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## CHAPTER SEVEN

# Edwin Morgan and European Modernism

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Morgan's *Collected Translations* (1996) is one of his most substantial achievements. This chapter looks at the trajectory of his translations from, and use of, poets of European modernism, in various forms, in a range of political contexts and languages, and in the continuing dialogue, or open conversation, of Morgan's poetic practice. Amongst the dozens of poets Morgan has translated, five stand out – Eugenio Montale, Sándor Weöres, Vladimir Mayakovsky, August von Platen and Attila József – because Morgan has dedicated a separate volume to each one. This chapter will show that by engaging with modern European poetry, and with these five poets in particular, Morgan was able to develop his voice in a number of important ways.

What did Edwin Morgan get from European modernism? It provided him with a set of models which shaped his poetic practice, and a sense of interconnected traditions which shaped his own identity. The blurb on his *Collected Translations* makes these points very clearly: 'his own work nourishes itself from the poetry of other lands and ages'; his work as a translator 'is also part of the mechanism that Morgan, as a Scot, employs to define his place as a European.' Morgan anticipates this in an essay of 1977 on Gavin Douglas and William Drummond as translators, where he invokes 'the subtleties of the communion of European writers, a vast web of ideals and traditions shading off in each country into finer and finer distinctions and measures of vernacular or personal variation'; and he adds: 'Drummond relished these European blueprints'.<sup>1</sup> Peter McCarey suggests that the same could apply to Morgan himself when he states that Lorca's 'Asesinato' could be seen as a 'blueprint' for Morgan's poem 'The Barrow'.<sup>2</sup> So, European modernism gave Morgan a set of 'blueprints' and a sense of 'communion', of belonging to 'a vast web of ideals and traditions'.

Through translating, Morgan found a number of poets with whom he could identify. His requirements for a worthwhile translation are ‘a devotedness towards the task in hand, and a certain empathy between the translator and his chosen poet [...] it is only when he can project himself confidently and happily into the mind of the target poet that his work gains the lift and fluency we all want to see.’<sup>3</sup> Morgan has ‘always enjoyed the use of many different voices and personas.’<sup>4</sup> For Morgan, translation involves a process of imaginary identification and projection, but one which is rooted in empathy and genuine affinity. Marco Fazzini once asked Morgan: ‘what moves the genuine translator is not a mimetic urge, but an elective affinity [...] Do you believe in what Goethe called “elective affinity”?’ Morgan responded: ‘Yes [...] I think it is an important idea!’<sup>5</sup> The reference is to Goethe’s novel *Elective Affinities* (1809), which explores relationships in terms of chemical reactions between couples who find themselves irresistibly drawn together. These statements indicate that translation for Morgan is far from being an intellectual exercise; instead it is an emotionally charged process. In the evocative essay ‘The Translation of Poetry’ (1976), Morgan suggests that translation is ‘like strangers moved to embrace across a fence.’<sup>6</sup> It can be transformative, too: ‘A good translation, like a good original poem, has the effect of slightly altering the language it is written in [...] as regards the available potential of that language.’<sup>7</sup> Not only does the translation transform the target language by ‘shaking its shibboleths’, it also transforms the translator too: ‘When he moves, he is no longer himself.’<sup>8</sup> Therefore, Morgan uses translation for practical purposes: to test the expressive limits of English and Scots, and also to modulate his own identity by assuming different poetic personae.

Morgan’s scrapbooks from the 1930s and 1940s contain many excerpts from French Renaissance poetry (Maurice Scève, Saluste du Bartas); French classical drama (Racine’s *Phèdre*) and French modernism (Jean Ajalbert, Albert Samain, Marceline Desbordes-Valmore, Victor Kinon, Germain Nouveau, Arthur Rimbaud, Paul Valéry, Jules Supervielle). He also begins to include numerous extracts from Russian poetry. His first translations were from Verlaine, in 1937; his last published translations in 2007 were from Paul Valéry and Tristan Tzara.<sup>9</sup> Despite Morgan’s enduring interest in French modernism, in his translations of the 1950s, his focus is not French at all, but Italian and particularly Russian poetry.

Morgan’s turn to Eastern European and Russian poetry puts him in the company of the Scottish modernist Hugh MacDiarmid, and

more recent Northern Irish poets such as Seamus Heaney and Tom Paulin, who have engaged with the work of Eastern European poets in order to negotiate their own aesthetic and political positions.<sup>10</sup> According to Heaney, ‘the surest way of getting to the core of the Irish experience’ is to contemplate the country from outside, e.g. from the perspective of Warsaw and Prague.<sup>11</sup> The turbulent history of Eastern Europe and Russia in the twentieth century means that poets have produced their work in testing political circumstances. As Morgan puts it in a textbook called *East European Poets* which he produced for the Open University:

Under circumstances like these, if there was any lesson European poets had to learn, and did learn, it was the lesson that patience, irony, deliberation, cunning, and an anti-hysterical and even anti-indignant art were more likely to make their points than a romantic or rhetorical grasping of lapels, poets’ or readers.’<sup>12</sup>

Both Morgan and Heaney are drawn to the same poem by the Polish poet Zbigniew Herbert (1924–1998), ‘A Knocker’. The poem contains these lines: ‘my imagination / is a piece of board / my sole instrument / is a wooden stick / I strike the board / it answers me / yes – yes / no – no.’<sup>13</sup> Heaney interprets this poem as saying: ‘Enjoy poetry as long as you don’t use it to escape reality.’<sup>14</sup> Morgan’s commentary is worth quoting in full:

The poet is to be wary, precise, concrete, hard, impersonal, unlyrical, unpretentious. [...] It is almost as if life had taught the poet no longer to trust anything beyond immediately tangible objects and necessities, above all not to trust the heroic gesture, the flamboyant claim, the fanatical or obsessional path. To survive, even unheroically, may be the heroism of our times.<sup>15</sup>

Morgan, it seems, has tried hard to learn his lessons from the Eastern European poets he has encountered, and it is certainly true that his poetry is tangible, material and (mainly) unpretentious.

Translation is, on one level, a form of appropriation. The translator takes another person’s voice and makes it their own. Amongst Morgan’s many translations, there are five single volumes: Montale (1959), Weöres (1970), Mayakovsky (1972), Platen (1978) and József (2001). This suggests that these five poets were particularly significant to Morgan. Let us now consider them in chronological order.

### *Poems from Eugenio Montale (1959)*

Why did Edwin Morgan turn to the work of Eugenio Montale (1896–1981) in the fifties, when he was trying to establish himself? What drew EM to EM? Perhaps the Italian poet gave Morgan an opportunity to work through his ‘difficult relationship’<sup>16</sup> with Hugh MacDiarmid (1892–1978), the dominant literary figure in Scotland at this time. Harold Bloom has argued in *The Anxiety of Influence* (1973) that younger poets are often troubled by the influence of their famous precursors, and that they must struggle to resist this influence if they are to develop. In *The Whittrick* (1961), Morgan tried to negotiate his relationship with MacDiarmid by staging an imaginary encounter between MacDiarmid and James Joyce. In my view, Morgan’s translations of Montale can also be seen in this perspective. There are uncanny parallels between Morgan’s relationship with MacDiarmid on the one hand, and Montale’s relationship with his precursor Gabriele D’Annunzio (1863–1938) on the other. MacDiarmid was an admirer of D’Annunzio: ‘In Memoriam James Joyce’ (1955) uses a quotation from *Alcyone* (*Halcyon*, 1903) as an epigram. *Alcyone* is the third volume of the series *Laudi del cielo, del mare, della terra, degli eroi* (1903–1918). It is a dithyrambic, Nietzschean tour-de-force which celebrates the ecstatic fusion between the self and the landscape. Montale’s first collection, *Ossi di Seppia* (*Cuttlefish Bones*, 1925) has been seen as a direct response to D’Annunzio’s *Alcyone*, ‘an attempt at wringing the neck of its overweening eloquence.’<sup>17</sup> D’Annunzio’s ecstatic fusion with his environment was predicated on the rejection of a moral conscience, which would act as a brake to physical sensation. In Montale, ‘this ecstatic fusion is more often sought after than achieved, defeated by an almost paralyzing self-consciousness.’<sup>18</sup> It seems possible that much as Montale countered D’Annunzio’s heroic vitalism with his own troubled self-consciousness, so too did Morgan turn to Montale’s poetics as a means to counter the dynamism of MacDiarmid. Montale’s dislike of fascism led him to cultivate coded messages of resistance. Both Montale and Morgan try to keep partisan politics at a remove from their work, preferring allusion to directness.

Jonathan Galassi explains that a Montale poem is typically a ‘catalogue in which objects pile up on each other in an allusive accretion of signifiers.’<sup>19</sup> This is the quality which Morgan appreciates in Montale’s verse. As Morgan puts it: ‘long before one fully understands a difficult poem by Eugenio Montale, his world stirs and reveals itself: there is a shimmer, a play of light on water and on crumbling buildings, a face glancing in a mirror [...]’<sup>20</sup> For Montale, a glimmer of light can signify life. One example

of this is Montale's poem 'Eastbourne' (1933/35) where the revolving doors of the hotel are 'All flashing leaves and facets'; the door is 'a roundabout that traps / And sweeps up everything it whirls' (CT, 18). Commenting on these verses by Montale, Morgan argues that poets should reserve their deepest receptivity for reality in its undefined, material state: 'a poet may find himself committed to a flash of glass' (*Essays*, 71).

Did Morgan have the stubborn materiality of Montale's verse in mind when he wrote *The Cape of Good Hope* (1955)? A brief comparison with Montale's *Mediterranean* (1924) may be useful here. In Montale's poem, the sea reveals to the poet the law of his own existence: 'to be as various / As vast, yet fixed in place' (CT, 9). At the same time, though, the poet stands outside this natural world. The poet wishes he could have been 'rugged, elemental' like the sea, but he does not have its 'uncaring, unrelenting will'; instead, he is a reflective human being, a man who can follow one path and regret not taking the other: 'The track of one path taken, I had still / The other soliciting my heart' (CT, 10). Morgan's *The Cape of Good Hope* begins by renouncing love, and launching out 'Over matter alone, and into the sea of matter' (CP, 61). In mid-ocean, we encounter 'A gleam, an inhuman shimmer' (CP, 64); this gleaming light, familiar to the reader of Montale, is still the symbol of a 'Mindless, meaningless' world (CP, 64). But by the end of the poem, the lyric 'I' finds his way back from this wilderness; he turns 'Through the great world of matter to my heart' (CP, 73). He concludes that materiality must learn love, and love must appreciate materiality (CP, 75). After contemplating the inhuman will of the ocean, the lyric 'I' concludes, like Montale in *Mediterranean*, that he is inextricably bound to his own human heart, and that he cannot abdicate this painful/precious burden. In this way, *The Cape of Good Hope* performs a similar ideological move to *Mediterranean*; it toys with the Nietzschean idea of complete immersion in the blind will of nature, only to step back from this abyss, concluding with a hard-won affirmation of humanist values. It seems that Morgan's engagement with Montale led him to appreciate what Éanna Ó Ceallacháin calls Montale's focus 'on the timeless miracle of individual human experience.'<sup>21</sup>

### **Sándor Weöres: Selected Poems (1970)**

In the Hungarian poet Sándor Weöres (1913–1989) Morgan found a kindred spirit, a poet as versatile as he was. Like Morgan, Weöres is known for experimenting with a wide variety of verse forms, and for his work as a translator (in Weöres's case, from Ukrainian and Georgian into

Hungarian). Like Morgan, Weöres is difficult to categorise. In terms of lyric intensity, William Jay Smith ranks Weöres with Blake, Rilke, T. S. Eliot and Dylan Thomas, but points out that his work is more playful than those poets.<sup>22</sup> Morgan met Weöres at an international poetry conference in Hungary in 1966 and they soon became friends (*BTL*, 176–80). According to Shona M. Allan, both poets share the desire ‘to explore everything and give anything and everything a voice.’<sup>23</sup> Morgan seems to have particularly liked the fact that Weöres has ‘a deep sense of the interconnections of human and non-human life’ (*CT*, 60). This sense of organic interconnection is displayed to full effect in ‘The Lost Parasol’ (1953) (*CT*, 72–81), a long poem about the gradual disintegration of a discarded red parasol. Morgan calls it ‘an astonishingly fertile, original, and thought-provoking work [...] fundamentally awesome in its revelation of nature as relentless metamorphosis’ (*CT*, 61). Indeed, the poem is a haunting *tour-de-force* which evokes the quality of Rimbaud’s ‘Le Bateau ivre’ (1871) and Brecht’s ‘The Drowned Girl’ (1919). As an epigram for ‘The Lost Parasol’, Weöres chose as an epigram a quotation from St Teresa of Avila: ‘I think there is much more in even the smallest creation of God, should it be only an ant, than wise men think’ (*CT*, 72). This would have appealed to Morgan whose Scrapbook Three quotes the Puritan writer Philip Stubbes: ‘And although they be bloody beasts to mankind, & seeke his destruction, yet we are not to abuse them, for his sake who made them, & whose creatures they are.’<sup>24</sup> ‘The Lost Parasol’ is a rich ecological compost-heap of a poem that celebrates the wonder of biodegradation.

An earlier poem by Weöres, ‘The Underwater City’ (1942) would have struck a chord with Morgan, who appreciates decaying cities. Here, an entire city is placed underwater and covered with seaweed. There is a sense of utter devastation about this poem that fits well with its time (1942), as if pre-war Europe had been utterly submerged by a wave of destruction. The sunken city is also a woman, and so on another level this poem may be about an unhappy love-affair, as the poet tries to recuperate his memories in the wake of some personal disaster. Much of Weöres’s work achieves a delicate balance between utopia and dystopia. This interest in the past and the future of humanity is expressed in a television interview in which Weöres hopes that humankind can ‘leave history behind.’<sup>25</sup> What he means here is ‘history’ understood in terms of continual power struggle and warfare; in terms of a process which divides humanity into winners and losers. As Weöres puts it in ‘Difficult Hour’ (1960) (*CT*, 98–99): ‘It was always others man conquered in the past; but – oh tremulous hope! – in the future he conquers himself’ (*CT*, 99).

***Wi the Haill Voice: 25 Poems by Vladimir Mayakovsky (1972)***

Morgan felt a strong affinity with the Russian revolutionary poet Vladimir Mayakovsky (1893–1930). The final poem in his *Collected Poems* begins: ‘At ten I read Mayakovsky had died, / learned my first word of Russian, *lyublyu*’ (CP, 594) [*lyublyu* means ‘love’]. Most of the Mayakovsky translations were done in 1959–60,<sup>26</sup> and Mayakovsky is also a key presence in ‘The Cape of Good Hope’ (1955). In an interview in 1999, Morgan stressed his sense of personal involvement with Mayakovsky: ‘I found him a fascinating, complex, eventually tragic figure with whom I could readily empathize’ (BTLD, 115). Why? The portrayal of Mayakovsky in ‘The Cape of Good Hope’ suggests three reasons: (1) Mayakovsky’s love affair was forbidden by the authorities; (2) he loved the workers; (3) he disciplined his own poetry. Let’s start with (1). ‘The Cape of Good Hope’ portrays Mayakovsky in his room in Moscow on 14 April 1930, just before his suicide. Mayakovsky had fallen in love with Tatiana Yakovleva (1906–1991), who had fled Russia in 1925 to live in Paris. In 1929 Mayakovsky was denied a visa to visit her, and in December of that year she married a Frenchman. The lyric self of Morgan’s poem asks: ‘Who forbids our love?’ (CP, 71). The sense of shared suffering is clear: Morgan, like Mayakovsky, suffered from forbidden love. (2) ‘I turned my love / To millioned scapegoat man’ (CP, 71). Mayakovsky became a socialist aged fourteen, for which he was arrested and spent several months in prison in 1909, where he started writing poems. His last poems reaffirm his belief in communism. Morgan, although his political engagement was more modest, clearly sympathised. (3) ‘To myself hard’ (CP, 71). Although he belonged to the Russian avant-garde, Mayakovsky satirised the pretensions of his futurist colleagues. He put his creative talent in service of the revolution, stifling his own lyric excesses. From 1920 to 1922 he worked for ROSTA, the Russian State Telegraph Agency, producing agitprop posters and slogans for a mass audience.<sup>27</sup> In the preface to *Wi the Haill Voice*, Morgan quotes an American critic who labelled Mayakovsky’s populist activity a ‘waste of talent’. Morgan disagrees, pointing out that Mayakovsky was ‘proud of the fact that he was able to mould himself in accordance with the demands of a Revolution he wholeheartedly believed in’ (CT, 105). Morgan is impressed that Mayakovsky made the transition from a ‘largely subjective futurism to a more outward-looking, more comprehensible [...] yet not self-compromised poetry’ (CT, 106–07).



Morgan chose to translate Mayakovsky into vernacular Scots, an appropriate choice since Mayakovsky preferred the language of the street.<sup>28</sup> Morgan states that in Scottish poetry (e.g. Dunbar, Burns and MacDiarmid) there is 'a vein of fantastic satire' that suits Mayakovsky, and he also enjoyed 'the challenge in finding out whether the Scots language could match the mixture of racy colloquialism and verbal inventiveness in Mayakovsky's Russian' (CT, 113). Morgan refers twice to MacDiarmid here, and there is a sense that in the Mayakovsky translations, Morgan is attempting to match MacDiarmid's *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle* (1926). That landmark poem opened up a dialogue between Scots and Russian modernism because it included translations from Aleksandr Blok (1880–1921). Translating Blok's colleague Mayakovsky was a way for Morgan to emulate MacDiarmid, and specifically to mine the 'vein of fantastic satire' he saw there. Mayakovsky has a wild, elemental, cosmic quality, which is most evident in 'Vladimir's Ferlie' (CT, 122–25) and 'The Atlantic' (CT, 137–41), where the poet encounters the sun and the ocean, respectively, and recognises them as friends and comrades. The confidential, familiar tone of the Scots helps to create a sense of the poet's intimacy with these elemental powers. Morgan has also shortened the title of 'Vladimir's Ferlie' to only two words compared to nine words of the Russian original.<sup>29</sup> We find a similar sense of communion with the sun at the end of Morgan's 'From a City Balcony' (CP, 184).

'Wi the Hail Voice' (CT, 38–41), written in January 1930, is Mayakovsky's last major poem and it has a testamentary quality. It addresses 'comrades o posterity', as the poet wonders what future ages will make of him. He imagines a happier age in which words like 'prostitution' and 'tuberculosis' will belong to a forgotten past. One day in that distant future, if 'archeological scaffies seekin licht / on oor benichted days' (CT, 38) come searching, then they might inquire about him, what kind of a man he was. And so the poet announces that he will 'shaw ye the age, and gie ye my ain credentials' (CT, 38). The idea of researchers coming from the distant future can also be found in Morgan's long poem 'London', when he writes: 'Now bury this poem in one of the vaults / of our civilization, and let the Venusian / computers come down, and searching for life / crack our ghastly code.' (CT, 251). Turning back to 'Wi the Hail Voice', Mayakovsky describes himself as a 'sanitary' and a water-carrier who made posters during the Russian Civil War, telling people to boil water in order to prevent the spread of infection. He has walked in the 'gairden' of 'Poesy' but the demure gardener speaks English, not Scots. He would not want

a statue of himself in such a place, if outside the streets are full of whores and TB sufferers. He is tired of creating propaganda, and nothing would be more lucrative than writing ‘True Romances’:

and naethin wid be nicer – or mair profitable –  
 nor I sud screeve ye True Romances, hen.  
 But och, I’ve maistert mysel therr, I’ve stapplt  
 The hass o my sangs wi my ain pen (CT, 39)

The brief absence of Scots for ‘True Romances’ shows the poet’s disgust for romantic clichés. It might be profitable to write such things, but he will not do it, because he has mastered himself, he has stopped the ‘hass’ (throat) of his own songs. If he speaks now with his whole voice, this is because he has trained his voice not to speak in rosy clichés. His poetry is like an army, weapons in service of ‘the planetary proletariat’ (CT, 40). And he does not want a marble statue, it is ‘sleekit’ (CT, 40) – the word means ‘smooth’, ‘slippery’, but also ‘hypocritical’. All he wants is the shirt on his back: ‘Lea me a clean-launert shurt to my back / and to tell ye the truth, I dinna need anythin’ (CT, 41).

Mayakovsky’s later poems use a staircase structure (*lesenka*), in which words are indented and shared out across successive lines. Morgan reproduces this structure in ‘Brooklyn Brig’ (CT, 142–46), Mayakovsky’s generous tribute to American engineering. In ‘Comrade Teenager!’, the final poem in Morgan’s Mayakovsky collection, the staircase structure is especially significant. The first half of the poem describes the obedience of young children, and this theme of obedience is also evident in the regular verse lines; there are only two ‘steps’ in this section. The second half of the poem calls on the teenager to disobey and fight for the Commune. As the poem moves from obedience to disobedience, the lines loosen up, becoming bold, sweeping staircases:

Comrade teenager,  
                   ye arna a babby-boo;  
 be a bonny fechter –  
                   a committit man,  
                                   ye ken. (CT, 155)

In the last two words – ‘ye ken’ – the poet appeals directly to the audience for their assent (‘you know what I mean’). The Scots ‘ye ken’, half-rhyming with ‘man’, and with the alliteration of the consonants ‘c’ and ‘k’, sounds

better and is much more inviting than its English equivalent could have been in this context. Moments like this fully justify Morgan's choice to render Mayakovsky into Scots.

### *Platen: Selected Poems (1978)*

August Graf von Platen-Hallermünde (1796–1835) is a precursor of German modernism. He was a homosexual German poet whose reputation suffered when he was publicly outed by his rival Heinrich Heine. Platen had mocked Heine's Jewishness; Heine retaliated with a homophobic tirade against Platen in *The Baths of Lucca* (1830). The two bitter rivals came from entirely different worlds: Heine was an impoverished urban Jew from the Rhineland and Platen was a Bavarian aristocrat. Morgan has translated both. For Heine, Morgan uses the vernacular Scots (appropriately, since Heine is a more demotic poet); for Platen, he uses English, with the notable exception of 'Forfairn's my hert' (*CT*, 314), an intense poem of heartbreak. Platen and Heine are both nineteenth-century poets, but their outsider perspectives give a distinctly modern sensibility to their works. Morgan's renderings of Heine's Romantic lyrics and Platen's sonnets show his interest in both poets, but it is clear that he has a special affinity with Platen, and particularly with Platen's *Venetian Sonnets* (1824), which have been called 'the most perfect sonnets in German'.<sup>30</sup> James McGonigal points out that there are several 'psychological similarities' between Morgan and Platen: they were both gay; they both served in wars but did not see any action (Platen enlisted against Napoleon in 1813 but his regiment was not at Waterloo), and they were both erudite, multilingual poets with an interest in foreign poetic forms, particularly the work of Hafiz, a fourteen century Persian poet who appears in Platen's *Ghasalen* (1821) and Morgan's *The New Divan* (*BTL*D, 213–14).

The most important affinity between the two poets is in their use of the sonnet form. Morgan became fascinated by the sonnet form in the early 1970s: his translations of Petrarch date from this time (*CT*, 164–66). Morgan began his translations of Platen's *Venetian Sonnets* around 1970 (*BTL*D, 212), only two years before he published his own *Glasgow Sonnets* in 1972 (incidentally, both works were published by the Castlelaw Press in West Linton). McGonigal suggests that 'it may be that revisiting the strict rhyme scheme of the Platen sonnets influenced EM's choice of this same form for his own *Glasgow Sonnets*' (*BTL*D, 213). The two sonnet cycles are similar in theme: Platen's *Venetian Sonnets* celebrate the faded glory of Venice; Morgan's *Glasgow Sonnets*, too, features a city which

has seen better days, littered with derelict buildings ‘condemned to stand, not crash’ (*CP*, 289). Morgan’s sonnets are set against the Clyde Shipbuilders’ work-in of 1971–72 led by Jimmy Reid, when the British government tried to close down the shipyards. The sixth sonnet begins: ‘The North Sea oil-strike tilts east Scotland up, / and the great sick Clyde shivers in its bed.’ (*CP*, 290). In Platen’s sonnets there are similar scenes of desolation. In Sonnet V the marble walls are ‘Now turned to sinking, slowly crumbling things’ (*CT*, 318); in Sonnet VIII ‘The harbour’s derelict, few boatmen call’ (*CT*, 319). The connection between Glasgow and Venice becomes even clearer in Morgan’s seventh Glasgow sonnet, which portrays the conservationists’ efforts to turn Glasgow into a museum piece: ‘riverside walks march off the lists’, and ‘the sandblaster’s grout / multiply pink piebald facades to pout / at sticky-fingered mock-Venetianists.’ (*CP*, 291); ‘mock-Venetianists’ suggests both the Italianate architecture of Victorian Glasgow and Platen himself. However, these renovations fail to conceal the sense of decline: ‘Prop up’s the motto. Splint the dying age’ (*CP*, 291). Indeed, they hasten Glasgow’s transformation from industrial centre to cultural destination.

In both sonnet cycles, form (sonnet) and content (nostalgic emotion) are opposed. It is almost as if the strict form of the sonnet has been chosen in order to resist the theme of decay. Siegbert Praver argues that Platen uses Venice as a symbol for his own personal problems, in order to contemplate his own emotions from the outside.<sup>31</sup> Venice was humbled by Napoleon; Platen was humbled by the stigma of his own sexuality. Morgan’s translations are well attuned to this homoeroticism, e.g. in Sonnet III: ‘Gay all around is the dear swarm of souls / Moving in idleness, as if freed from care; / A queer soul can feel free here as he strolls’ (*CT*, 318); and in Sonnet XIV, which concludes with the cry of the gondoliers. In the German original, the poet hears the gondoliers but remains silent; in Morgan’s translation, he addresses them directly: ‘Ah, gondolier!’ (*CT*, 321). There is a similar layering of desire in Sonnet IX of *Glasgow Sonnets*, when the city is anthropomorphised:

It groans and shakes, contracts and grows again.  
 Its giant broken shoulders shrug off rain.  
 It digs its pits to a shauchling refrain.  
 Roadworks and graveyards like their gallus men. (*CP*, 292)

In this way, Morgan’s sonnets to Glasgow derive their force from the poet’s profound identification with Glasgow, which means that the damage

done to the city affects him personally. On another level, the *Glasgow Sonnets* are a love song addressed to the 'gallus' (brash, cheeky, bold) men who inhabit the city and dig its roads and pits.

### *Attila József: Sixty Poems (2001)*

Morgan first encountered the poetry of Attila József (1905–1937) in an Italian translation that had been published in 1952. In 1959 Hugh MacDiarmid asked Morgan to help him translate József's work (*BTL D*, 113). Morgan's translations of József bring his career as a translator to an impressive close. József is one of the few poets who are both world-class and genuinely working-class. Morgan and Mayakovsky are for the people, but they are not – as József – of the people too.<sup>32</sup> József bears comparison to Mayakovsky: both are powerful political poets who address their poetry to working people. Both express the utopian impulses of their turbulent times, the 1920s (Mayakovsky) and the 1930s (József). Both invoke their kinship with primal natural forces: the sun calls Mayakovsky his brother (*CT*, 124), and József calls the forest his comrade.<sup>33</sup> Both question the validity of art and culture: compare Mayakovsky's 'Mandment No. 2 to the Army o the Arts' (*CT*, 126–28) with József's 'Culture'.<sup>34</sup> Both suffered from unrequited love. Both committed suicide. Sometimes reading József is like reading Mayakovsky in a minor key.

József's father was a soap-maker who ran off when he was three; his mother was a washerwoman. He was expelled from university in 1925 because of his poem 'Heart-Innocent' (*CT*, 341), and his third collection of poetry was banned for subversion in 1931. In 1930 he joined the Communist Party of Hungary but was soon expelled from there too. Peter Sherwood states that 'one important reason for this must have been his belief in the importance of sex and love', which made him 'attempt to synthesize Marx and Freud'.<sup>35</sup> József became schizophrenic and he fell in love with his analyst. He died in 1937 and was only rehabilitated by the Communist Party in 1954.

What drew Morgan to the work of József? József's central themes – urban poverty, love, sex and politics – clearly resonate with Morgan's own work. According to Tom Hubbard, who is translating József into Scots, Morgan and József write 'a poetry of struggle as opposed to a poetry of contentment, a poetry for alert citizens rather than for passive consumers'.<sup>36</sup> Hubbard points out that both poets are alert to cats, dogs and derelict buildings.<sup>37</sup> Morgan said that the József poems which moved him most were those on the poet's mother – József's mother died of

cancer when he was only fourteen.<sup>38</sup> The closing lines of Morgan's *Glasgow Sonnet X* with the 'stalled lives' who trudge to the launderette (*CP*, 292) can be compared to József's poem 'Mother'. The poet describes his mother as she carries 'the creaking basket / of clothes, without pausing, up to the attic' (*CT*, 341). Her short life was one of constant toil. In 'My Mother', we read: 'a washerwoman's lot is to die early' (*CT*, 344). Cancer may have killed her, but it was capital that crushed her:

She pauses with the iron: I see her.  
Her brittle body was broken by  
capital, grew thin, grew thinner –  
think about it, proletarians – (*CT*, 344).

It is this fusion of the personal and political which makes József such an important poet.

József's two great themes are love and politics. His poem 'The Woodcutter' celebrates revolution, as the axe cuts down a tree representing the feudal order (*CT*, 353). His central focus is not revolutionary violence, though, but the work of love. In 'Fly, poem ...' we read: 'Love and liberty don't show / tumblers of blood, but living springs.'<sup>39</sup> In 'It isn't me you hear ...', the poet suggests that love and politics are intertwined. The answer to the poor man's predicament is to engage with others, or, as the poem puts it: 'To plunge your face into yourself – wasted labour, / you are only washed in the waters of others' (*CT*, 345). There is a sense here that only by loving others can we reveal our true being. This idea is expressed most powerfully in 'Ode', a love poem in six sections (*CT*, 345–49). 'Ode' begins with the poet sitting on a wall, as he inhales the summer wind. In section two he addresses his lover and he tells her:

You have been able to force  
speech from the universe –  
and from solitude, weaving its fitful deceptions  
in the heart's deepest place. (*CT*, 346)

Solitude here is portrayed as a form of deceit. Only in love do we hear the whole universe speak. The poet bears the imprint of his lover's existence, and she has become engraved on his mind 'like acid on metal' (*CT*, 346), so there is a searing, agonising quality to this love which mingles with the poet's joy. The poet feels that he is 'moulded and carved' by her 'simplest glance' (*CT*, 347). Her love makes him into what he is.

Then the poem segues into a biological mode, admiring the cells, the lungs and the kidneys of his lover. She seems to contain the entire universe within her body. 'Here, in your huge essence, / the eternal unconscious wanders' (CT, 348): this is perhaps a reference to C. G. Jung's concept of the collective unconscious. This experience of love leads to the insight that 'Existence stammers: / only law has a clear voice' (CT, 348). Just as solitude is deceptive, so too is clear speech, plain speaking that tries to set itself up as a law. The truth of existence is stammering, erratic, fragmentary, and this is why we need poetic speech to take the measure of the universe. In the final section of the poem, the poet leaves in search of his lover, and he imagines that – if he finds her – then perhaps she will say to him:

The water's lukewarm, go and try it!  
A towel for your body, dry it!  
The meat is baked, end your hunger!  
In my bed forever linger. (CT, 349)

In this way, 'Ode' takes the reader on a brief cosmic odyssey, and, like the *Odyssey*, it ends with an evocation of sensual domestic bliss. The poet's deepest desire is to share the water, the food, and the bed of his beloved. The locus of love is 'the common rumpbed bed', as Morgan puts it in Section 12 of *The New Divan* (CP, 298). The hidden centre, for both poets, is this shared space.

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As we conclude this brief survey of Morgan's translations of European modernists, we can see how this was an essential aspect of Morgan's poetic practice. By engaging in dialogue with other poets, Morgan could work through his own concerns. With Montale he appreciated how an intense consciousness could be expressed through material images. With Weöres he admired the formal virtuosity, the utopian strain and the sense of a big picture. With Mayakovsky he enjoyed the revolutionary swagger but also respected the poet's self-discipline and his social engagement. With Platen he valued the way in which the expression of sexual desire is embedded within an urban cityscape. With József he recognised the interconnections between self and others, between politics and love.



I myself incline to the “warm” rather than the “cold” end, but I recognise that there are other points of view.’ (University of Glasgow Library, Special Collections, MS Moragn DZ/1). I am indebted to James McGonigal for this reference.

### 7. Edwin Morgan and European Modernism

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### 8. Concrete Realities

1. I am indebted to James McGonigal, David Kinloch, Virna Teixeira and Silke Strohe for their valuable advice in the writing of this chapter (though all infelicities remain my own) and to the Director and staff of the Centro de Referência Haroldo de Campos in São Paulo, Brazil, for help in searching the archives there. I am also grateful to the University of Macau for allowing me research leave to visit the archive.
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