical or straightforward work for so long, his mind did not take easily to reading books, even, or especially, books of poetry." (McGonigal, BTLD 79)

materials move from the form of the daily diary, the closer they approach to the figurative and the fictional.” (310) Meanwhile in *Literatures of Memory. History, time and space in postwar writing*, Peter Middleton and Tim Woods assert:

Postmodern historical fiction is unconvinced that there is a single unitary truth of the past waiting to be recovered, and is more interested in who has or had the power to compose ‘truths’ about it, whereas historical realist fiction tends to assume that the literary narrative has a special power to present the past in a language of the present and give direct access to the thoughts, speech and events of that other time without distorting their significance. (21)

Subsequently whilst adding a poetic structure to real events distances them from the actual personal experience, the inclusion of narrative form becomes a more emphatic medium of expression. Concurringly, Robert Kee, an RAF pilot in the Second World War, explains:

From all the quite detailed evidence of these diary entries I can’t quite add up a very coherent picture of how it really was ... There’s nothing you could really get hold of ... No wonder the stuff just slips away mercury-wise from proper historians. No wonder they have to erect rather artificial structures in its place (Fussell 311)

If Kee's explanation of "artificial structures" as a mode to gaining "coherent picture[s] of how it really was" is a common opinion and a reliable account, as Fussell suggests, then we might regard a more creative, constructed or artificial expression of war to be a more effective mode of representation than factual or documentary approaches. Rather than creating irrelevant abstraction and incoherence, the fictional elements and artificial structures of poetry may actually serve to enhance the writer's ability to accurately portray a sense of "how it [war] really was". Whilst Fussell argues that "it is only the ex post facto view of an action that generates coherence or makes irony possible", (310) Morgan takes this to the extreme, not only through writing about the memories of soldiers who died before he was born but through creating an even greater chronological distance between his experiences in the Second World War and those described in "In Sobieski's Shield" by setting the poem in a distant future. This fictionalised time difference acts to extend and invert the "ex post facto view ... that generates coherence" (Fussell 310), despite the relative incoherence of the narrative account.

Just as Kee, and we might suppose many survivors of war, had difficulty in verbalising their war experiences, we might also postulate that Morgan's non-inclusion of his experiences in the Second World War are a partial product of an inability to give a sense of "how it really was" through language. The failure of Morgan's narrator to accurately describe the effects and feeling of his rematerialisation through language are relevant to this; the blurring of his vision and the blurring of his descriptions are captured through Morgan's lack of punctuation and the narrator's various errors and corrections ("Is that a lake of mercury I can't quite see ... my memory of mercury seems to be confused with / what is it blood no no mercury's not like blood"). The insufficiency of language to accurately portray

events is reflected in Morgan's frequent use of ambiguities so as to suggest an inconsistency in the expressive potential of language, which is further enhanced through his variety of poetic forms and narrative voices to develop a series of non-definitive perspectives. In "Alterities from Outer Space", Fazzini describes how "no systematic polarisation can be accepted by Morgan. His elusive style and diverse literary production seems to reflect that indefinable field which human linguistic means can only approach through multiplicity of discourses that construct history through a procession of styles." (239) As such, Morgan's tendency towards formal and stylistic experimentation may be a reaction to his inability to fully portray his war experiences through language. Multiplicity must necessarily replace absolutes in Morgan's work for two reasons: firstly because perception is subjective and therefore open to interpretation, and secondly because language is incapable of achieving absolute expression.

Morgan's metaphor of dematerialisation and rematerialisation feeds into the notion that the "indefinable field" of experience must be approached through a "multiplicity of discourses [and] a procession of styles" (Fazzini, "Alterities" 239) because it inflicts changes on the narrator's means of perception and expression. He and his family symbolise physical and mental transience, through which Morgan raises questions as to the nature of existence and what it means to be human. We might ask: do the alterations to their bodies make them different people? Do the alterations to their minds make them different people? Or even, are they still human? Such questions were likely to be prominent in the post-war decades, as soldiers returned home physically and mentally altered by their experiences, as Morgan was. McGonigal explains that "[Morgan] had been away from home for five years. His parents found him altered and did not quite know how to react. This sort of awkward

homecoming must have been a common experience for many men returning ... Readjustment was difficult.” (*BTL D* 78) Subsequently we might read “In Sobieski’s Shield” as an attempt to explore and reconcile Morgan’s involvement in the war, as rumination on the effects of trauma, even if he felt that his own experiences were less traumatic than those of people who came before him and those who might come long after.

Approximately nine years after the publication of “In Sobieski’s Shield”, Morgan’s experiences of the Second World War became the focus of his one hundred poem sequence, *The New Divan* (*CP* 295-382), published in 1977. *The New Divan* contained “many marvellous tales of fantastic journeys and the unrolling of many a magic coincidence [that] are set within the life-crisis of the story-teller” (McGonigal, *BTL D* 243) and maintained a distinctly science-fictional feel, particularly through Morgan’s extraterrestrial-esque descriptions of landscapes. In poem “44” (*CP* 309-310) of the sequence several images appear to parallel those in “In Sobieski’s Shield”. Morgan writes:

Clouds passed boiling in swarms.
Watching the speeded-up universe is dreadful,
but who knows what’s the speed of gods and
prophets, is their only metal
mercury

Clear comparisons between the imagery in this poem and those in “In Sobieski’s Shield” can be drawn, whilst technical similarities between “In Sobieski’s Shield” and *The New Divan* are also evident and indicate a movement towards

Morgan's war experiences leaving "the limbo of [his] memory" (Morgan, "Roof of Fireflies" 191) and emerging, albeit perhaps subconsciously, in his poetry. The publication of "In Sobieski's Shield" in 1968 coincides with the widely broadcast events of the space race, and the flashback technique used to summon imagery from the First World War in "In Sobieski's Shield", which "tuned with his own desire for a multi-dimensional literature close to the experience of living in an age of cinema, relativity and space exploration" (McGonigal, *BTLD* 152) was similarly utilised in *The New Divan*. Indeed Morgan admitted that *The New Divan* "would not have been instigated if the Middle East had not been again so much in the news in the 1970s, driving [his] mind through memorial labyrinths that were almost labyrinths of witness" ("Roof of Fireflies" 191) and so a link between the contemporary media coverage of space travel and war, and the amalgamation of travel and war themes in *The New Divan* and "In Sobieski's Shield", is apparent. Whyte explains that "the genre [science fiction] flourished, particularly after World War II, with the establishment of the United Nations and the growth of a space industry: possible future societies were described, the possibility of intelligent life elsewhere, of other worlds, was explored" ("The Milk of Space" 1) and Morgan's other-worldly explorations fit this pattern.

In particular the idea of human survival and positive change being reliant on heroic self-sacrifice, a trait we might associate with soldiers of the World Wars, is central to Morgan's space poems. In a 1996 interview with Fazzini, Morgan described "In Sobieski's Shield" as:

a kind of heroic poem ... although it is a science-fiction poem where people are pushed into a very difficult situation in a far future, it still

revolves around human experience, it says something about survival and heroes (“Two Interviews” 49)

The heroics of Morgan’s narrators are captured by their perseverance in the face of adversity. The frequent motifs of deconstruction and reconstruction in Morgan’s space poems not only reflect his “dislike or fear of the stable state” (*NNGM* 36) but also highlight an insistence on the importance of the past, the need for heroism and adaptability as humanity ventures into new and unknown realms. This is taken to an extreme in “In Sobieski’s Shield” as the narrator and his family are physically and mentally deconstructed, altered and put back together with borrowed memories, but similar themes are continued into *The New Divan*. In poem “100”, (*CP* 330) the final poem in *The New Divan* sequence, for example, the speaker struggles to vocalise his experience (“Oh I can’t speak / of that eternal break of white”) as Morgan and others had undoubtedly struggled, yet expresses a proficiency towards speaking “only of / memories crowding in from human kind, / stealthily, brazenly, thankfully, stonily / into that other sea-cave / of my head.” As with the speaker’s account in “In Sobieski’s Shield”, overcoming the hardships of war seems reliant on an association with the past which emerge as borrowed “memories”. Similarly, poem “100” describes how “The dead climb with us like the living to the edge”, Morgan’s narrator metaphorically carrying the dead with them to move forward, much like the narrator of “In Sobieski’s Shield” is empowered by the memories of his “dead helper” as he leads his family from the protective dome. The fallen soldiers of the past play an important role in the poems examined, symbolising a continued tradition of human perseverance from which newer generations can gain inspiration.

Literary references are used to similar effect, linking the past to the present and to potential futures as a means of providing historic and cultural relevance to his poems. In poem “2” (CP 295) of *The New Divan*, Morgan makes reference to ancient Greek and Middle Eastern stories to further the idea that heroics, determination and adaptability are a catalyst for positive change that can inspire future generations:

The Old Man of the Sea has all the gales
within his heaving pack, get deep within
his folds, he’s on your back, get deep
within gale-weary Sindbad, be the driver
of tritons and the triton

“The Old Man of the Sea” refers to a figure in Greek mythology who, in Homer’s *The Odyssey*, was able to answer any question he was asked so long as his captor was able to hold onto him as he changed forms. The character appears again in *The Seven Voyages of Sinbad the Sailor*, (trans. Burton) fooling travellers into helping him across a river but not allowing them to rest, until they eventually died from exhaustion. “the triton” is a Greek god, son of Poseidon and Amphitrite, who was able to control the seas’ ferocity by blowing on a conch shell. Borrowing from famous stories of gods and heroes, the poem suggests that strength comes from an understanding of the past and, using that, adapting situations to your advantage. The speaker’s assertion that we ought to “be the driver” of malleable, metamorphic power, is a promotion of individual agency, denouncing apathy and resonating with the concluding proactive and optimistic message of action and enlightenment in “In Sobieski’s Shield”: “let’s go.”

Although there is a sense of optimism developed towards the end of “In Sobieski’s Shield” as the reader, likely sympathetic to the family’s plight, follows the family “out from the dome” and into the “mineral storm”, Morgan also hints at a chance of peril, writing “the old moon’s in / the new moon’s arms”,¹⁴ a line which expresses uncertainty through its variety of interpretations and literary references. A sense of comfort is certainly present through the personification of the moons, which adopt the image of a parent and child embracing, or lovers hugging; however Morgan also alludes to the same expression spoken by a sailor in the old Scottish ballad “Sir Patrick Spens” (Ferguson 103-104) to warn of a potentially fatal storm. Stanza seven of “Sir Patrick Spens” reads:

“Late, late yestre’en I saw the new moon

 Wi’ the auld moon in hir arm,

And I fear, I fear, my dear master,

 That we will come to harm.”

The old Scots ballad “tells a story that may be based on two voyages of thirteenth-century Scots noblemen to conduct princesses to royal marriages” (Ferguson 103), all of whom drown. “In all versions”, Ferguson writes, “Patrick is sent to sea against his will.” (103) In some ways Morgan’s poem mimics the old Scottish ballad; it is a human story, the world they inhabit is strange, almost haunted by the past, and the protagonists are given a dangerous mission which they do not

¹⁴ “the new moon / Wi’ the auld moon in hir arm” is an astrological phenomenon: the Moon is illuminated partly by sunlight that is reflected from the Earth. A crescent of light (“new moon”) is seen around the dimmer part, the “old moon”. It was commonly thought by sailors to be a sign that a storm is approaching.

desire. In the final stanza of “Sir Patrick Spens” all passengers are killed by the storm and so the potential new beginning (marriage) ends in tragedy:

Half o’er, half o’er to Aberdour

It’s fifty fathom deep,

And there lies guid Sir Patrick Spens

Wi’ the Scots lords at his feet.

As with “Sir Patrick Spens”, “In Sobieski’s Shield” maintains revealing images and shifts of viewpoint, combining suspense with a sense of foreboding. However Morgan avoids the ballad’s tragic end, instead offering the possibility of a new beginning for the narrator and his family by replacing the lines “And I fear, I fear, my dear master, / That we will come to harm.” with “let’s take our second / like out first life out from the dome”. This sense of yearning for a rebirth, rather than a narrative of tragic death, is reminiscent of the opening to Samuel Coleridge’s ode “Dejection” (Parrish 45) in which the speaker desires the arrival of a storm as a way of curing the dullness of his senses. As with “In Sobieski’s Shield”, Coleridge’s “Dejection” focuses on the potentially liberating effects of destruction, change and creativity. Coleridge quotes stanza seven of “Sir Patrick Spens” (the stanza which begins “Late, late yestre’en I saw the new moon”) as a preface to his ode. As it appears in the first published version in “*The Morning Post* on 4 October 1802” (Parrish 45), “Dejection” begins:

WELL! if the Bard was weather-wise, who made
The grand Old Ballad of Sir PATRICK SPENCE,
This night, so tranquil now, will not go hence
Unrous'd by winds, that ply a busier trade
Than those, which mould yon clouds in lazy flakes,
Or this dull sobbing draft, that drones and rakes

In "Dejection" the literary reference to "Sir Patrick Spens" reforms the speaker's sense of his present condition. His declaration that "this night, so tranquil now, will not go hence / Unrous'd by winds" seems akin to a summoning through which the onset of a violent storm, he hopes, will bring about fruitful change in his "dull sobbing" state of mind, and consequently arouse more passionate emotions and creative inspiration within him. Coleridge's reference to "Sir Patrick Spens" and Morgan's subsequent allusion to the old Scots ballad and Coleridge's ode sustain a sense of literary heritage in which traditional tales of adversity act to inform and add perspective to current and potential-future hardships. As such old lines are given new meaning as Morgan combines the traditional with the yet-to-be, mingling a sense of jeopardy through reference to "Sir Patrick Spens" with the notion of creative invigoration and rebirth through reference to Coleridge. The borrowed narratives of "Sir Patrick Spens" and Coleridge problematise any premise that Morgan rejects tradition; rather in "In Sobieski's Shield", the various literary references, much like the speaker's borrowed memories gained from their "dead helper", insist that change is dependent on an awareness of what came before it and that the difficult experience of our ancestors, literary or otherwise, can prove to be a positive force for the future.

Morgan's space poems seek to universalise their topics by separating them from their source, Earth, whilst embodying his view that change is necessary to bring about new opportunities. However, the possible dangers of the unknown are genuine concerns and Morgan offers no guarantees of success; there is a tension between rejecting and maintaining a link with the past, but also the suggestion that opportunity is born from an explorative attitude, by living through and learning from traumatic experiences, through actively deconstructing and reconstructing the self by voyaging out from normal patterns of language and life.

Chapter 4

Dissolving Views – Morgan’s Dystopias

“Man is fully conscious that he is himself putting obstacles in the way of survival by developments like the hydrogen bomb” – Edwin Morgan

(“Let’s Go” 84)

Although much of Morgan’s space poetry offers a sense of optimism for the future through its use of *medias res* and ending at new beginnings – so as to suggest a continuation of the narrative, rather than an end – a significant amount of his work inverts this structure in poems which begin at an apparent end. Most notably his collection of Petrarchan sonnets, *Sonnets from Scotland*¹⁵ (CP 437-547), published in 1984, contains a number of dystopian poems that open with a desolated or abandoned Scotland and speculate about, or warn against, factors that may bring about irreversible damage to mankind.

In “On Jupiter”, (CP 456) from his *Sonnets from Scotland* collection, Morgan imagines a future-Scotland has been rediscovered as an abandoned realm on Jupiter:

¹⁵ Published in 1984, in which “Anonymous interstellar visitors come to Scotland, arriving before time, witnessing a multitude of stories, events, and characters in the trajectory of the nation, from fifty-one oblique and illuminating perspectives, and coming to imagined futures, sometimes terrifying, sometimes wonderfully liberating” (Riach, “Science Fiction and Scottish Poetry” 147)

Scotland was found on Jupiter. That's true.
We lost all track of time, but there it was.
No one told us its origins, its cause.
A simulacrum, a dissolving view?
It seemed as solid as a terrier
shaking itself dry from a brisk black swim
in the reservoir of Jupiter's grim
crimson trustless eye. No soul-ferrier
guarded the swampy waves. Any gods there,
if they had made the thing in play, were gone,
and if the land had launched its own life out
among the echoes of inhuman air,
its launchers were asleep or had withdrawn,
throwing their sticks into a sea of doubt.

Establishing the end of Scotland at the beginning of the poem, "On Jupiter" builds a sense of hopelessness and suggests a predetermined fate for the nation, through which the reader is unable to affect any change and is subsequently disempowered – Scotland has been ruined and there is no perceivable way to reconcile or rebuild it. In particular Morgan's use of "was" suggests that although Scotland was discovered on Jupiter some time ago, it is no longer there, and this idea is reinforced throughout the rest of the poem. This sense of predestination, and the subsequent powerlessness it may invoke, is further enhanced by Morgan's complicated narrative chronology through which the reader assumes an unusual position as an observer of a future that is so distant that Scotland's relocation to Jupiter is, in the timescale of the poem, actually in the past. As such the reader is

required to quickly understand and accept the relationship of four separate time periods: the 'now' of their reading, the point at which Scotland was moved to Jupiter (some year in the future), the point at which the narrator claims that Scotland was "found" (some time after Scotland was moved) and the time at which the narrator is speaking (some time after Scotland had been found on Jupiter).

The reader is also made to trust in the speaker's account as Morgan's use of the past tense and an authoritative narrative voice creates an immediate documentary feel. "Scotland was found on Jupiter" is an arresting line, initially seeming to present an absurd scenario ('How could a whole country be relocated to Jupiter?') but the narrator's account that "Scotland was found on Jupiter" is made all the more definitive by Morgan's use of "It's true", asserting that there is no other possible explanation. This surety, further enhanced by Morgan's use of full stops to imply an exact and unquestionable statement of fact, suggests that the narrator is in a position of authority – perhaps a scientist or historian – and so the reader may become more open to accepting the scenarios being described.

The poem's form reinforces the idea of an ill-fated nation developed by Morgan's technique of breaking away from traditional linear narrative and beginning the story by detailing the end of a nation. Replicated throughout the *Sonnets from Scotland* sequence, the Petrarchan sonnet form lends the poem a sense of inevitability as rhymes follow the sequence's familiar rhyme scheme (ABBA CDDC EFG EFG) and each line contains precisely ten syllables. As such the form and the future scenario described in the poem are quickly established and seemingly unalterable. However, despite Morgan's adoption of the traditional form and authoritative narrative voice, the sonnet deviates somewhat from the strictest, or

most traditional, of Petrarchan sonnets. Morgan's octet contains two different envelope quatrains (ABBA and CDDC) rather than the more traditional rhyme scheme, which maintains the first envelope's rhymes (ABBA ABBA). This change deviates from the expected form, replicating the combined tones of authority and uncertainty which run through the poem, as the speaker is simultaneously self-assured but also uncertain as to the exact details of the past ("A simulacrum, a dissolving view? / It seemed"). The change in rhyme, appearing at line 5, also marks a change in narrative as the speaker shifts from generalisations about losing Scotland ("We Lost all track of time, but there it was. / No one told us its origins, its cause.") to more concrete images ("It seemed as solid as a terrier / shaking itself dry from a brisk black swim"). Morgan's subtle structural deviations undermine a sense of absoluteness which a strict adherence to traditional form might have invoked. This structural change acts in a similar way to Morgan's combination of tradition (the sonnet) and futurism (science fiction), borrowing from the past as a means for reinvention. In "New Currency or Old", Gavin Wallace explains that "The Italian sonnet traditionally retains for its conclusion a powerful epigrammatic synthesis and summation of the foregoing" (1) and whilst Morgan does retain a sense of summary in his final line, "throwing their sticks into a sea of doubt", it is unusually (for Morgan) pessimistic and offers no sense of resolution. Again, Morgan adapts the form for his own devices, as "between the octet and the sestet there is usually a change in direction ... the octave may present a problem, to which the sestet proposes a solution" ("Petrarchan Sonnet", University of Hull) yet Morgan's sonnet appears to have no definitive turn, instead the "sea of doubt" is continued throughout the poem, a common thread through a number of poems in the *Sonnets from Scotland* sequence that contrasts with the majority of his work.

Alan Riach writes that “Arguably, *Sonnets from Scotland* was the turning-point of Morgan’s career. Certainly, in conversation with me he named it his own favourite among all his books.” (“Science Fiction and Scottish Poetry”, 147) The frequent destructive, dystopian and dissolving views of Scotland present in the collection, although not exclusive to this collection or completely representative of *Sonnets from Scotland* as a whole text, might seem an unusual “favourite” for Morgan, who was so often considered an ultimate optimist by himself and others. In *Nothing Not Giving Messages* (ed. Whyte), Morgan claimed that *Sonnets from Scotland*:

began with the idea of writing one or two, I think as a kind of reaction, probably, to the failure of the Referendum [in 1979] to give Scotland political devolution and any idea of a Scottish Assembly ... It’s a kind of comeback, an attempt to show that Scotland was there, was alive and kicking. (141)

Morgan’s political imperative, with a focus on the potential of creative output in defining and reshaping a nation, seems particularly vital to “On Jupiter”, in which the narrator’s account acts as a warning for contemporary audiences not to allow Scotland to slip into becoming “a simulacrum, a dissolving view” of what it once was. The poem hints that the underlying reason for Scotland’s future estrangement is that “No one told us its origins, its cause”, to imply that a nation is lost once its history and culture have been forgotten. Rather, survival and progression depends on a creative spur, with Morgan stating that “We may not have got our assembly but we’re still here, we’ve got our writing to continue and maybe think about Scotland.” (qtd. in McGonigal, *BTL D* 258) In this sense Morgan’s dystopian poems might be viewed as a revolution against settlement; they provide a warning to the reader that their culture

is at risk from obscurity, and that action is the vaccine. In a 1997 interview with Gerry Cambridge, Morgan stressed the importance of a rebellious attitude:

GC: It's this notion that a rebellious attitude, even in a hopeless situation, has something in it to commend it, irrespective of how practical it may be.

EM: I think that's true. There could be a worrying side to that in the sense that you can't make up your bloody mind about anything. Who are you or what are you doing? *Oh we don't know. Tell you tomorrow.* (Laughter). We'll have to watch when we get our independence, get a parliament of our own, we'll have to watch we don't become too solemn (42)

This "rebellious attitude" complies with Morgan's disdain for periods of stagnancy (as discussed in chapter 2) and his worry of a risk that "you can't make up your bloody mind about anything." Although Morgan makes direct reference to Scotland in interviews such as this, and in *Sonnets from Scotland*, his dystopias have the potential to speak more generally to localised and international groups. Similar to the universalising effects of alien languages in poems such as "The First Men on Mercury", (*CP* 267) placing Scotland on Jupiter disassociates it from its real location and potentially its specific cultural references. We might also view this relocation as a means of diminishing any inferred importance placed on physical location: Scotland's problems, or those of another nation, are not a product of its physical location; rather it is social consciousness and the ability to communicate which must be reformed to ensure that a culture does not become extinct. In "Registering the Reality of Scotland" (*Essays* 153-157) Morgan identified language as the "most potent national binding-force and inspiration [in the history of] a small,

much-conquered, much-oppressed country”¹⁶ through which “sheer time and change, rather than literary will or political action, simply cut the knot, and ‘what is left’ is ‘the solution’” (153), and this idea is reiterated in “On Jupiter” through the narrator’s reference a lack of communication being the cause of the country being lost and forgotten: “no one told us”.

Morgan’s attitude of rebellion is seen through his use of language and form, his creative experimentation and his resistance to fully adhere to poetic tradition. In *Sonnets from Scotland*, and in his work more generally, Morgan frequently displays this rebellious tendency, which we might also label a restlessness, to promote ideas of change and to reject permanency. In “The Coin” (CP 454-455), another sonnet from his *Sonnets from Scotland* collection, Morgan explores the implications of a long-abandoned Scottish republic on future generations as a way of speculating about the possible political future of Scotland. The poem is a first-person account from a future narrator, who finds a coin from a long since departed Scottish nation:

We brushed the dirt off, held it to the light.
The obverse showed us *Scotland*, and the head
of a red deer; the antler-glint had fled
but the fine cut could still be felt. All right:
we turned it over, read easily *One Pound*,
but then the shock of Latin, like a gloss,
Respublica Scotorum, sent across

¹⁶ Morgan uses Hungary as an example but goes on to suggest that the same can be said for many nations, such as Scotland.

such ages as we guessed but never found
at the worn edge where once the date had been
and where as many fingers had gripped hard
as hopes their silent race had lost or gained.
The marshy scurf crept up to our machine,
sucked at our boots. Yet nothing seemed ill-starred.
And least of all the realm the coin contained.

Assumedly set in a distant future in which Scotland has become an independent republic ("*Respublic Scotorum*") that had since died out or been abandoned, the poem utilises the image of a single worn coin to raise questions as to the potential future of the nation. Gavin Wallace asked: "have they really gone? Is the currency the coin symbolises 'new', or 'old'? Is this a Scotland yet-to-be, or has-been? Or both?" (1) Morgan's time frame is once again complicated, yet despite the questions raised by the future scenario described, the poem seems to suggest more about Morgan's contemporary Scotland (circa 1978-1984) than we might first suppose. In *Deconstructing the Starship*, Gwyneth Jones argues that "The sf [science fiction] future is an extrapolation of the writer's present. It deals with society's preoccupations at the exact time of writing." (91) In a collection which Morgan felt was, in part at least, a "reaction, probably, to the failure of the Referendum [1979]" (*NNGM* 121), considering "The Coin" through Jones' argument refocuses our reading to ask 'What could now-Scotland become?' The coin's "worn edge where once the date had been" implies a high level of commerce and exchange had been going on "where many fingers had gripped it". This image suggests an economically-vibrant independent Scotland, but it is also purposefully vague so as to make the approximate date of the thriving Scottish Republic,

something Morgan claimed he would “like to see”, (*NNGM* 142) unknown, as if to speculate that its existence could be in the near future.

Combining traditional form and imagery with a futuristic scenario similarly draws a comparison between the then-present and the potential future being described. The poem’s every day idiom is disrupted by Morgan’s inclusion of the Latin phrase, “*Respublica Scotorum*”,¹⁷ his use of a dead language being used to suggest a real possibility of cultural and political resurgence. Antiquity and futurism combine yet again, not only to offer unusual points of entry into contemporary issues but also as a way of avoiding the parochialism of Scottish cultural and political ambition, of escaping the dangers of “sentimental native conservatism or by desperate attempts to imitate the modes of the dominating neighbour culture.” (Morgan, *Essays* 166) Whilst Dunn writes that “it could be argued that [“The Coin”] is made sentimental by being set in a future that is not foreseeable in the political present”, (“Morgan’s Sonnets” 88) in *From Saturn to Glasgow* James Robertson suggests that the poem “asks if this is a Scotland we can attain ... there is a great optimism in the last lines which fills me with hope”. (21) “The Coin” imagines and proposes a future in which a Scottish nation has been reborn, not simply by clinging to the romantic preoccupations of the past (“a red deer”, often a romantic image of Scotland,¹⁸ appears faded through overuse and age), a dilemma which Morgan felt “dogged Scottish writers like the ghost of their country’s history” (Morgan, *Essays*

¹⁷ “Respublica”: “resp” refers to “the real thing, fact, truth, reality” to form “respublica”, “the republic, state, commonwealth” Morgan’s use of Latin therefore implying a certain “reality” to the idea of a Scottish Republic. (“Respublica”)

¹⁸ Parts of the deer were used as tools and food since “at least the Neolithic” age and the red deer had “a central place in Gaelic poetry and folk tails [such as] ‘Moladh Beinn Dòbhrain’ (The Praise of Ben Dorain) [which was] composed by Donnchadh Bàn Mac an t-Saoir between the years of 1751 and 1766” and in art, such as Sir Edwin Landseer’s famous oil painting, “Monarch of the Glen”. (Scottish National Heritage, “Red Deer”)

167) but by evoking a cultural resurgence, through which “the fine cut could still be felt” years later.

Although the poems examined so far implore the survival of culture, perhaps the most evocative poems in *Sonnets from Scotland* are those that are concerned with the physical survival of the human species, warning against the possible extinction of mankind by their own methods. In discussion with Marshall Walker in 1975, Morgan argued that “man is fully conscious that he is himself putting obstacles in the way of survival by developments like the hydrogen bomb. But he is capable of overcoming even very great disasters” (*NNGM* 84) yet Morgan’s optimism is complicated in “The Target” (*CP* 452) and “Computer Error: Neutron Strike”, (*CP* 453) two further sonnets from the *Sonnets from Scotland* collection, in which the devastating impact that the detonation of weapons of mass destruction might have on Scotland is explored. In “The Target”, Glasgow is under attack and the nuclear explosion is killing its inhabitants, devastating the area. The sonnet opens amid the destruction:

Then they were running with fire in their hair,
men and women were running everywhere,
women and children burning everywhere

The speaker’s account is immediately striking as the reader is placed in the human centre of the drama, amongst the men, women and children of Glasgow. Locating the poem in Glasgow also provides a point of reference for the reader, Morgan later describing the destructive power spreading to nearby Rhu (“Rhu was a demon’s pit”) and Faslane (“Faslane a grave”) to suggest the more widespread

effects of an attack. In the opening lines the repetition of “running” and “everywhere” builds a sense of the chaos and desperation in the destruction, which is suddenly replaced by horror as Morgan substitutes “running”, which the reader is likely expecting giving its previous repetition, with “children burning” to evoke a strong emotional reaction. In contrast to this human drama, “Computer Error: Neutron Strike” describes a future-Aberdeen, in which all life has been destroyed following a neutron bomb explosion, whilst the artificial structures and machines remain intact:

No one was left to hear the long All Clear.

Hot wind swept through the streets of Aberdeen
and stirred the corpse-logged harbour. Each machine,
each building, tank, car, college, crane, stood sheer
and clean but that shred of skin, a hand,
a blackened child driven like tumbleweed

Rather than describing specific buildings or machines in detail, locating the poem in Aberdeen has the potential to stimulate the reader’s own memories and imagination, subsequently bringing more personal and vivid images in the reader’s mind. Again, Morgan exploits the emotions of the reader through his description of a “blackened” (by which we might read ‘burned’) child. The delivery and effectiveness of this repeated technique of emotional exploitation is debatable – it’s hardly sophisticated – but by contrasting the energy and human activity in “The Target” with the absence of life in “Computer Error: Neutron Strike”, Morgan is able to highlight the potential short and long-term destructive power of nuclear and neutron weapons. The sonnet form allows him to do so succinctly, whilst the sequencing of the poems builds a sense of extended narrative between them. The result is a seemingly

hopeless scenario in which Scotland becomes desolate, not dissimilar from the presentation of Scotland in “On Jupiter”. However, “The Target” and “Computer Error: Neutron Strike” deal more overtly with “society’s preoccupations at the exact time of writing” (Jones, *Deconstructing The Starship* 91) whilst demonstrating Morgan’s anti-nuclear stance and potential attempts to dissuade readers from supporting the stockpiling, testing and use of weapons of mass destruction.

In particular, “Computer Error: Neutron Strike” highlights contemporary concerns regarding the development of the neutron bomb during the 1970s and 1980s, a weapon which destroys organic matter by emitting large amounts of gamma radiation whilst leaving inorganic matter (buildings, machines, infrastructures) mostly undamaged through producing a much reduced blast radius. “By the late 1970s American nuclear scientists had developed the W-70 neutron warhead [but] Washington never deployed the weapon ... because of surrounding political controversy” (BBC, “Neutron Bomb”) yet they were still being tested in France by 1980 and parliamentary records from 1978 show ongoing debates regarding the potential need to stockpile neutron bombs, with a number of supporters voicing their opinions. On 25th April 1978, for example, parliamentary records note an oral debate in which Dr Alan Glyn states that the neutron bomb is, “probably one of the best weapons in the defence of Europe to prevent all-out nuclear attack, and that, whether or not the bomb has been delivered, we should be making plans as to how many are required.” (Glyn 1)

Given the pro-arms opinions expressed throughout UK parliamentary record and the existing tensions from the Cold War, in which the threat of nuclear strikes during the Cuban missile crisis seemed very real, we might consider “Computer

Error: Neutron Strike” Morgan’s political rebuttal, as the poem continues to describe “horrors we were slow to understand” as a case against the storage and use of weapons of mass destruction:

the videos ran on, sham death, sham love;

the air conditioners kept steady sound.

An automatic foghorn, and its light

warn out to none below, and none above.

The end of the sonnet suggests desolation beyond Aberdeen through reference to “air conditioners”, a technology rarely used in Scotland, much more prevalent in hotter countries. This allusion hints at a more global catastrophe in which Aberdeen is only one casualty of many, and we might imagine large expanses are left lifeless due to international nuclear war as “an automatic foghorn ... warns out to none”. “Automatic”, non-human, descriptions run throughout the poem, building a sense of the “inhuman air” described in “On Jupiter”. In “Computer Error: Neutron Strike”, Morgan describes “unmanned rigs that flared into the night” and “videos ran on” without operators, suggesting that any political ambition to destroy life whilst retaining the manmade resources of a city strips away the value of human life, reducing it to “sham death, sham love.” Morgan turns national and international concerns into an imagined reality to evoke an anti-arms reaction, the sonnet’s brevity capturing the immediate and potentially irrevocable destruction that may be caused by the use of such weaponry.

Similar concerns are the focus of “The Target”. Morgan focuses on the potential impact of the atomic bomb and introduces a speaker in the final four lines, who describes how the destruction and loss of life acts as their “tocsin”:

... ‘Where I am, watch;
when I raise one arm to destroy, I save
no one; increase, multiply; vengeance is mine;
in no universe will man find his match.

Echoes of the American deployment of atomic bombs against Japan during the Second World War might be heard in the killer’s words, which are not dissimilar to those of President Truman as quoted on the cover of the New York Times on 7th August 1945:

It was to spare the Japanese people from utter destruction that the ultimatum of July 26, was issued at Potsdam. Their leaders promptly rejected that ultimatum. If they do not now accept our terms, they may expect a rain of ruin from the air the like of which has never been seen on this earth ... We are now prepared to obliterate more rapidly and completely every productive enterprise the Japanese have above ground in any city. We shall destroy Japan's power to make war (Shalett)

In “The Target” the killer’s claim, “when I raise one arm to destroy, I save” is reminiscent of ongoing debates regarding the use of nuclear weaponry against

Japan as a means to save American lives,¹⁹ yet Morgan immediately challenges this questionably peaceful reading by placing “no one” on the following line, continuing to suggest other possible reasons for the nuclear strike: “increase, multiply; vengeance”. Whilst such terms speak generally of retribution and a desire for political and economic expansion, which are historically common spoils to the victors of war, “vengeance” stands out as a potential reference to America’s nuclear attacks as retribution for Japan’s bombings of Pearl Harbour in 1941, which Secretary of State Cordell Hull called a “treacherous attack.” (Kluckhohn) More generally, the killer represents the inhumanity of war, “The Target” and “Computer Error: Neutron Strike” acting as a tool to broadcast Morgan’s political and personal reflections on the potential devastation that weapons of mass destruction had brought about in Morgan’s lifetime, and the dystopias they might bring about in the future. The two poems also capture Morgan’s real concerns over the likelihood of Scotland becoming a legitimate target for attack in the 1970s and thereafter, as Morgan described in his essay “The Poet’s Voice and Craft”:

The area just north and west of Glasgow contains the largest concentration of nuclear weapons and installations in these islands, so that in the event of a major conflict the Glasgow conurbation, with about two and a half million people, would be a prime target. (60)

¹⁹ Japan planned to meet and defeat American invasions in Kyushu and Honshu, so the surrender of Japan through America’s use of nuclear weapons made such invasions unnecessary: “the 767,000 Americans who were to land on Kyushu could expect to face over 900,000 Japanese, under circumstances where terrain favored the defenders and proximity fuses and radar were not going to be as effective as these important devices had been earlier.” (Weinberg 168)

Morgan's scrapbooks reveal a continued fear regarding the destructive potential of such weaponry. On the double page opening from Scrapbook 12 (1954 - 1960) (2243-2244) Morgan had included the following images:



(Printed with permission from University of Glasgow Library's Special Collections)

McGonigal describes the relevance of these pages:

The heavy black mask-like head and the single eye on the left-hand page seem to be brooding on the same cataclysm: 'This is the Hydrogen Bomb' being exploded in 1952 near the Marshall Islands in the North West Pacific. ... Newspaper cutouts record the 'searing, burning, blinding ball of fire', and the description of the fireball as being like a crouching monster is juxtaposed to the apocalyptic headline summary: 'Thought end of the world had come' ("Double Page Opening")

Morgan wasn't alone in using poetry as a means of expressing this concern; other anti-nuclear poems were being written and published throughout the UK, including *Nuclear Fragments* by Monica Frisch, published in Newcastle Upon Tyne in 1982; *Poems for Peace. Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (Wales)*, edited by Elfin Menna and Nigel Jenkins in 1987; and Robin Bell's 1989 documentary poem, "Chasing the Bear" (9-26) which "deals with the interceptance of a Soviet airforce surveillance mission by NATO Phantom jets, leading to the crash of a Russian nuclear bomber off Britain's northern seaboard." (Blurb) In 1984, the same year that Morgan published *Sonnets from Scotland*, a group of approximately 130 Scottish writers expressed similar concerns in the form of four cantos, which had been written on rolls of wallpaper in public houses and social gatherings across Edinburgh. Morgan didn't contribute, but on completion it was subsequently presented to the National Library of Scotland. The poems were "collected by Sally Evans for the Gathering for Peace and Scottish Writers against the Bomb." ("Poems for Peace" cover page) Evans describes how the project came about:

We wanted everyone to contribute a piece of poetry on a pacifist / protest theme ... the poets loved it and all cooperated because here was a way of finding a use for poetry, it was a way they could put their name to something and get something read (people did go round reading the rolls). But from the point of view of the establishment it was just a list of people who were against nuclear power and war in general ... It was largely an anti nuclear weapons movement ... we were trying to show solidarity with the peace movement. (Email correspondence)

Whilst the vast majority of poems in the anti-nuclear texts cited here dealt directly with contemporary concerns, Morgan projects those concerns into an imagined future to create a vivid sense of the possible effects of nuclear war. Through doing this he is able to create a narrative which provides a sense of immediacy and a visual impression of the devastation that would be caused as a form of deterrence, rather than simply giving an explanation or account of contemporary fears. MacDiarmid utilised a similar technique, employing fiction to explore anti-nuclear worries in his 1963 free-verse adaptation of Harry Martinson's *Aniara: A Review of Man in Time and Space*. Riach describes this as “central work of the Cold War, imagining a post-nuclear apocalyptic earth, polluted by atomic explosions, from which mankind is leaving in swarms of spaceships to colonise other planets” (“Scottish Poetry as Science Fiction” 139) but also notes:

It is a vast, dreadfully pessimistic dystopian vision, and thus a highly unusual component of MacDiarmid’s generally optimistic and affirmative *oeuvre*. That MacDiarmid took on the role of co-translating it says something important about his engagement with the nuclear age and may be considered alongside his anti-nuclear writings (“Scottish Poetry as Science Fiction” 140)

Morgan and MacDiarmid’s apparent pessimism may seem “a highly unusual component” of their work, but it fits the apocalyptic mould of the postmodern science fiction novel as described by Brian McHale: “most postmodernist futures ... are grim dystopias ... The motif of a world after some holocaust or some apocalyptic breakdown.” (67) These anarchistic poems in particular seem in keeping with those of the New Apocalypse movement of the 1940s, which “aim[ed] for the condition of

being prophetic [with Scottish contemporaries including] G.S Fraser and Norman MacCaig ... Others sometimes mentioned in this connection include Ruthven Todd, Tom Scott, Hamish Henderson, Edwin Morgan, Burns Slinger and William Montgomerie" (Morley) although Morgan and MacDiarmid take the term "apocalypse" much more literally than their peers. Rather than offering merely the "apocalyptic breakdown" that McHale suggested of postmodernist science fiction novels, Morgan and MacDiarmid's dystopias of apocalypse offer an indulgence in anarchy, a rebellion against the systems which brought about the demise in the first place and act – in a sense – as an ultimate cure to the social corruptions that created them. Apocalypse offers an ultimate destruction and an opportunity for renewal which on some level may have appealed to Morgan's desire for change to be brought about from a dislocation with the past, in the same way that "he sides with the bulldozer, with the energy of metamorphosis" (Crawford, "The Whole Morgan" 18) in the *Glasgow Sonnets*. (CP 289-292) *Sonnets from Scotland* does not end on destruction, but in continued survival and the hope of rebirth in which, following nuclear and neutron strikes, the narrator speculates about "A Golden Age" (CP 457) and claims that "a strengthened seed outlives the hardest blast". Morgan's analogy of a seed surviving "the hardest blast" (we might suppose, the blast of a nuclear weapon) encapsulates his optimistic view of the persistence of the human spirit in the face of adversity and his belief that humanity is "capable of overcoming even very great disasters." ("Let's Go" 85) Subsequently we might not only view Morgan's dystopian poems as expressing contemporary concerns and as warnings against "putting obstacles in the way of survival by developments like the hydrogen bomb" (Morgan, "Let's Go" 84) but as a challenge to the status quo and an imaginative exploration into the rejuvenating potential of rebellion, destruction and reconstruction. His optimism is not unconditional, rather his poems emphasise the importance of remaining

conscientious and ambitious for change, requiring a devotion to action rather than inaction, which is reflected in his deviation from traditional form, language and theme.

This emphasis on human agency and a need for change is echoed in Morgan's poetic criticism and his recorded belief that poetry ought to consider "man within his whole environment: not just the drop of dew; the rose, the lock of hair, but the orbiting rocket in Anselm Hollo, the laboratory in Allen Ginsberg, the lunar mountains in Hugh Mae" (Gregson, "Metamorphoses" 8) which he felt was lacking in the work of some of his key contemporaries. Morgan was particularly critical of Edwin Muir for mythologising the past and undermining human potential. In Muir's poem of post-atomic survival, "The Horses", (*The Complete Poems of Edwin Muir*, 226-227), "Barely a twelvemonth after / The seven days war that put the world to sleep, / Late in the evening the strange horses came" and begin to rework the land. The poem ends:

Since then they have pulled our ploughs and borne our loads,
But that free servitude can still pierce our hearts.
Our life is changed; their coming our beginning.

In the same fashion that Morgan's space poems frequently end on a new beginning, Muir's "The Horses" suggests a new opportunity for mankind to rebuild, albeit without the technology and industry it had created, which the narrator describes as useless:

The tractors lie about our fields; at evening
They look like dank sea-monsters couched and waiting.
We leave them where they are and let them rust

Morgan described Muir's short future-war sequence (made up of "The Horses" and six other poems in a similar vein) as "a powerful though imperfect last attempt by Muir to speak more generally than through myth and symbol" (*Essays* 192) yet in particular shows disdain for Muir's search for "simplicity which the future was unlikely to reveal unless by a return to the past, and even the simplicity of the past is more myth than reality." (*Essays* 193) In contrast to the rusting tractors and a return to the "simplicity of the past [that] is more myth than reality" which he saw in Muir's work, Morgan's *Sonnets from Scotland* ends with civilisation rebuilt in glowing cities, the narrator of the final sonnet, "The Summons" (*CP* 457) leaving, somewhat reluctantly, for new lands: "Without fuss / we lifted off, but as we checked and talked / a far horn grew to break the people's sleep." In stark contrast to Muir's "The Horses", Morgan's work expresses a need for human self reliance and determination, rather than saviour. Again in criticism of Muir, Morgan wrote:

Muir's primitivism, returning all post-atomic mankind to an Orkney farm, not without a certain austere satisfaction, seems to me more insulting than comforting to man's restless and aspiring brain. Let your survivors tame the horses of the Moon, the dragons of Mars: I would call that hope ... Muir retreats from the wonderful challenge which the apparent menace of the scientific and political future has thrown down to us (*Essays* 193)

Whilst Morgan felt that Muir's poem dealt with "the fear that an atomic devastation would destroy not only what is physical but human values as well" (*Essays* 193), Morgan approaches the "wonderful challenge ... of the scientific and political future" and rejects the premise that the human spirit is so easily dissolved,

by asserting in the closing lines of “The Summons” (CP 457), the final poem in *Sonnets from Scotland*, that humanity will persist and that love is able to endure even great moments of devastation and change:

If it was love we felt, would it not keep,
and travel where we travelled?

Morgan’s poems of apocalypse project contemporary issues into extreme future scenarios as a way of promoting his political ideals, but they primarily rejoice in the permanence of human ingenuity and compassion. Science fiction allowed him to access the whole environment of human experience through imagined voyages into unexplored voices, spaces and times. These provided a new critical eye to various then-current and potential-future human conditions by taking them to extreme points which would not be possible through conventional means. His “whole environment” was not restricted to the here-and-now, the parochialism of the past or even his physical location, but rather the imagined spaces of the future.

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