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Edwin Morgan and the Two Cultures

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An enduring cliché postulates that the realms of the sciences and the humanities are inevitably polar opposites. Despite efforts by such esteemed figures as C. P. Snow, in his *Science and the Two Cultures*, students of these two areas of knowledge are still regarded by many, perhaps most, as unable to communicate with each other, much less share their perceptions and modes of operation. Andrew Schmookler in his *Parable of the Tribes* provides a good example of this attitude:

> No matter how great a poem is, it is not so structured as to make it suitable for intellectual system building. Newton could stand on the shoulders of giants (and Einstein in turn on Newton's), but who stood on Shakespeare's?
>
> The logic of reason is an objective logic. The relationships it manipulates inhere in the objects of the external world. Compare $E = mc^2$ with "My love is like a red, red rose." Each employs a kind of logic to state an equivalence. But the relationship in Burns' formulation has a validity inseparable from the realm of the poet's own experience, whereas Einstein has said something objectively valid, regardless of human experience.[1]

That such declarations are clearly simplistic doesn't seem to disturb those who hold them, despite the constant evidence that poets, as well as other writers, are indeed almost always highly aware of predecessors and often consciously build

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[1]Andrew Schmookler, *Parable of the Tribes: The Problem of Power in Social Evolution* (Boston, 1984), p. 195.

off of or in reaction to other poets, and many would contend that, as far as "progress" is concerned, science spawns at least as many ills as goods in the resulting technology. However, leaving the issue of progress aside, because it is perpetually moot since indefinable, modern poets are every bit as likely as scientists or engineers to pursue and incorporate changes derived from science and technology, since scientific logic is native to the twentieth-century landscape and art inevitably extrudes from contemporary terrain. While it is true that a poem still, as always, extends a different and more personal pleasure to a reader than the joy found in solving a *New York Times* Double-Crostic, modern poets do sometimes exhibit a combination of objective logic (like the puzzle) and internal experience.

Edwin Morgan is an excellent example, particularly during the periods of his career when he was attempting "concrete," "emergent," "instamatic," and science-fiction poetry. Take for example the emergent poem "Message Clear," written in 1965,[2] so called because the basic sentence generating the entire poem "emerges" in the last line:

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      am                i                                1.
                                             if           2.
  i am                              he                    3.
       he r              o                                4.
       h      ur     t                                    5.
       the re                  and                        6.
       he        re           and                         7.
       he re                                              8.
    a                     n    d                          9.
       the r                        e                    10.
  i am     r                             ife             11.
                       i n                               12.
             s       ion and                             13.
  i                         d      i e                   14.
     am    e res    ect                                  15.
     am    e res    ection                               16.
                       o              f                  17.
          the                       life                 18.
                       o              f                  19.
     m     e            n                                20.
           sur e                                         21.
          the                 d      i e                 22.
  i          s                                           23.
             s    e t     and                            24.
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i  am the    sur          d                          25.
   a  t   res    t                                    26.
                    o              life               27.
i  am  he r                           e               28.
i  a            ct                                     29.
i        r   u      n                                 30.
i    m   e   e      t                                 31.
i                  t              i  e                 32.
i           s      t    and                           33.
i  am th              o        th                      34.
i  am     r                a                           35.
i  am the    su       n                               36.
i  am the    s        on                              37.
i  am the    e    rect on        e   if               38.
i  am     re          n      t                         39.
i  am        s            a            fe             40.
i  am        s    e    n      t                        41.
i     he  e              d                            42.
i     t e   s      t                                   43.
i          re         a d                             44.
   a  th  re         a d                               45.
   a       s    t on        e                         46.
   a  t  re          a d                               47.
   a  th  r        on        e                         48.
i          resurrect                                   49.
                         a        life                50.
i  am             i n            life                 51.
i  am     resurrection                                52.
i  am the resurrection and                            53.
i  am                                                 54.
i  am the resurrection and the life³                  55.
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Although what this poem depicts is a highly subjective narrative of the cruci-
fixion, the immediate effect of the poem is technological. It has a binomial
appearance, as letters appear to sweep onward into the same letters in the same
linear position in the next line or two, like a flow chart or computer language.
The whole thing seems mechanical in construction, spliced together by ma-

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chine logic. Even the vocabulary exudes a mechanical abstruseness, suggesting the kinds of choices that disregard standard usage: "sion" (*l.* 13) is usually spelled "Zion"; a surd is an arcane word meaning an irrational number such as the square root of two, but here the word is used to suggest irrationality in general, or in another meaning, the voicelessness of the speaker; Ra and Thoth, here tossed in without a context, are ancient Egyptian deities.

However, the visual dissociation of the word parts has its own semiotics beyond vocabulary; when we unite the words into normal form, we lose the additional meaning. So we should read it the way it is written, and aloud. It is not an easy task, but the poem can, and must, be read with the words distorted in the exact way each appears. We must pause at length between "am" and "i" (*l.* 1) and slur out "h ur   t" (*l.* 5). Only then do we hear/feel the extreme doubt in the first and the physical pain in the second. It is a cliché that the sound is as important as the sense of words in a poem. That is of course true here also, but with additional meaning supplied by the dislocation of word parts into new phonemes. We know from the complete words that the speaker is wounded four times—"there and/ here and/ here [the three nails used in the crucifixion] and/ there" (*ll.* 6-10)—but it is only from the spacing of letters that we realize that the fourth time, in its elongated agony, is by far the worst wound (from the spear in Christ's side):

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a                      n    d
    the r                        e                    (ll. 9-10)
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The final "e" is a quick gasp, only heard in an oral rendering.

With the correct reading the mental turmoil and physical experience become apparent and now exist as more than intellectual abstractions. With the erratic spacing, Morgan has turned a pain noted into a pain felt. By this experiential level, the poem avoids being just another version of the crucifixion of Christ, perhaps somewhat original because told in first-person narrative. With proper reading, the story line becomes secondary to a more universal experience of evolution from self-doubt to confidence, and it is that emotional and spiritual evolution that is the real story, communicated here through the typography. As the speaker becomes less racked and more certain of himself and his mission, the fragments of the poem begin to cohere, words begin to solidify, and ordering agents such as rhythm and rhyme put in appearances. We move from the excruciating "am   i" of the first line to the "i am" (*l.* 54) of the next to the last line. In other words, as the speaker achieves wholeness and mission, so do the typography and the grammar, and so does our experience of both poem and speaker. Verbs of being in the initial lines signal a focus on existence, on life and death, on self alone. Then we feel the effort of the narrator's attempt to turn the situation around in the almost whole, action verbs—"r u   n" (*l.* 30), "m   e e   t" (*l.* 31), "t   i e" (*l.* 32) and especially "s   t   and" (*l.* 33), in which, if read aloud, the placement of the letters con-

tains the very difficult action of getting up and leads to "the e   rect on   e" (*l.* 38) a few lines later. The last third of the poem resumes verbs of being, but now they suggest a growing spiritual essence and activism rather than the physical existence the speaker has left behind.

It is true that the entire poem is drawn out of the letters of the last, quite famous Biblical line, "I am the resurrection and the life" (John 11:25), and one of the organizing conventions of the poem is that all letters in the same vertical column must be like the letter (or space) in that column in the last line. Yet the last line is emphatically not the message of the poem. The *struggle* to achieve that ultimate serenity is the message, along with the poem's struggle to com-municate that struggle to us, all of which can be found almost exclusively in the physical presence of the poem on the page: the hesitation in "am   i" (*l.* 1), the pain in "h   ur   t" (*l.* 5), and the difficulty in "i   re   a d" (*l.* 44). And what he reads sounds ominous and reverberatory beyond denotations of the words, beyond even their normal unstretched heavy sounds: "s   t on   e" (*l.* 46), "t re   a d" (*l.* 47), and "th r   on   e" (*l.* 48). Even when the narrator finally begins to speak in whole words, he still fumbles among them a while, sifting and shifting the meaning in a miniature of the en-tire poem's progress from self to spirit: "i   resurrect / a   life" (*ll.* 49-50) (his own) to "i am   resurrection" (*l.* 52) (resurrection incarnate, his own and everyone else's) to the swift run-on of "and / i am" (*ll.* 53-54). Only now does he exist fully. He is transcendent existence itself. When he began this last run of lines, he was in the process of resurrection, of fulfillment. By the end of the run, he has finished and so can make his triumphal assertion, the solitary "i am" (*l.* 54), which is aggressively not spaced and appears alone on this line as the most emphatic fragment in the poem. The better known, historical last line is almost a quiet afterthought by comparison. Subject and stylistics are wedded here, and the subject is the struggle against despair. Robin Hamilton asks if the final line generates the poem or is generated by it,[4] but the answer is neither: historically the final line precedes the poem by two millennia, but experientially that line is only an echo of the poem's labors.

The more local, historical subject, the crucifixion, does anchor but does not limit the poem. In all the diversity of subject matter and style in his poetry, Morgan usually has a distinctly circumscribed focus: a particular news event, a place, a specific spot or incident, usually in Glasgow, the site of many of his works. However, Morgan, whatever his use of local color or historical event, is an international figure: his translations of authors from Russian, French, Latin and Czech have been lauded; he readily admits to influence from Brazil-

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[4]Robin Hamilton, *Science and Psychodrama: The Poetry of Edwin Morgan and David Black* (Somerset, 1982), p. 43. Henceforth Hamilton.

ian, German, and Russian poets.[5]   Further, despite a firm base in Scottish language, in which he has written and to and from which he has translated, his subject matter has been enduringly far-flung, from Middle Eastern war zones to other planets in the galaxy. So we have here a poet keenly aware of both tradition and contemporary mores and styles. In fact the rapid evolution of his interests parallels the lightning speed of the modern evolution of science and technology. Both he and it emphasize progress and newness. What Hamilton says about Morgan's science fiction and concrete poetry could as well be said about a number of other types of poems he has composed, that they "all celebrate the lyricism of science through the mutation of language" (Hamilton, p. 38).

     More to the point, his poems do transcend the immediate situation, and that is a hallmark of excellence. Should a reader of "Message Clear" be a Christian, or at the very least religious? Certainly the poem draws its material from Biblical gospel: the "son" of God (*l.* 47), the "stone" (*l.* 46) rolled in front of the tomb's entrance, the "tread" (*l.* 47) of the women on the path to the tomb, the "throne" (*l.* 48) of God, along with "sion" (*l.* 13) and the four wounds on Jesus's body. These references are oblique, as God and Christ are never actually named, nor are the nails or the spear used in the wounding. The text can be very indirect indeed: does the fateful expression "the die is set" (*ll.* 22-24) refer to the gambling of the soldiers at the base of the cross? Again, the soldiers themselves are never mentioned, yet we feel fairly safe in surmising the presence of these figures and items although we see them here only inferentially. Or in terms of the first-person point of view, "the die is set" (punning on "die") might mean the finality of the narrator's physical death, which does seem to occur at the end of this sentence, after which the tone of the narration begins definitely to lift: "o life I am here" (*ll.* 27-28). Or could the line more slyly refer perhaps to a typesetter's die and the unusual typography of the poem itself; or might this be an aesthetic reference to printing, suggesting the finality of the poem's printed form, which precludes further revision, a death of the poem's evolution, so "die" in both senses?

     In other examples, the "thread" (*l.* 45) mentioned could be the actual shroud in which Jesus was wrapped or it could be more figuratively the thread of destiny, a reference that harkens to the Greek three female Fates. The awareness of both personal and general fortunes shows the broad overview that the narrator has now achieved, no longer trapped in his own suffering. In another instance, "i am the sun" (*l.* 36) may only repeat the subsuming of pagan gods into the new divinity of Christ, since Ra is the Egyptian god of the sun

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[5]Edwin Morgan, *Essays* (Manchester, 1974), pp. 27-34, 62-64, henceforth *Essays*; Robert Crawford and Hamish Whyte, eds., *About Edwin Morgan* (Edinburgh, 1990), p. 6. Henceforth Crawford and Whyte. Edwin Morgan, "Two Interviews," with Marco Fazzini, *Studies in Scottish Literature*, 29 (1996), 48. Henceforth Fazzini.

and "I am the son" (*l*. 37) (of God) immediately follows; or we may take the sun here as the traditional symbol of enlightenment and reason, now putting "at rest" (*l*. 26) the earlier irrationality of the "surd" (*l*. 25). "Message Clear" resonates with this kind of referential possibility, yet without losing the vivid focus of the immediate physical situation. Possible meanings radiate insubstantially from a core of seemingly rigid and solid typography. Joseph Campbell, that inspired student of mythology and culture, once described poetry as "a language that has to be penetrated."[6] "Message Clear" invites exactly such penetration by offering a hard yet permeable format through which one is invited to move in several directions but always into a more flexible, organic meaning. By the end the mundane facts of pain and the mechanical appearance have become the means of spiritual transcendence, yet not at the expense of the physical. Indeed, Morgan criticizes poets like Edwin Muir for moving "so quickly into the abstract...his poetry does not always fully 'earn' the mythology it presents."[7] The mechanical structure is thus both a challenge, because difficult to approach, and an invitation to move beyond the quotidian.

The lack of direct naming is entirely appropriate to the form of non-vocalized dramatic monologue that we have here. The narrator is thinking to himself and has no need to explain things that are visceral and familiar to him ("him" because of "son" (*l*. 37), which is the only hint of gender aside from the inferred historical context). We all think in shorthand. However, this nebulousness and displacement of specific historical and religious names and events has the additional advantage of shifting the stress of the poem away from history and religion and toward the internal, personal evolution of the speaker. The subjective experience of the man, limited initially and in sonorous triumph later, is the emphasis. That experience is a very human growth from pain, through efforts at assertion and hope, to confidence and peace; from an ineffectual egocentricity (the self-pity of the first twenty lines, as in "i die a mere sect" (*ll*. 14-15), for example) to a calm fatalism ("sure the die is set" (*ll*. 21-24) to a growing sense of action ("i act / i run" (*ll*. 29-30)) to the development of a feeling of purpose and power ("i am thoth/ i am ra/ i am the sun/ i am the son" (*ll*. 34-37)) to a turning outward toward a mission to assist other people ("i heed/ i test" (*ll*. 42-43)) to a sense of transcendent purpose incarnate ("i am resurrection" (*l*. 452)). The evolving series of emotions has a historically religious context, yet clearly one does not have to be religious for this process to have import. Even the concept of resurrection could be taken in a more personal, spiritual sense, non-literally. What the poem offers is a universal human

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[6]Joseph Campbell, "Joseph Campbell and the Power of Myth," TV interview with Bill Moyers, Oct. 27, 1998.

[7]Edwin Morgan, *Crossing the Border: Essays on Scottish Literature* (Manchester, 1990), pp. 213-20.

experience made physical. It is not limited by historical time and place. Morgan likes to use oblique Christian elements in an incidental manner while not himself much of an orthodox believer, preferring to focus on the humanity of situations;[8] and Morgan himself notes his absorption of Christian imagery—but not Christian belief—in his childhood.[9] Of course a reader who is religious, particularly Christian, would find additional personal significance in the implied recalling of the pivotal Christian event. The religious implications of the poem are, if you will, a bonus for receptive individuals, but the religious implications are not strict requirements for participation in this poem.

So the poem's technological appearance is deceptive, for it both conceals and reveals strong emotion and spirit. It is, as Ian Gregson notes, "a defamiliarising vision"[10] that challenges us with its alien stuttering, but this apparent fragmentation then pushes us to new levels of experience. However, there we can see the danger of borrowing a technological façade for the poem for those who, like the first readers in the *TLS*, saw only the bizarre, machine-like features of the poem and were misled into thinking of it as a code to be broken. So they did not attempt the distorted reading that the poem demands, assuming the spacing to be arbitrarily required by coordination of all the lines with the last one. One respondent wrote archly: "Sir—May I congratulate Edwin Morgan on typing 'I am the resurrection and the life'—after fifty-four unsuccessful attempts?"[11]   Jack Bevan's letter reflected a more dedicated assault on the poem, but was equally wrong-headed, asking "if this is really a poem" and finding that the work "has no linguistic reverberations, merely a visual presence" that "could not be perpetuated vocally, or in the memory" (*TLS*, 20 Jan. 1966, 43). That last remark was particularly unfortunate, since Morgan himself ardently champions the auditory component of poetry and does vocalize as he composes (Fazzini, pp. 46-7), and he applies that emphasis on vocalization to his concrete poetry as well:

> But it was interesting doing this [reading concrete poetry aloud in public] and just seeing what could be done with the actual speaking voice in perhaps transforming written poetry into something that could be spoken....visual poems, or concrete poems in that sense, the sense of being visual, nearly always do also involve some

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[8]Letter; cf. Geddes Thompson, *The Poetry of Edwin Morgan* (Aberdeen, 1986), p. 23 for a discussion of the poem "Trio." Henceforth Thompson.

[9]Edwin Morgan, *Nothing Not Giving Messages: Reflections on Work and Life*, ed. Hamish Whyte (Edinburgh, 1990), pp. 134-5, 207-8. Henceforth *Messages*.

[10]Ian Gregson, "Edwin Morgan's Metamorphoses," *English*, 39 (1990), 151.

[11]Arnold Hyde, letter, *TLS*, 20 Jan. 1966, p. 43.

> kind of word-play, play on sounds or play on forms of words or play on the order
> and juxtaposition of words (*Messages*, p. 23).

Unfortunately these early readers' reactions regarded "Message Clear" as a graphic design only, oblivious to the linguistic and emotional components embedded in the print.

Fortunately two weeks later "Message Clear" found a champion who attacked the earlier erroneous comments by pointing out that careful reading reveals an easy, repetitive sentence pattern except for some rather long, dangling introductory phrasings in the second sentence (which are by the way, appropriate to the narrator's current tentativeness). This reader, Heather Bremer, does also note the rhythm, rhyme, and alliteration in the second half of the story. She proposes further, quite correctly, that "the purpose of the 'design' surely is to suggest the fragmentation and fumbling search—infinite trial and error, perhaps—before finally the Message IS Clear" (*TLS*, 3 Feb., 1966, p. 83). Indeed, the growing assurance of the speaker does coincide with our growing understanding of the poem, so, yes, the message does slowly become clearer to us too, as if we were trying to tune in a faraway station on the radio, catching only snippets of sound at first but gradually succeeding in stabilizing the garbled voice. As proof of the poem's coherence, Bremer also submitted a version of the poem written out in whole sentences, for which she rightly apologizes by admitting that "much of what Mr. Morgan was trying to do is lost in such a 'translation,'" as has already been noted. Additionally lost would be R. S. Edgecombe's appealing concept of the poem's visual fragmentation as evoking a sense of an ancient defective papyrus, appropriate to the setting.[12]

Bremer was unable to understand lines 15-16, which were clarified a week later by a letter from Morgan himself; she should not feel embarrassed, since Robin Fulton misreads these lines the same way in a later critical study,[13] and a more recent critic, Roderick Watson, also ignores Morgan's comments, preferring "am ere sect" (*l.* 15) to "a mere sect" as "implying that the truth of Christ is always prior to sectarian disputes."[14] Unfortunately that resounding interpretation violates the narrator's immediate frame of mind and circumstances. Even without the support of the author himself, reading the lines as "a mere sect / a mere section" (*ll.* 15-16) more clearly fits the miasma of despair and failure into which the narrator has sunk at this point, as he has managed to

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[12]R. S. Edgecombe, "The Poetry of Edwin Morgan," *Dalhousie Review*, 62 (1993), 673.

[13]Robin Fulton, "Edwin Morgan," *Contemporary Scottish Poetry: Individuals and Contexts* (Loanhead, 1974), p. 35.

[14]Roderick Watson, "Edwin Morgan: Messages and Transformations," *British Poetry from the 1950s to the 1990s: Politics and Art*, eds. Gary Day and Brian Docherty (New York, 1997), pp. 175-6.

collect, for all his effort, only a handful of disciples and lacks any faith in the spread of his message. "Am ere sect / am ere section" (*ll*. 15-16) (Bremer, Fulton, and Watson's reading) suggests that the narrator is predicting schismatic activity in some future church, but he is at this juncture totally focused on his present situation and incapable of such thinking into the distance. The second alignment simply doesn't fit contextually into the narrator's initial absorption with self.

Nor is arbitrary distortion sufficient for Morgan's purposes. Bremer needs to go further. Any kind of visual word disruption would have been sufficient to convey the concept of a garbled message. Morgan's distortions are much more specific on the one hand, conveying the number and severity of the wounds, the degree of effort in physical actions like standing, the lessening degree of doubt and growth of confidence. At the same time the distorted typography's evolution into coherence is not simply a delivery system for the last line but, as already noted, communicates rather an intense portrayal of a physical, emotional, and spiritual struggle with which a reader can readily identify.

What is obvious is that none of the *TLS* correspondents read the poem aloud the way it appears on the page. They treated it scientifically with rational experimentation, attempting either to ignore or to solve its distortions, rather than cooperating with the unusual typography and so letting the poem come alive. They chose to treat the poem as a structure assembled from what Virginia Woolf once called the "orts, scraps, and fragments"[15] of reality, that is, as something to be picked apart and intellectualized. They did not know, of course, that Morgan himself asserts that the abstract construction of concrete poetry not only should include social and psychological (human) values, but that it cannot avoid doing so (*Essays*, pp. 19-25).

In other words, the division between science and art may be due not so much to the artists, since artists like Morgan are clearly trying to incorporate science into the humanism of their art, but to readers who are trying to convert this art to pure scientific method, forgetting that there still must be humanistic layers enfolded in the technology. Morgan's poem may have a computer-generated appearance—and he does believe that the international flowering of concrete poetry in the 1950s was inspired by the development of computers (Fazzini, pp. 47-8)—but that mechanical shredding of language exists solely for the purpose of better revealing a human experience. In fact, "Not Playing the Game" by Morgan specifically warns against treating poetry as some kind of mind game:

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[15]Virginia Woolf, *Between the Acts* (New York, 1941), pp. 188, 215.

Although a poem is
undoubtedly a 'game'
it is not a game

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and we'll not play that. (*Poems*, p.270)

Critics like Alan Bold who dismiss Morgan as "technically a clever writer whose poems engage the reader's intellect rather than his emotion" and as having "very little tender human contact between people"[16] should reconsider.

Although "Message Clear" has specific religious allusions, the circumstances around the creation of the poem substantiate the poem's focus on emotional, humanistic evolution, for Morgan composed the poem following a wrenching hospital visit to his father, who was terminally ill with cancer.[17] We don't need this biographical information to understand the poem—the typography carries the triumph over anguish—but the real-life context does reinforce the richness of the poem's human experience. The first two *Times* correspondents dismissed "Message Clear" as frivolous: would they have done so had they known the immediate situation that led to the poem's creation? If we don't have facts such as these about a poem we read, we don't miss them. If we do have such facts, however, we cannot imagine regarding the poem in question without them, for they have instantly become a part of the total landscape of the poem. In this case external facts guarantee the humanity of the poem behind the technological veneer.

"Message Clear" comes under the heading of "concrete poetry," that is, poetry that depends on visual image as well as linguistic and auditory sense. Morgan was influenced, or perhaps one should say inspired, in this regard by his awareness of Brazilian and East European concrete poets,[18] thus providing an obvious refutation, one of many possible, to Andrew Schmookler's contention mentioned at the beginning of this discussion that artists and writers do not build on their predecessors while scientists do. "Message Clear" qualifies as concrete poetry because it visually suggests the digital quality of computer communication. Indeed, given Morgan's admitted fascination with science and technology (*Messages*, p. 24) and his use of the computer as subject matter in other poems (for example, "The Computer's First Christmas Card," "The

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[16]Alan Bold, *Modern Scottish Literature* (London, 1983), p. 79.

[17]Letter; also W. N. Herbert, "Morgan's Words," in Crawford and Whyte, p. 73.

[18]Kevin McCarra, "Edwin Morgan: Lives and Works," in Crawford and Whyte, p. 6; Robyn Marsack, "A Declaration of Independence: Edwin Morgan and Contemporary Poetry," in Crawford and Whyte, pp. 29-30; Angus Calder, "Morganmania," *Chapman*, 64 (1991), 41-45.

Computer's Second Christmas Card," and "Computer Error: Neutron Strike"), it is easy to suspect that he used an actual computer in sorting out the permutations and combinations of letters from "I am the resurrection and the life" (*l.* 55). Did he have a computer compile a list of extracted words from which he could then compose his poem? Ironically, we have here a case of human agency going to great lengths to emulate a machine; no computer was employed—only Morgan's nimble brain.[19] Would the experience of the poem be any less authentic if a computer had been used as an aid in its composition? Some artists do believe that technology and poetry are mutually exclusive and that computer usage adversely affects the essence of poetry itself,[20] but given Morgan's championing of science, change, and newness against history and tradition,[21] he is certainly not of that number. Again, perhaps the only difference in the case of "Message Clear" is not in the poem itself but in the reader's attitude: doesn't the technological appearance of the composition add an aura of daring, of avant-garde, to the poem, making it more or less attractive depending on the reader's own artistic conservatism or liberality?

Perhaps the suggestion of technology in the poem's appearance is enough. The earliest modern concrete poems depended on the technology of their day, that is, on paintings and photographs, as in Apollinaire's "calligrammes," where words are structured to show objects such as a fountain or bird. Later examples, say in e e cummings, distort language via the typewriter, including spacing and punctuation, to suggest movement and emotion instead of overt representation of an object. So now Morgan alludes to the computer whether he explicitly employs it or not. As he notes, science and technology are part of our lives, and everything in our lives is the subject of art:

> Although it's very, very difficult and perhaps in some ways impossible, I would hope that poetry would at least keep nibbling at this problem and try to present in its words a world that includes science and scientific ideas (*Messages*, p. 32).

Elsewhere he reaffirms his commitment to fusing scientific and humanistic cultures in a positive way:

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[19]Letter.

[20]Louis Simpson, "Poetry and Word Processing: One or the Other, but Not Both," *New York Times Book Review* 3 Jan. 1988, p. 12.

[21]*Messages*, pp. 34-5; Robert Crawford, "'to change / the unchangeable'—The Whole Morgan," in Crawford and Whyte, pp. 18-19.

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.[22]

Morgan further asserts his

interest in science as well as the arts. [...] I never thought there should be a split between the famous two cultures (*Messages*, p. 104).

It is crucial that "Message Clear" be a dramatic monologue (always one of Morgan's favorite approaches anyway) since only that form will allow the extreme intimacy necessary to counterbalance the mechanical forms and conventions that obtrude immediately on a reader's consciousness. The monologue asserts the validity of the emotions. This is a live happening, almost as in Morgan's experimental "instamatic" poems, only, unlike the pictorial objectivity of those, the experience recounted in "Message Clear" is alive inside the mind of the character as the drama unfolds second by second. It has the instamatic poem's vivid immediacy, but adds full emotional intimacy as well. To use Geddes Thompson's distinction, the instamatic poems attempt to record reality, while most of Morgan's poems, including "Message Clear," recreate reality (p. 17). At the same time the frequent irony of many dramatic monologues, in which the subject unknowingly mocks himself, as in Robert Browning's poems, has here been exchanged for full union and sympathy with the subject, for this subject is totally self-aware and in the course of the poem becomes more and more merged into a consciousness of the external world. This monologist lacks guile and self-delusion, and that directness is itself appropriate for a machine age in that computers transmit explicitly and unsubtly. The initial visual impression of disjuncture is countermanded by an emotional communication that is as blunt and open as any office e-mail.

Although the poem has an obvious religious tint, it is as easily discovered to be humanist, in fact political, as well, given the historical context. As one person, Jesus is the outsider and reformer, acting against the grain of a strictly controlled society that eventually physically crushes him. In Morgan's poem we find Jesus still filled with doubts and despair, unsure after all about his mission in life. Morgan is not postulating any new attitude here, but simply extending the extreme New Testament doubts expressed in the Garden of Gethsemane and in the slow death on the cross with "why hast thou forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:46, Mark 15:34). So Morgan's first person despair, then stabilization, then triumph over doubt are logical assumptions. So is the victory of the individual over the repressive political forces. It is a personal, internal victory of belief and hope over despair and doubt, of selfless mission over social determinism. As such, it is internal, not witnessed by those viewing

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[22]*Messages*, pp. 66, 134; cf., Fazzini, pp. 48-9.

Jesus's death, known only to himself (and presumably God)—and, thanks to Morgan's poem, to poetry readers. The socio-political structure, no matter how powerful and no matter how much control it has over life and death, cannot contain, finally, the sheer glory of the triumph of the individual spirit over the system.   Thus Morgan's poem has added psychological, emotional, and political dimensions completely apart from the potentially religious experience, making it far more inclusive than the biblical account. Morgan's stated ambition is to give voice to people, animals, and objects who otherwise do not communicate with us:

> I think a lot of my poetry is in either a straight or some disguised form of dramatic monologue, and I quite often do try to give an animal a voice, just as I might give an object a voice...just to get everything speaking as it were.... I feel the whole world is able to express something (*Messages*, p. 77).

However, this statement is far too modest considering his actual accomplishment. Here the poet's role has been to communicate a particular triumph over adversity that was not shared previously with anyone beyond the person experiencing it. This is more than just giving "voice," more even than Robert Crawford's description of Morgan as "the translator, the decoder of alien messages" (Crawford and Whyte, p. 16). This is the experience of an entire soul.

The success of this and other concrete (including emergent) poems by Morgan lies in the understanding that philosophical meaning should usually be tertiary in poetry, falling behind sensory and emotional communication. Poets and critics of various hues and stripes, from Archibald MacLeish:

> A poem should not mean
> But be.
> > "Ars Poetica"

to Mark Strand:

> Ink runs from the corners of my mouth.
> There is no happiness like mine.
> I have been eating poetry.
> > "Eating Poetry"

have long agreed on a hierarchy of importance in which physicality is preeminent. "Message Clear" would be merely clever except that its form, conventions, and distorted language comprise, not merely an ingenious experiment, but direct communication of pain and joy. In terms of form, this poem attempts to bridge the immediacy and simultaneity of the visualness of concrete poetry with the temporal and narrative features of more traditional, linear poetry (*Messages*, p. 60). The sheer humanity of the poem includes and sub-

sumes the mechanical features, resulting in a total experience that is physical, emotional, and intellectual, in that order.

So the conventions in "Message Clear" are not arbitrary forms and structures; instead, here the conventions add to the meaning and reinforce the themes. That all letters from the last line are present from the beginning of the poem and in the same order and relative position to each other gives a very solid impression that the message, much disguised and concealed, is also latent even when it seems least apparent in the suffering and the pervasive aura of failure. "I die a mere sect" (*ll.* 14-15) contains the potential for "i am the resurrection and the life" (*l.* 55).

Edwin Morgan is able to fuse such diverse elements into successful poetic unions because his talent is basically synthetic rather than analytic. He encompasses pairs of what would normally be considered opposites, and he often has obvious fun in so doing: thus "Message Clear" has a tragic story line with a happy ending; and the gradual discovery of the unusual conventions and linguistic twists is itself a source of delight. While certainly not naïve, Morgan is optimistic about the possibilities of human culture and creativity, making "the sheer spirit of happiness" his major poetic interest (Thompson, p. 22), although Hamish Whyte correctly notes that Morgan's optimism is "restless" and larded with insecurities and doubt.[23] He believes that "an artist ought to be reacting to as much of his whole environment as he genuinely can feel for and encompass," including science and technology; and he feels optimistically that the supposed evils of technology will prove to be benefits in the end.[24] Hugh MacDiarmid does not believe that Morgan has produced "a poetry to encompass the whole problem of modern life."[25] Perhaps not, but certainly Morgan confronts major questions of modern times, and he does so with verve.

Catherine Stimpson has recently postulated that the only possible hope for the survival of humanism in the hi-tech twenty-first century lies in a sense of the miraculous, by which she means "to see the ordinary natural and human world as a miraculous place" so as to "burnish humanism's delight in human creativity and creations while warning us against a posthumanistic...use of technology to flatten and organize people as if they were quantifiable data on a screen."[26] Despite the mechanical appearance and conventions of "Message Clear," the poem's allure is still through physical sensation and the evocation

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[23]Hamish Whyte, "Morgan Matters," *Scottish Poetry Library Association Newsletter*, 15 (Aug. 1999).

[24]*Messages*, pp. 64-5, 177; also Crawford and Whyte, p. 112.

[25]Hugh MacDiarmid, *The Company I've Kept* (Berkeley, 1967), p. 177.

[26]Catherine Stimpson, "Learning to See the Miraculous," *Civilization* (Oct. 1998) pp. 64-8.

of strong emotion. At the core, it fuses machine logic with the sensuousness that is a requisite for all poetry. Edwin Morgan is a syncretist who exploits a technological mind-set in order to reveal a beating human heart.

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