

## D. M. Black

### *'How Shall the Race be Served?': The Life of Edwin Morgan*

ONE OF THE DEFINING THEMES of Scottishness, at any rate in Scottish eyes, is the notion of the divided self. Holy Willie, the Justified Sinner, Deacon Brodie, Jekyll and Hyde, Ronnie Laing, are all said to exemplify it. In the 1960s, Alan Jackson proposed an explanation: 'John Knox he was a bad man, / He split the Scottish mind'. Hugh MacDiarmid, characteristically contrarian, chose to celebrate dividedness, calling it 'the Caledonian antiszygy'. He is buried under the epitaph: 'I'll ha'e nae haufway hoose, but aye be whaur / Extremes meet'.

It sounds heroic. But in reality a divided self is, as Edwin Morgan might have put it, no joke. It results in a divided life—in self-suppression, secret hatreds, broken relationships, despairs and intoxications. Or its issues may be avoided, and one meets instead someone who merely seems oddly unavailable, conventional, moralistic, 'dull'.

I begin like this because very often the question one wants to ask about Morgan's poetry is: what are we to make of its variety? Some of his poems reveal warm personal feeling with a touching nakedness; others, such as the Instamatic Poems, appear to withhold feeling altogether, and inflict on the reader the rather unpleasant experience of contemplating some wretched and painful event apparently without compassion. Some, such as the Glasgow sonnets, describe misery in unflinching detail, determined it seems to make a political point; others, such as the poem about Marilyn Monroe's suicide, express powerful emotion about someone known only through the fog and hype of media stories. Others are science fiction; many are jokes; some are typographical arrangements, including one, 'Message Clear', which issues resonantly in Jesus's great affirmation: 'I am the Resurrection and the Life.' (But Morgan publicly proclaimed his dislike and rejection of Christianity.) The question, *what are we to make of all this?*, inevitably shades off into the question, *who is this guy?* Who is the person behind this enormous and extremely various output? (And I haven't even mentioned his translations, which are equal in bulk to the original work.)

Thanks to James McGonigal's excellent biography, we are now able to put all this diverse public creativity into the context of a reasonably comprehensible private life. (The facts I shall give in this essay are mostly borrowed from McGonigal.) Morgan was born in Glasgow in 1920, the only child of respectable, middle-class, church-going parents. His mother was from a family who owned a large ship-breaking business in which his father was an employee. With the exception of the years of the Second World War, he lived with his parents until the age of 42, then moved to a flat of his own a few minutes distant from them. Very soon after, they moved to live in the block adjacent to his, and his mother's sister moved into a

flat in the same block as Morgan himself. This aunt lived on for many years; at the age of 62, when Morgan received an OBE from the Queen, Aunt Myra was by his side. It was not until the age of 70 that he came out as gay (homosexual acts were officially illegal in Scotland until he was 60), so like other gay men of his generation, he suffered almost the whole of his life from the complex impact of that legislation and its accompanying social attitudes. When he died last year, aged 90, he had lived virtually all those ninety years in Glasgow.

So the life background of this far-ranging and experimental poet was in the geographical sense remarkably static. He came from the sort of family, not uncommon in the Scottish middle classes in the first half of the twentieth century, which was loving and loyal to its members, but entirely tongue-tied with regard to feelings—creating a tense politeness and emotional paralysis in its children, who found it difficult to rebel against parents who were so obviously decent and doing their best. The photographs McGonigal has included of the young Morgan remind me vividly of the man I remember from the 1960s; they suggest a sort of alert and curious, but also subdued and self-suppressing vitality, someone who would want to speak but might not dare to. By the 1960s, of course, he was already becoming well-known and was much more confident, but I recall him even then as reticent and guarded. I felt he was ill at ease with me, and perhaps I was with him, but he was a kind man, eager to encourage the young, and he gave me an excellent poem, ‘Aberdeen Train’, for a magazine, *Extra Verse*, which I edited while I was a student at Edinburgh. Many years later, when I published a *Collected Poems*, he came South to London to read at the book-launch in the Poetry Society premises at Earls Court; he reviewed it afterwards in the *Times Literary Supplement*, quite favourably but without enthusiasm. I thought perhaps he didn’t like my wish to enquire into feeling, which was so different from his own generous impulse to express, to go outward, to take things at face-value, to be always moving on eagerly to the next exciting, unforeseeable project.

Probably it was not generally known in the 1960s that he was gay, though it seems obvious now from poems such as ‘Glasgow Green’. McGonigal is illuminating about the misery of living as a gay man in Glasgow in the 1940s and 50s; for many years in his late twenties and thirties Morgan was depressed, sometimes very severely so. He was putting in long hours as a lecturer in the English department of Glasgow University, living with his parents, struggling to find a poetic voice and working hard at a translation of *Beowulf*. Sexually, there was nowhere to go but the streets and public toilets, or you had to watch for magical, furtive signals from strangers in bars and cafes; ‘Glasgow Green’ describes well the frightening masochistic excitement of the resulting obscure encounters, never quite free of the threat of violence and, of course, courting the danger of police arrest and humiliation. When the distinguished actor John Gielgud was arrested for soliciting outside a public toilet in London—a shocking scandal at

the time—it sent a ripple of fear throughout the gay community, even as far away as Glasgow.

Perhaps Morgan's depression was also connected to his decision to remain in Glasgow. When he was 20, the demands of war had dragged this home-dominated boy away from his family and put him on a troopship to Egypt. It was many years before he could use his war-time experiences in poetry, but when he did we glimpse the delight and exhilaration he had felt, to be among men of his own age, and out in the great world that fascinated him so intensely. Because the Mediterranean in 1940 was too dangerous, they travelled to Egypt by way of South Africa, and one of the moments at which Morgan's poetry touches unmistakable splendour is the account, at the start of 'The Unspoken', of approaching the Cape:

When the troopship was pitching round the Cape  
in '41, and there was a lull in the night uproar of seas and winds, and a  
sudden full moon  
swung huge out of the darkness like the world it is,  
and we all crowded onto the wet deck, leaning on the rail, our arms on  
each other's shoulders, gazing at the savage outcrop of great Africa,  
and Tommy Cosh started singing 'Mandalay' and we joined in with  
our raucous chorus of the unforgettable song,  
and the dawn came up like thunder like that moon drawing the water  
of our yearning  
though we were going to war, and left us exalted,  
that was happiness [...]

It certainly was, and in these lines Morgan conveys it with the directness and simplicity of someone who is not feeling the need to play any literary games at all. It became clear as the years went by that he had had a remarkably good experience during the War. He had joined the Royal Army Medical Corps as a stretcher-bearer (having decided to reject his initial thought that he would be a conscientious objector), and he never had to 'see action', but he was able to spend time in this strongly masculine environment and to live for four years in the Mediterranean, first in Egypt and later in Lebanon and Palestine. He had an intense 'non-physical' relationship with another soldier, Cosgrove, to whom he refers in later poems ('my closest companion that burning year on the Lebanese coast'), and clearly there were also physical affairs—highly risky but in practice tolerated with the curious sympathy that sometimes heterosexual men in all-male environments show to homosexuals. From all this liberation and possibility he returned to complete his degree at Glasgow University, and to go back to living with his kindly parents, to whom he could say nothing of what had happened to him.

In 1947, he won a scholarship to go to Oxford but refused it in order to take up a teaching post in the Glasgow University English department. This was the one moment in Morgan's life, as far as I can tell, when he had a clear opportunity to leave home by his own decision (not compelled by military call-up)—but he decided not to take it. Perhaps part of the savage depression he felt in his thirties, sometimes suicidal, was to do, not only with the emotional starvation rations he was living on, but also with the loss of the male camaraderie of the war years, and also with some degree of self-reproach for having rejected the opportunity to strike out on his own. I am saying this because the need for the splitting and multiple selves which became for a time such a feature of his poetry may have been because—unlike, say, Auden, another homosexual poet, or, more recently, Thom Gunn—Morgan couldn't bring himself to break away and found his life on a new and self-chosen basis. Instead, he stayed in Glasgow, and it was many years before the wonderful energy of that moment at the Cape would return to him.

It did, however. In 1962, significantly also the year in which he at last moved into a flat of his own, he met a wiry, dark-haired man from a working-class Irish Catholic family, two years older than himself—a man from the sort of background, as McGonigal points out, that Eddie's respectable Protestant parents would certainly not have approved of. John Scott became Morgan's lover until they quarrelled, for obscure reasons, in 1977, a year before Scott's death. The two men never lived together (Morgan needing, he said, to be alone to write) but this was for the first and only time in his life a full and committed relationship, and he was hugely strengthened by it. The collection of poems he published in 1968 he called *The Second Life*, in celebration of the new hope and energy that had aroused in him. 'The old coats are discarded. / The old ice is loosed. / The old seeds are awake.'

It is impossible not to be moved by Morgan's capacity for exhilaration. Time and again, when that note enters his poetry, his voice is suddenly loosened in relief and he speaks with a compelling music. It happens in 'Night Pillion', a poem I hadn't previously registered, which McGonigal quotes:

The shuddering machine let out its roar  
As we sprang forward into brilliant streets.  
Beyond your shoulders and helmet, the walls rose  
Well into darkness...

It happens in 'Strawberries': 'There were never strawberries / like the ones we had / that sultry afternoon / sitting on the step / of the open french window...' and so on. The voice is effortlessly communicative, the world described is alive with sensuality and feeling, the heart is at ease and full. In this mood too he finds access to metaphor that seems to rise unbidden from the dream levels of the

psyche. In 'The Unspoken' he says 'our first kiss'

was like the winter morning moon, and as you shifted in my arms  
it was the sea changing the shingle that changes it  
as if for ever (but we are bound by nothing ...

That unsought metaphor of the sea and the shingle is an image of no pretension and extraordinary grace. This is lovely writing, by any standards, and if one wants to make a claim for Morgan as a major poet it is on such passages that one can plausibly take a stand.

The liberation of the 1960s was not only sexual. By the late 1950s he had become alerted to the new currents of energy that flowed, initially, from America. He was an early supporter of Beat poets such as Allan Ginsberg and Gary Snyder (it must have been important to him that Ginsberg was gay, and not ashamed to have it known). Through the enterprising Migrant Press, run by Gael Turnbull (a Scottish doctor living in California) and Michael Shayer he had begun to discover the new avant-garde of Black Mountain poets, such as Robert Creeley and Charles Olson, and experimental British writers such as Roy Fisher. Among the latter was Ian Hamilton Finlay, then living in Fettes Row in Edinburgh.

There are certain parallels between Morgan and Finlay. Both were oddly stay-at-home, Morgan because of his family, Finlay because of his agoraphobia, which meant in the early 1960s that he was virtually confined to his Fettes Row flat. Both, from a narrow base, became extraordinary networkers, linking themselves to poets and creative artists all across the globe. And both, of course, were prodigies of creativity themselves.

Moreover both, in the early 1960s, were producing 'concrete poems', which in practice meant experimenting with typographical arrangement. In Morgan's case, this resulted in his 'emergent poems', in which some meaningful statement gradually takes form out of many preliminary hesitations (the most famous is 'Message Clear', where the statement turns out to be Christ's proclamation, 'I am the Resurrection and the Life', in which Morgan did not in fact believe). He also did playful things, like 'The Loch Ness Monster's Song', or the 'Siesta of a Hungarian Snake', which makes a visual joke using the Hungarian consonantal unit, 'sz', comic to the eye of an English-speaker. His concrete poems seem not all that distant from other sorts of verbal play like 'O Pioneers', which takes as its starting point a piece of bungled graffiti from a Victorian initiative to build the Channel Tunnel. Finlay, always charming and intensely combative, accepted Morgan as an ally in his war against the forces of reaction, but in private, I recall, his comments on Morgan's concrete work were usually ironic. (Finlay was an interesting paradox, an 'avant-garde' artist with a fastidious and classical sense of form—one could almost call him Mozartian—a world away from the omniv-

orous, omni-productive Eddie. I am slightly surprised to see the two men so strongly bracketed as they are here by McGonigal, and it may reflect a certain lack of guile on Morgan's part that he didn't recognise how ambivalent Finlay's regard for him was.)

For Finlay, 'concrete poetry' was the cause to which he devoted his life. He developed it in many directions, did some brilliant things, and was a true pioneer on a world-wide scale. For Morgan, it was just one of the many 'experimental' arrows that he was always ready to add enthusiastically to his quiver. He was excited by formal ideas, and rushed into production of work exemplifying them, but the intense meditative care that allows formal perfection to emerge (native territory for Finlay) was alien to Morgan's quick, excitable intelligence. Essentially, most of his concrete work is jokey or whimsical, sometimes very likable (I can still laugh aloud when I read 'O Pioneers'), but with none of Finlay's prickly determination to 'interrogate the medium' and to use it with precision to create beauty and emotion.

I have a parallel difficulty with the 'Glasgow Sonnets', written at great speed (ten in less than ten days in early 1972), which are earnest and massive constructions in sonnet-form portraying the world of a poverty-stricken Glasgow tenement. The impulse to write them is no doubt admirable, but they fail, in my view, on formal grounds. The material is forced energetically into the pre-established mould of the sonnet-form; much of the observation is acute (a wind 'raises the hackles' on puddles; 'roses of mould' grow on ceilings), but the form is joyless and without life; one reads them by an act of the resolute will, much as, one imagines, they were written.

The same goes for a lot of Morgan's avant-garde work, the Instamatic Poems for example. McGonigal tells us they are popular in schools, and one can see why: anyone can notice there's a mismatch between the deadpan style and the horrible or miserable events that are being described, and that is momentarily intriguing. No doubt it allows for school-teacherly expatiation on the dangers of photography and television, and of a voyeuristic take on the world. That is fair enough, and worth saying. But by what standards do we judge poems? Unless we are looking for themes to discuss in the class-room, we don't, I think, wish to spend much time with descriptions that exemplify a schizoid state of mind that is all too easy to imagine. (Here of course we reconnect with the notion of a divided mind.)

From the more personal point of view, the world-wide network of 'experimental' poetry, still slightly 'underground' in the 1960s, caused Morgan to be, as he loved to be, in constant motion. It was further supported by the links created by his ceaseless activity as a translator, particularly of Hungarian and other Eastern European poets. From the 1960s, his biography becomes largely a record of his interactions with publishers, editors and organisers of conferences, though it's clear that his mainly off-stage relationship with John Scott (and Scott's Glasgow-

Irish family, who accepted Morgan's role in Scott's life with a warm and apparently unenquiring friendliness) contributed greatly to his stability and increasing self-confidence. After some poor experiences with publishers (the Edinburgh University Press comes out particularly badly), he was lucky enough to find some good ones, notably Duncan Glen of Akros, Michael Schmidt of Carcanet (who became a close personal friend) and later Hamish Whyte of Mariscat. Michael Schmidt even became a co-creator with Morgan: he would send along a few lines of his own poetry, which Morgan would carpenter into a complete poem. Relations with a cooperative publisher are a godsend to any poet, and especially to one so various and innovative as Morgan. His niceness, wide learning, and boyish enthusiasm made him an attractive and non-threatening colleague, and he became a much-loved figure on the poetry reading circuit and in schools. A retiring, bookish man, he loved these chances to be popular and in the lime-light. (I have found it difficult, writing this review, to call him Morgan and not Eddie, the easy, friendly name by which he was universally known. McGonigal includes an enchanting photograph of him at 56, reading under the dart-board in a hotel in Durham, demurely delighted by the lively response he's receiving.)

In many ways, the 1960s were Morgan's era. In addition to the new sexual freedom, there was a warm attitude, widespread though by no means universal, towards experiment and playfulness, and an excited sense of the future that now beckoned after half a century of world war and economic stringencies. Students with little idea of what they were talking about looked forward to 'the Revolution', preferring not to know too much about the reality of the Soviet and Chinese histories they obscurely had in mind. The true immorality of the Vietnam war seemed to confirm a general picture in which 'the young' knew better than their parents. Marshall McLuhan enthused about the 'global village'. Yet even in the 1960s themes that would dominate the later part of the century were becoming audible: Rachel Carson, Frazer Darling and others were already warning of ecological disaster, and the terrible dangers of a war involving nuclear weapons were vividly present to us. Even then, to be eagerly enthusiastic about future developments in science and technology, as Morgan was, seemed at risk of naivety.

The question, for him as for many who achieved success in that remarkable decade, was how to develop beyond it. I was interested that McGonigal records Morgan as saying that, after so much excitement, the 1970s were 'a blank' in his memory, although in reality during that time he was very active, published a great deal, and had a growing reputation. Perhaps it seemed like a blank because for a long time he couldn't find a way to deepen his work. The curious episode of *Scottish International*, a journal created at the end of the 60s with generous backing from the Scottish Arts Council and with a Board that included both Peter Butter and John McQueen (Professors of English Literature at Glasgow and Edinburgh Universities respectively), is instructive. Morgan was one of its initial

troika of editors (along with Robert Garioch and Bob Tait); later he and Garioch acted as ‘advisers’ to Tait as the main editor. The journal produced its first issue with considerable fanfare in 1968, and by 1974 had collapsed in disarray. The full story is still unclear, but it seemed to symbolize the failure of hope that the energy of Scottish writing in the 1960s contained the potential to found a substantial and coherent future.

After the death of John Scott, Morgan’s personal life again becomes obscure. He retired from his academic career at Glasgow University in 1980, but his poetic career continued and was rewarded by a string of honours. He kept up a remarkably high level of production well into his eighties. In 1999 he was appointed Poet Laureate of Glasgow, and in 2004 of Scotland (‘Scotland’s Makar’, a title he disliked because he thought it sounded old-fashioned). He was increasingly treated with something approaching veneration within Scotland, and was widely respected outside it. Rather as John Ashbery has done, in old age he moved on from ‘experimentation’ in all its forms, and wrote mostly in a pleasant, fluent manner, easy to understand and appreciate. Of his many publications in his eighties I have read *Cathures* (2002), *The Play of Gilgamesh* (2005) and *A Book of Lives* (2007), all published in attractive editions by Carcanet. The two poetry collections both contain work of a high standard. *Cathures* includes ‘Nine in Glasgow’, a series of monologues by Pelagius, Merlin, George Fox, etc, all people it is possible to connect with Glasgow (‘Cathures’ is an old name for the city), all interesting and written in a lively style. ‘The Pink Triangle: Homosexuals’, part of ‘The Trondheim Requiem’ is a moving description of the fate of homosexuals under the Third Reich. ‘Sunset’ conveys a mood touchingly evocative of old age:

Dear light of evening, breaking through  
 To where I stand in dark review  
 Of things to come, and things undone  
 That should be done, if I have won  
 Any remission for good intent,  
 Stay with me while your gold is sent—

—which is clearly a prayer. One of the odder of Morgan’s attitudes was his consistent hostility to religion. Often, as here, his practice contains an unmistakably religious tonality, and he identifies very naturally with figures like Pelagius or Columba from Christian history. McGonigal tells us that when he wrote his three plays about the life of Jesus, Morgan was surprised to find himself in tears when he reached the Last Supper. But he had accepted early on the cult of science and Enlightenment rationality, no doubt influenced by MacDiarmid as well as by the generally socialist spirit of post-war Glasgow, and this resulted in a rather programmatic rejection of religion and of any doubts one might feel about

the onward march of science and technology towards the ‘mastery of nature’. Morgan’s work would be profounder, in my view, if he had been more able to acknowledge the real ambiguity of these positions.

In an excellent sequence, ‘Planet Wave’, in *A Book of Lives*, he includes a section on the bombing of the Twin Towers, in which he says, in a way somewhat reminiscent of Auden, that he will become ‘very cross’ if anyone suggests that the Twin Towers were ‘arrogant’. ‘There is a soaring thing’, he says grandly, ‘you will never stamp or stunt into the earth’. One wants to ask: ‘OK, but is that “soaring thing” best expressed by creating enormously tall buildings?’ The question has clearly occurred to him as well, but he crossly refuses to entertain it.

His play about Gilgamesh is an impressive piece of work, well-imagined and very readable. But it fails, I think, to quite find an overall direction. He becomes preoccupied by the nature of Gilgamesh’s relation to Enkidu—is this, he asks in the introduction, the ‘oldest gay poem in the world?’—and misses what I take to be the more fundamental theme of the myth, the need of the omnipotent adolescent male to come to terms with the fact that he lives on a ladder of generations. Women are a threat to Gilgamesh, not because he’s gay, but because sex with a woman would result in the birth of the next generation, who are destined to usurp his place on the ladder and push him on towards the unthinkable future of ageing and death. Morgan makes the relationship with Enkidu sexual, and then in a vivid scene has Enkidu die of an unnamed ‘virus’ that can only put the modern reader in mind of *Aids*. After Enkidu’s death, the energy seems to go out of the play; the rest of the story, the meeting with Urshanabi, the history told by the immortal Ziusura, the loss of the rejuvenating herb and the return to Uruk, are all despatched in a single efficient but rather perfunctory final Act.

Coming to terms with ageing is one of the inevitable themes of this biography. McGonigal knew Morgan well in the last decades of his life, and he gives a moving portrait of Morgan’s sadness at not having children, and his continuing interest in and support for a number of younger writers, including McGonigal himself and others such as Hamish Whyte. Following Scott’s death in 1978, in a somewhat separate part of his life, Morgan developed and maintained relations with a number of men, who are referred to only by first-name-plus-initial—working-class Scots, it seems, with whom Morgan carefully maintained relationships over periods of many years. As McGonigal points out, the demotic Scots-language in which some of his poems continued to be written was no doubt the language that was alive for him in some of these relationships.

If we ask the question I implicitly asked at the start of this essay, about the extent to which Morgan’s varied styles represent psychological splits, I am inclined to think that, after all, he need not be added to the list of Scotland’s seriously ‘divided selves’. Gay men growing up in the mid-century in Scotland necessarily found tricks of concealment, and the ‘avant-garde’ offered an envi-

ronment in which creativity could be engaged in without too much awkward self-revelation and without having to decide exactly how serious one was about what one was writing. But even in the earlier poems, and certainly in the later ones, we also meet a contrasting voice, that tells of emotion with impressive frankness and shows little need to conceal itself, and the emotion we meet is warm and understandable. If what I call his programmatic enthusiasm for the future, and for novelty, had in part the function of avoiding some more complicated feelings of sadness and apprehension that might have enriched the poetry, who is to say that it didn't also play an essential role in supporting him in those many years of productive and energetic life in which he was able to contribute so greatly?

One additional thought: Morgan was a member of that outstandingly talented first generation of Scottish poets following MacDiarmid, which included Robert Garioch, Sorley MacLean, Norman MacCaig, Tom Scott, Iain Crichton Smith, George Mackay Brown and Ian Hamilton Finlay. It's a most impressive list (and I could make it longer without departing from excellence, but these are the poets, I think, who made the largest impact). Each of them stayed in or returned to Scotland, each was a most talented poet, and each was extremely idiosyncratic. They can't be described as a 'school'; it's truer to call them a somewhat straggling 'generation', born between 1909 and 1921 (with Crichton Smith as a statistical outlier, born in 1928). Morgan outlived them all, and it will be some time before his achievement, and theirs, can be seen in proper perspective. We should be very grateful to James McGonigal for this thoughtful, generous and illuminating biography, and it would be an excellent thing if some Scottish publisher would commission similar biographies, or perhaps a single volume containing rather shorter biographies, for the entire group.