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## Some Early Vision Poems by Edwin Morgan

*Dies Irae* (1952), the first collection subsumed into Edwin Morgan's *Collected Poems* (1990), was published almost forty years after being written. Interviewed in 1972, Morgan observed that *The Vision of Cathkin Braes* (also published in 1952)

Always seems a bit odd...because it was meant...to be one of a pair. At the same time as I was getting that one published there was supposed to be a book of more serious poems [*Dies Irae*] being brought out by a different publisher. He went bankrupt and the poems never appeared. So it was meant to be a half of the coin, as it were.<sup>1</sup>

Conceiving *Cathkin Braes* as the antimasque of *Dies Irae*, he clearly wanted its visionary satire to spark off the vision poems in the complementary collection, and, if we bear in mind that he was working on Dunbar, Douglas and Langland at roughly the same time—"Dunbar and the Language of Poetry" appeared in 1952<sup>2</sup>—the source for *Dies Irae*'s visionary content is easily found.

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<sup>1</sup>Interview with John Schofield, in Morgan's *Nothing Not Giving Messages: Reflections on Work and Life*, ed. Hamish Whyte (Edinburgh, 1990), p. 46. Henceforth *Messages*.

<sup>2</sup>*Essays by Edwin Morgan* (Manchester, 1974), pp. 81-89. Henceforth *Essays*.

Later in his career, Morgan would become highly critical of organized religion, but the tone of the eponym, "Dies Irae,"<sup>3</sup> is difficult to gauge. Is it heartfelt spiritual autobiography or, since the poet has adapted some prosodic features of Old English verse, is its vision of judgment ironic pastiche? Whether or not he assented here to the religious tenets of the form—a form concerned with bridging physical and spiritual worlds—"Dies Irae" is best contextualized as a twentieth-century heir to the line of vision poems that stretches back to Anglo-Saxon poetry and beyond. In one Old English work, for example, *The Dream of the Rood*, a vision carries the speaker "forward in time to a scene which descriptive details clearly identify as the Last Judgment."<sup>4</sup> And *The Dream of the Rood* drew in turn on a range of Biblical and patristic precedents. Visions, it goes without saying, had been put to apocalyptic use in the books of Daniel and Revelation, and in those of the Fathers after them. Although they generally had a cosmic reach, exceptions did occur.

For example, Jerome, no doubt inspired by the account of Paul's rapture (2 Corinthians 12:1-4), gave his a personal turn: "Suddenly I was caught up in the spirit and dragged before the tribunal of the judge. Here there was so much light and such a glare from the brightness of those standing around that I cast myself on the ground and dared not look up."<sup>5</sup> This particularizes and individuates a general human fate, so fusing two classes from the Macrobian scheme of dreams, viz., the personal ("when one dreams that he himself is doing or experiencing something") and the universal ("when he dreams that some change has taken place in the sun, moon, planets, sky, or regions of the earth").<sup>6</sup> The same idea found embodiment in the spiritual autobiographies that flourished after the Reformation. Many of these personalized the graph of the Biblical narrative, as M. H. Abrams has pointed out: "[Gerrard] Winstanley's pamphlets extend the correspondence between the spiritual history of the individual and the Biblical history of mankind back from the last to the first things."<sup>7</sup> From this would eventually spring such masterpieces as Cowper's "Castaway," which seems in turn to have influenced "Dies Irae."

<sup>3</sup>Edwin Morgan, *Collected Poems* (Manchester, 1990), p. 21. Henceforth CP.

<sup>4</sup>Richard Payne, "Convention and Originality in the Vision Framework of *The Dream of the Rood*," *Modern Philology*, 73 (1976), 340.

<sup>5</sup>Jerome, *The Letters of St. Jerome*, trans. Charles Christopher Mierow (London, 1963), pp. 165-6.

<sup>6</sup>Macrobius, *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio*, trans. William Harris Stahl (New York, 1952), p. 90.

<sup>7</sup>M. H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* (New York, 1971), p. 52. Henceforth *Supernaturalism*.

If, as seems possible, Morgan had not yet sloughed the religion of his boyhood, the Calvinism of Cowper's lyric might well have provided the grit on which his longer meditation empearled itself. The differences, however, are almost as striking as the similarities. Cowper repeatedly stresses the darkness that envelops the protagonist—"Obscurest night involved the sky"<sup>8</sup> (a Protestant reworking of the dark night of the soul). Morgan, on the other hand, moves from the lightning of the outer storm to the intense radiance of its eye. Also, while both writers project a desperate loneliness, an individual rather than a society facing God's judgment full on, there is at least one first person plural pronoun in Cowper's narrative, and several references to the crew that leaves him behind:

No voice divine the storm allay'd,  
No light propitious shone;  
When, snatch'd from all effectual aid,  
We perish'd, each alone (Cowper, p. 342).

Even though we get no sense of the community from which Cowper feels exiled, he at least feels empathy with his fellow castaway. The plight of Morgan's narrator is bleaker still, for the wrecked ship is *his* (not *ours*), and so too is everything else in the long anaphoric catalogue that tolls out his isolation. This list—vanished compass, sodden clothes, lost knife, and so on—resonates ironically with the checklist in Raleigh's "Passionate Man's Pilgrimage":

My staff of Faith to walk upon;  
My scrip of Joy, immortal diet;  
My bottle of Salvation;<sup>9</sup>

But in Raleigh, suffering is posed for extinction, whereas in Morgan it is just beginning. This faint echo also stresses the allegorical undertow of "Dies Irae," an undertow equally evident in its *paysage moralisé*. Just as Cowper swivels between an actual event in Anson's diaries and Calvinist psychodrama, so Morgan shifts from an (apparently) locatable spot in the Arctic Circle to such abstractions as the sea of time, and—rather less standard—a shoreline identified with God's anger. Like many visions—Jerome's, say, or that of Er in Plato's *Republic*—it seems to dramatize a crisis in the life of the visionary.

But the generic outline of "Dies Irae" keeps wavering as documentary lines cross with symbolic ones. Like all Robinsonades (or narratives of shipwreck), it gives a circumstantial account of the speaker's plight, and how he

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<sup>8</sup>William Cowper, *Poetical Works*, ed. H. S. Milford; rev. Norma Russell (London, 1967), p. 432. Henceforth Cowper.

<sup>9</sup>Norman Alt, ed., *Elizabethan Lyrics* (1949; rpt. New York, 1960), p. 360.

plans to address it; but the details don't make for a clear dating and placing. The lost compass takes us out of the world of Anglo-Saxon mariners to a *terminus a quo* in the late Middle Ages, and the boomerang takes us further forward still, to Cook's arrival in Australia. These references to later times notwithstanding, the language of the poem—its inversions and alliterative drag—take us far away from the eighteenth-century diction of "The Castaway." Morgan's translations from the Anglo-Saxon in the same collection ("The Ruin," "The Seafarer," "The Wandered," and a handful of riddles) provide a crucial background to the bleak, allegorical remoteness of "Dies Irae." As he himself characterized it in his article on Dunbar, it is a texture related to, but at odds with, the cumbrous elegance of aureate writing:

Douglas will also supply an example of the second important development, which might be called the 'anti-aureate' style. Here the lesson of latinism was shown to have been learned: the effect of culture, of authority, of the hieratic, of clarity and resonance, which a due latinizing supplied in descriptive passages where beauty, brilliance, splendour, and pleasure were involved, gave place at other points to an equally typical effect of deliberate harshness, apparent uncouthness, surface obscurity, and greater onomatopoeic emphasis, and for this the poets had recourse to Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian rather than to Latin and French components, to the tough, concrete, and actively sensuous rather than to the tranquilly majestic, however gleaming and marmoreal (*Essays*, p. 87).

In this *color Saxonicus*, perhaps, lies the key to the poem's religious ambivalence, for Morgan himself has suggested that although *Beowulf* "has quite strongly felt Christian elements in it," it "also has a very, very strong kind of pagan undertow, and its gets its values very often, its poetic or aesthetic values, from the clash between the two."<sup>10</sup> At the same time, the Old English timbre and religious "undertow" recall a more recent precedent. Because "Dies Irae" reads at times like Cowper paraphrased by Hopkins, one suspects that "The Wreck of the Deutschland" made a contribution, especially with regard to the linguistic and experiential embodiment of divine anger:

The frown of his face  
Before me, the hurtle of hell  
Behind, where, where was a, where was a place?  
I whirled out wings that spell  
And fled with a fling of the heart to the heart of the Host.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>Interview with Robin Hamilton in 1971, in *Messages*, p. 44.

<sup>11</sup>*Poems and Prose of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, ed. W. H. Gardner (Harmondsworth, 1953), p. 13.

But once all these precedents and influences have been listed, and the pastiche dimension acknowledged, we must honor the distinctive and individual aspects of "Dies Irae." Strokes of modernity keep lightening its statuesque linguistic rituals. So, when the speaker allegorizes the rain by deleting the vehicle and cutting straight to the tenor, he suggests that the drops scour the threads off his coat, turning what might at first seem in inverted epithet into an implied adverbial phrase: "Torrents of pitilessness upon my face / Mocking my poor coat threadbare with their last" (CP, p. 21). And he also imports a dignified *color Romanus*—aureate touches at odds with an Anglo-Saxon matrix—when he uses such words as "fulgor" and "livid." This is, and is not, the language of an actual sailor, and contributes as much as anything else to the tonal, temporal and spatial mysteries of the poem.

Nowhere is this complexity more apparent than in its structure, which breaks open like a geode, revealing another level of experience within itself. Again there is a precedent, for we find the same graded, interlocking spaces in that most celebrated of visionary passages, the Ur-vision of Er: "He said that when his soul left his body it travelled in company with many others till they came to a wonderfully strange place, where there were, close to each other, two gaping chasms in the earth."<sup>12</sup> It is at this juncture of "Dies Irae" that the vision proper is brought to birth, its strangeness validated by its circumstantial surround as in many other visions before it. Langland, for example, had begun *Piers Plowman* in the same specific, locative mode: "Ac on a May morwenyin / on Maluerne hulles / Me byfel for to slepe."<sup>13</sup>

As to the vision itself, it might be worth cobbling up two more categories to add to Macrobius' typology—the *visio consolatoria* and the *visio iudicatoria*. I would apply the first to the work of mystics who, seeming to enter the presence of God, are possessed by a sense of well-being, a sense of pattern and purpose. Traherne's work is perhaps the *locus classicus* for these dream-visions of consoling order:

To see the glorious Fountain and the End,  
To see all Creatures tend  
To thy advancement, and so sweetly close  
In thy Repose.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup>Plato, *The Republic*, trans. Desmond Lee, rev. edn. (Harmondsworth, 1974), p. 448.

<sup>13</sup>William Langland, *The Vision of William Concerning Piers the Plowman in Three Parallel Texts Together with Richard the Redeless*, ed. Walter W. Skeat. 2 vols. (London, 1886), I, 3.

<sup>14</sup>Thomas Traherne, *Centuries, Poems and Thanksgivings*, ed. H. M. Margoliouth. 2 vols. (Oxford, 1958), II, 29.

So too is Henry Vaughan's: "I saw Eternity the other night / Like a great Ring of pure and endless light."<sup>15</sup> Here the speaker, like the *Virgo hodigetricia* in Orthodox icons, serenely points toward a clarification.

In contrast, Jerome and those who follow him in writing *visiones judicatoriae*, stress the idea of judgment, and gloat over the chaotic tortures of hell. Morgan's vision lies somewhere between the two. At first it offers no release, but simply internalizes the outer storm in a passage that brings Marvell to mind—"Yet it creates, transcending these, / Far other Worlds, and other Seas".<sup>16</sup> Not only is there stormy weather, but also naval warfare of an improbable, apocalyptic kind—"a million sails / Veered in a wake of blood" (*CP*, p. 22). But then, as the eye of the storm encircles the scene, a brilliant calm breaks out. This calm, according to the speaker, is "God's steadfast meditation and peace," (*CP*, p. 23). At first it fails to reassure him, for the monism of this all-encompassing gaze seems to edge out all identities beyond its own, a sensation conveyed by the spondaic dimeter lodged in the blank verse here: "God, God, God, God" (*CP*, p. 23). Nonetheless, once absorbed into a Godhead that heals the Cartesian division between subject and object, the speaker experiences a measure of peace. It fails to hold, however, and, like Caliban after dreaming that the heavens dropped fatness, or like the knight in "La Belle Dame Sans Merci," he wakes to comfortless sobriety. The spiritual recess (as in the anecdote of the admiral who dreamt of battles to the sound of a banging door) has been shaped by its external environment, and vanished like the rack of Prospero's pageant: "Clouds like the armadas of my dream / Remain" (*CP*, p. 24). After returning to more Robinsonade survivalism, Morgan tacks on an envoi that commends the poem to God—a problematic coda, given the fact that the vision has been all but demythologized.

Written after Hiroshima had redefined apocalypse as holocaust, "Stanzas of the Jeopardy" stresses the prophetic potential of the vision poem. Whereas the religious content of "Dies Irae" had gone in and out of focus, here the tone is relentlessly skeptical, recasting Pauline ideas of transfiguration "in the twinkling of an eye" (*CP*, p. 24) as burns and radiation sickness. Vision has indeed moved toward judgment, for the poem resembles the pause before the loosening of the seventh seal. Instead of transformation, as in "Dies Irae," it offers us a blanket deletion. That is the point of its catalogues—all those human and animal activities, contingently linked by an imminent end. In this it resembles Auden's "Musée de Beaux Arts," with ordinary events and the extraordinary ones taking place beside them—vision manquée, as it were. This calm, dispassionate manner contrasts with such sonnets as "The Target" and

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<sup>15</sup>Helen Gardner, ed., *The Metaphysical Poets* (Harmondsworth, 1972), p. 271.

<sup>16</sup>*The Poems and Letters of Andrew Marvell*, ed. H. M. Margoliouth, rev. Pierre Legouis and E. E. Duncan-Jones. 2 vols. (Oxford, 1971), I, 52.

“After Fallout,” published over thirty years later. The very way in which Morgan conceived them underlines the more frontal, the more impassioned cast of their prophecy:

I was lying in bed, with the light out, getting ready to go to sleep, but with the mind very active, as so often happens in that situation...and again very suddenly, and with no warning and no preparation, and with no follow-on as far as I am aware from anything I had been thinking about during the evening or seeing on television or reading, the first four rhyming lines of sonnet came strongly into my head with a great sense of urgency, and I put on the bed-light and wrote them down on the telephone pad...—I felt that if poets were prophets, as they are sometimes thought to be, this was a fearful poem to be writing. 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.<sup>17</sup>

That Morgan should be able to develop both modes of vision—the obliquely meditative and the Cassandra-confrontational—measures his immense versatility as a poet.

So dominant is the visionary mode in this early collection that it impinges even on the simple lyrics that follow “Stanzas of the Jeopardy.” Not, of course, that that surprises. Many lyric poems, because they record a sudden access of beauty, trench *de facto* on the visionary mode. To that extent at least, Wordsworth’s daffodils resemble the orient and the immortal wheat of Traherne’s childhood. An eye unprejudiced by habit will reveal the mysterious otherness of the simple data. Bacon was one of the first to expound the visionariness of sheer empirical seeing:

All depends on keep the eye steadily fixed upon the facts of nature and so receiving their images simply as they are. For God forbid that we should give out a dream of our own imagination for a pattern of the world; rather may he graciously grant us to write an apocalypse or true vision of the footsteps of the Creator imprinted on his creatures.<sup>18</sup>

Visionary lyrics, to distinguish them from more formal vision poems, often cast their discoveries in question form. Blake, for instance, having advanced the tiger as an epiphany of divine power, uses interrogatives to convey its inconceivable nature. And Morgan’s “What waves have beaten...” also interrogates an otherwise explicable event (frost) into a state of mysterious otherness. His later poems would try to encompass scientific facts; this one

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<sup>17</sup>Edwin Morgan, “The Poet’s Voice and Craft,” *The Poet’s Voice and Craft*, ed. C. B. McCully (Manchester, 1994), p. 60.

<sup>18</sup>Qtd. in *Supernaturalism*, p. 62.

opts instead for mystification. It is a compelling lyric, as elegant a pastiche of the emblem mode as "Dies Irae" of the vision poem. The archaic inflection of "bravely" = "radiantly," the heraldic color of "device" (*CP*, p. 26), the seventeenth-century longing for poise and stasis (so uncharacteristic of the things Morgan would later yearn for), all these suggest the poem crafted in the style of Quarles, Herbert and Traherne. He clearly conceived its companion lyric, "A Warning of Waters at Evening" as a contrasting pendant, rather as "Il Penseroso" balances "L'Allegro." Though hinged by the parallelism of their opening lines (those visionary questions again), they are antithetic poems. Instead of the crystalline visuality of "What waves," we encounter the poet in unseeing darkness in "A Warning"—"I see neither tree nor wave" for the moment recalls Keats—"I cannot see what flowers are at my feet"<sup>19</sup>—but where Keats submitted tranquilly to his loss of sight, Morgan experiences an attack of panic, panic further heightened by the faint allusion to "Dover Beach"—"I only hear / Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar."<sup>20</sup> As in "What waves have beaten," a familiar landscape has been defamiliarized, but defamiliarized into terror instead of beauty. The once radiant tongues of Pentecost, nightmarishly transformed into those of baying hounds, seem all the more frightening in their dark menace. Indeed all things are sensed by the danger they pose, the demonstrative adjectives of "this chafed and shuddering weir" and "this river at my feet" (*CP*, pp. 26, 27) implying both knowledge and terror. As in "Dies Irae," one hears a half-muffled note of Calvinism, the ritual anaphora of the last verse offered as an image of inescapable judgment. But if this is a *visio judicatoria*, there is none of the Schadenfreude so often associated with that form. Far from rubbing his hands in grim prophetic satisfaction, Morgan's speaker rehearses the blindness and helplessness of that "infant crying in the night" to quote Tennyson's *In Memoriam*,<sup>21</sup> an infant, like Morgan, only too aware that vision has failed—"So runs my dream," Tennyson said.

The three poems that follow—"The Sleights of Darkness," "The Sleights of Time" and "Sleight-of-Morals" form an equally distinct subgroup, linked by their titles and their effort to get behind specious facades. Prophets have often claimed the power to see through things, to take a God's-eye view of humanity, as in the Lord's address to Samuel: "For the LORD seeth not as man seeth; for man looketh on the outward appearance, but the LORD looketh on the heart" (1 Sam. 16:7). In such instances, the vision poem can become rather sibylline—Blake is a classic instance—and indeed all three "Sleight" lyrics are

<sup>19</sup>John Keats, *Poetical Works*, ed. H. W. Garrod (London, 1970), p. 208.

<sup>20</sup>*The Poems of Matthew Arnold*, ed. A. T. Quiller-Couch (London, 1909), p. 402. Henceforth Arnold.

<sup>21</sup>*The Poems of Tennyson*, ed. Christopher Ricks, 3 vols. (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1987), II, 370.

difficult to construe. One suspects, though, from hints and glints behind the veiled, sultry diction, that these are the earliest and most oblique of Morgan's homosexual poems. While studying at Glasgow, he had felt an unrequited love for a fellow student, and, owing perhaps to that frustration, had found satisfaction in casual sex, satisfaction that in "Epilogue: Seven Decades" he would term "wild but bleak" (CP, p. 594). "The Sleights of Darkness" suggests that he was conscious of the danger of this solution, for it envisions a man of some allure ("my friend in his golden fell"—CP, p. 27) about to cross a threshold. Rather like Macbeth and the weird sisters—hence the gothic of "fiends'-hovel"—or like the errant sister in Rossetti's "Goblin Market," the crossing (into something "wild but bleak" perhaps?) will radically alter his life, and "mingle loneliness / With the waiting loneliness" (CP, p. 27). In Morgan's "Bitter vision" (CP, p. 28), this will affect his ability to love (as habitual "wild bleakness" often does). But even as he invokes Love to defend him, the poet acknowledges a bleakness in the broader landscape of relationships, anticipating a position in "Glasgow Green": "The beds of married love / Are islands in a sea of desire" (CP, p. 169). This suggests that for Morgan most love is as rare and as scattered as it had been for Arnold before him: "a God their severance rul'd; / And bade between their shores to be / The unplumb'd, salt, estranging sea" (Arnold, p. 135). This strange and haunting lyric relies on parhyme, something prompted perhaps by the visionary homo-eroticism of Wilfred Owen's "Strange Meeting," where longing too is thwarted by impositions from without.

Its sequel, "The Sleights of Time," comes as close to Eliot as Morgan (not an uncritical admirer) would ever come. Half-abstract, half-concrete; half-suggestive, half-stated; disparate and unitary in the manner of the *The Waste Land*, it seems to set stable sexual traditionalism—continuity through the bloodline ("Son unborn, never to be born"—CP, p. 29)—against a flurry of ephemeral contacts that redefine the genetic idea of race as the pounding of the risen blood: "Surrendered laughing to the bloodrace ways / Of hallucinating touch" (CP, p. 28). The poem's successor, "Sleight-of-Morals," runs its title components into a mocking slur to suggest that, like the dynastic motive for sex, clear-cut moral codes do not survive inspection. It begins by recalling the stern moral tableau that, celebrating Augustan temperateness, Pope had constructed in the *Epistle to Bathurst*: "In the worst inn's worst room... Great Villers lies—alas! how chang'd from him, / That life of pleasure and that soul of whim?"<sup>22</sup> No Popian triumphalism in Morgan, though, but rather the relativity and transvaluations of a Genet, transvaluations that turn an annunciation into a sado-masochistic spectacle—"The wounded ganymede glows like Gabriel" (CP, p. 29)—the glow of which could encompass anything from the phosphoric rottenness to transfiguration. The poem's "mystic school" is supra-

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<sup>22</sup>*The Poems of Alexander Pope*, ed. John Butt (London, 1963), p. 583.

moral, set beyond simple antitheses that blind instead of clarifying: "See through the braille of good and evil, / And put their sapience to the mystic school" (*CP*, p. 29).

In "Sleight-of-Morals," comic details—Traherne perched in a chestnut tree—have begun to aerate the solemn tone of many vision poems. Indeed, because visions and dreams are closely cousins, the comedy of dream-like incongruousness has often haunted the edges of such works as the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* (those urine fountains!) It has only to be brought in from the wings for things to fall apart in mirth, as "Harrowing Heaven, 1924" (*CP*, p. 30) shows. In that poem Lenin empties heaven as Christ had half emptied Hell in *Piers Plowman*, and, while there is a semblance of Langland's dignity and hieratic purpose—tolling anaphora, Hebraic parallelism—it is nothing more than the bass of a lively jig. Such key words of Christianity as redemption and consolation turn by a sort of aphasia into their capitalist understructures, "emption" and "consoles" (*CP*, p. 30). And the heavenly city of the Apocalypse (which, if you think about it, is a rather gaudy conception) is put under the demolisher's drill with the same Futuristic excitement that Morgan would later feel over the renewal of Glasgow.

Which takes us straight to "The Vision of Cathkin Braes," that antimasque that stood for so many years without its masque-foil. Antimasques (roughly strung together) and vision poems (cousined to the disparateness of dreams), share a loose, accommodating format. Constance B. Heatt points out that medieval dreams were frequently "used as a unifying device, tying together seemingly unrelated material by means of the sort of association and transformation typical of dreams,"<sup>23</sup> and William Sheidley has likewise observed that for

English writers of the middle decades of the sixteenth century, faced with the task of synthesizing a uniform national culture out of the disparate streams of medieval tradition, Renaissance humanism, and Protestant reform, the dream vision was a useful laboratory for experiment.<sup>24</sup>

Its usefulness persisted even into the nineteen fifties, because that is precisely the purpose that Morgan makes it serve in "The Vision of Cathkin Braes"—the bricolage of the events and personalities, the assumptions and influences that lie behind a national psyche. Because, as we have noted, visions neighbor dreams—Macrobius placed *somnium* alongside *visio*—the vision poem has sometimes tended toward a dreamy grotesquerie seen, *inter alia*,

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<sup>23</sup>Constance B. Heatt, *The Realism of Dream Visions: The Poetic Exploitation of the Dream-Experience in Chaucer and His Contemporaries* (The Hague, 1967), p. 11.

<sup>24</sup>William E. Sheidley, "'The autor penneth, wherof he hath no prooffe': The Early Elizabethan Dream Poem as a Defence of Poetic Fiction," *Studies in Philology*, 81 (1984), 74.

in Dante's *Inferno*, the punishments of which seem to have been accessed from the unconscious. Even the daylight world of *The Rape of the Lock* is subtended by the surreal derangements of its antitype, *The Cave of Spleen*.

Disorder and disruption also eventually sprang from another vision poem's own self-importance. Its pomp and circumstance and its solemn eschatology ripened to such a point of absurdity that *The Vision of Judgement* simply had to be written. Yet even as Byron was engineering its collapse into satire, a new race of vision poems—chastened and gritty and diagnostic—was also coming into being, chief among which are the great pageant poems of Shelley. "The Masque of Anarchy" and "The Triumph of Life," with their heteroclitic processions and dreamy transitions, have also left a trace on "The Vision of Cathkin Braes," especially on its texture. Gone is the insistent alliterative boom of "Dies Irae," and in its place, loose and flexible couplets such as those of Keats and Leigh Hunt. Gone too is that comfortless *paysage moralisé*, for, like "The Triumph of Life," "Cathkin Braes" begins as an idyll. Very soon, though, the visionary dream begins to trench on nightmare, a liminal mix that Morgan would also detect in Lorca's American poems. These, he later remarked, "are not strictly surrealist, but employ some surrealist techniques to convey his nightmarish, almost hallucinatory feelings about American society during the crack-up of 1929-30."<sup>25</sup> "Cathkin Braes" offers just such a

Nightmare world [where] many places are mentioned by name... These are merely places where things happen, where the spirit grows stunted or desperate, where indefinable and terrible forces are at loose and can only be indicated through recurrent imagery, often non-realistic (*Essays*, p. 55).

Even so, Morgan dilutes those "indefinable and terrible forces" with an infusion of comedy. Perhaps a precedent for the poem closer than those I have so far cited is Hugh MacDiarmid's *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle*. Like Shelley, MacDiarmid draws on the *Trionfi* at one point of that work, viewing the course of Scottish history as a pageant of dignitaries, among them John Knox and Clavers. Turning national pride and traditionalism on their heads, however, he wants no truck with them. Much the same tone informs Morgan's "Vision of Cathkin Braes." Take, for example, the seminal figures of Jenny Geddes who, according to the *DNB* is "supposed to have...inaugurated a riot in St Giles's Church, Edinburgh, when an attempt was made to read Laud's service-book on Sunday 23 July, 1637." One cannot but chuckle at the obsessive-compulsive way in which Jenny Geddes has lugged her riot stool to the Braes. No less funny is the heterogeneous makeup of the masque. Who else would have thought to bring in Lauren Bacall to countervail Jenny Geddes as an archetype of sensuality and *laissez-faire*. This is antimasque anarchy, for in official terms the actress has no more to do with Scotland than the English poet

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<sup>25</sup>"Three Views of Brooklyn Bridge," *Essays*, p. 54.

who follows her. Perhaps Wordsworth does have a thematic purpose, though, as the mascot of Scottish conservatism. The authors of *Blackwood's* repeatedly used his poetry to launch attacks on Romantic radicals. Morgan also strikes other incidental targets when he conflates Mungo Park the explorer with the Mungo who evangelized Lothian, connecting physical and religious imperialism as Achebe would do six years later in *Things Fall Apart*. Another compound identity, the blur of Mary Stuart into Mary Tudor, hints that Scotland would have been no happier under a Catholic dispensation than under the Calvinist one that history bestowed. The code redefines the vision as a *danse macabre*, and since all these consign their dancers back to hell, it gives the coda a gentle "pox on both your houses" turn.

These early poems, to some extent united by the way in which they ring changes on a shared generic shape, seem to have been the happy accident of Morgan's calling to Academe. The young lecturer at Glasgow, working and publishing inter alia on the Scottish Chaucerians, found a way of modernizing and energizing a form that, before he brought it back to life, had probably seemed too far removed from twentieth-century life to be poetically viable. Morgan's pastiche efforts, however, for all their dependence on medieval models and subsequent adaptations of the vision poem through the ages, are the work of a highly original and innovative poet. Indeed, he ranks among the most versatile and accomplished writers of our century, and is always starting out in new directions. We should thus be careful to note the facilitating effect of pastiche with regard to the poems in hand. John Warrack has pointed out how, in the comic operas of Arthur Sullivan, "The parody is [sometimes] direct," but that "more often he fastens on a composer (e.g. Handel) or form (e.g. madrigal) and absorbs as much of it as is needed to start his own invention running."<sup>26</sup> What strikes us in these early "fastenings-on" by Morgan is the originality of his sources—Anglo-Saxon and medieval literature rather than the poets of the preceding generation, which, as Howard Nemerov has pointed out, is where most poets turn when they are trying to find their voices:

People spend volumes and hours of class time worrying about what all those early poems [by Yeats] mean. But he's an 18-year-old fellow come from Ireland. He's trying to find a way of doing something that isn't either Browning or Swinburne. He avoided Browning pretty well, but he doesn't avoid Swinburne too well. That's too bad, but we don't come into the world fully formed.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup>Harold Rosenthal and John Warrack, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Opera* (London, 1964), p. 390.

<sup>27</sup>Neal Bowers and Charles Silet, "An Interview with Howard Nemerov," *Massachusetts Review*, 21 (1981), 51.

Despite the truth of this pronouncement by a distinguished poet on fellow writers, we can at least remark that the early vision poems of Edwin Morgan reveal him to be more fully formed than most.

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