

THE INTERNATIONAL
COMPANION TO

EDWIN MORGAN

EDITED BY ALAN RIACH



INTRODUCTION

Presence, Process, Prize

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The Presence

On 27 April 2010, Edwin Morgan was ninety years old. A gathering of people approached him as he arrived in his wheelchair in the Mitchell Library in Glasgow, passing from one conversation to another in small groups, sharing warm words, in an appropriately quiet, festive fashion. The occasion was amicable, without friction or animosity, a collective of goodwill. In his company, we were all friendly, but every one of us paid attention sharply when the necessary moment arrived and he was invited to cut his handsome birthday cake. He extended his hand with purpose, the slight tremble steadied, and Alasdair Gray's voice rang out, 'Use the knife, man!'

This book is a companion to a life's achievement in work that could never have been predicted fifty, or even ten, years before his death a little later the same year, on 17 August 2010. Morgan continued to write, publish and take new directions to the end, and point forward towards different possibilities, but with one deep driving force, active long after his death. This introductory chapter considers two questions that take us to the heart of Morgan's work, and to that driving force.

The two questions are: Why is it that, for Morgan, the most essential motivation is exploration? His essential affirmation is 'the intrinsic optimism of curiosity' or, as he says himself, 'Unknown is best'.¹ And what is it that makes Morgan's work such an enabling, encouraging oeuvre in modern poetry?

The driving force we will come to later.

Turn the clock back ten years from the ninetieth birthday to the celebration for Morgan's eightieth birthday and the little book of tributes

produced for the occasion, *Unknown Is Best*. The title was taken from a line in the poem Morgan himself contributed to the book, entitled 'At Eighty'. It begins:

Push the boat out, compañeros,
Push the boat out, whatever the sea.

This is bad advice, of course: *whatever* the sea? The wise man does not push out the boat into oceans murderous with elemental hostility, and no one in a long career of negotiated public identity and private disposition demonstrated that truth more clearly than Edwin Morgan. But of course, this is a poem, not literal advice. It works by metaphor. It continues:

Who says we cannot guide ourselves
through the boiling reefs, black as they are,
the enemy of us all makes sure of it!²

The turbulent seas and raging rocks are there, and whatever it is that opposes us all ensures that the world is difficult. But the poem enacts a defiance: 'who says we cannot guide ourselves?' The metaphor is one of self-determination, but it is not a glib assurance. What keeps it tense is the reality of opposition, whoever would foreclose the extension of human life to which we are healthily disposed. The words of the pioneer of socialism in Glasgow during the First World War, John MacLean, as quoted by Morgan in his commemorative poem from 1973, come to mind: 'We are out / for life and all that life can give us'.³ And thus the conclusion:

Out,
push it all out into the unknown!
Unknown is best, it beckons best,
like distant ships in mist, or bells
clanging ruthless from stormy buoys.

This suggests that the co-ordinate points by which we must navigate our voyages are not always reliable, and are subject, themselves, to the tides and torrents of time. In turn, that might remind us also that there is something deeply serious in the seeming frivolity of the aural pun in that last word, 'buoys'.

The precedent here is Walt Whitman's 'Song of Myself' with 'Old age superbly rising!' and the exclamatory praise, that

Every condition promulges not only itself, it promulges what grows
after and out of itself,
And the dark hush promulges as much as any.

I open my scuttle at night and see the far-sprinkled systems
And all I see multiplied as high as I can cipher edge but the rim of
the farther systems.

Wider and wider they spread, expanding, always expanding,
Outward and outward and forever outward.

My sun has his sun and round him obediently wheels,
He joins with his partners a group of superior circuit,
And greater sets follow, making specks of the greatest inside them.

There is no stoppage and never can be stoppage,
If I, you, and the worlds, and all beneath or upon their surfaces, were
this moment reduced back to a pallid float, it would not avail in
the long run,
We should surely bring up again where we now stand,
And surely go as much farther, and then farther and farther.

A few quadrillions of eras, a few octillions of cubic leagues, do not
hazard the span or make it impatient,
There are but parts, any thing is but a part.⁴

So Whitman sails on into the cosmos and inhabits it with his song. Whitman's originality is breathtaking, but there is ambivalence here. Is this truly a poetry and ethos embracing 'others' or is it in fact endlessly self-extending vanity?

The urge that drives us towards other things and other lives than our own is what gives Morgan's poem a tension, both individually, as a poem, a made thing, but also, in Whitman's phrase, as 'but a part'. To collect these parts is to engage in a process, and the process for Morgan is encompassed not only in his *Collected Poems* but also in his plays, criticism, translations, letters – a life's work – and then in what this enables and encourages beyond that.

In his little book on Herman Melville, *Call me Ishmael*, the American poet Charles Olson proposes that the story of a great historical era can be read to its final end in the nineteenth century, in three great odysseys: ‘The evolution in the use of Ulysses as hero parallels what has happened in economic history.’⁵ Homer’s Ulysses pushes against the limits of the known world, the Mediterranean, and in this way he projects the archetype of the West to follow, the search, to reach beyond the self. By 1400, Dante finds Ulysses in Hell, among the evil counsellors. He has become an Atlantic man. In the *Inferno*, he speaks to his crew like Columbus, urging them further forward: ‘O brothers! [...] who through a hundred thousand dangers have reached the West, deny not, to this brief vigil of your senses that remains, experience of the unpeopled world behind the sun.’⁶

He bends the crew to his purpose, and drives them west. After five months on the Atlantic, they see the New Land there on the horizon, but a terrible storm blows up and they are drowned and destroyed before they reach land.

I once asked Edwin Morgan about his poem ‘At Eighty’ and reminded him that Dante placed Ulysses in Hell for giving his crew the same advice. He smiled mildly and replied, ‘Perhaps Dante was wrong.’

It’s significant that Odysseus’s final voyage is referred to by various significant twentieth-century poets, including T. S. Eliot in *The Waste Land*, Ezra Pound in *The Cantos*, Hugh MacDiarmid in *To Circumnjack Cencrastus* and Derek Walcott, in both ‘The Schooner *Flight*’ and *Omeros*.⁷ But the point here is really that for Homer and Dante, Odysseus is pushing against the limits of the known world. Back to Olson:

The third and final odyssey was Ahab’s. The Atlantic crossed, the new land America known, the dream’s death lay around the Horn, where West returned to East. The Pacific is the end of the UNKNOWN which Homer’s and Dante’s Ulysses opened men’s eyes to [...] Ahab is full stop.⁸

‘Ahab is full stop’ – but is he? ‘The end of the UNKNOWN’ – but is it? Is the world ever really conquered, either in economic history or in human exploration?

Morgan, in his *Odyssey*, takes us from the darkness and constraint of mid-twentieth-century Scotland into the twenty-first century. Olson’s map of history shows us the globe and we can recognise the truth in

what he is saying. We cannot repeat those journeys, but every setting out is a new beginning, and the open complexity of all journeys is the domain of the arts. Understanding this is to resist the vanity of all efforts to bind and contain imaginative life, to resist the mechanical excess of systematic meaning, and to teach that intelligence and sensitivity reside with an irreducible openness, never with the closed.

The work of Edwin Morgan is to affirm this irreducible openness, a home to sensitivity and intelligence, a lasting assurance. In 'The World', from *The New Divan*, (1977) he writes:

I don't think it's not going onward,
 though no one said it was a greyhound.
 I don't accept we're wearing late. [...]
 I don't believe that what's been made
 clutters the spirit.⁹

In an ethos of pervasive angst and contagious ennui, that is an astonishing thing to say. And in his translation from Eugenio Montale's poem 'Mediterranean', from 1959, Morgan writes:

You first made me know
 That the puny agitations
 Of my heart were only momentary motions
 In yours; that there lay at the base
 Of my life your terrifying law: to be as various
 As vast, yet fixed in place.¹⁰

This is why 'unknown' is best: it generates exploration, and exploration generates discovery, and enablement and encouragement become the most essential elements in Morgan's work.

In the little book of tributes *Eddie@90* there are eighty items, essays, poems, salutations, records of delight, each one of them announcing Morgan as an encouragement, an enabler, a friendly catalyst: his characteristics are in words like 'welcome', 'invitation', 'kindness', 'dedication' – that positive view, energised, generous, poetically and culturally promiscuous – or to quote Alan Spence, 'For [...] forty years [...] Edwin Morgan has been an inspiration, a benign presence.'¹¹

What makes him such an encouragement? Where does this come from?

The Process: Five Lives

It may be helpful to read Edwin Morgan through five periods of his writing life, each a further part of the process. The first (1952–68) is that of *Beowulf* and *The Vision of Cathkin Braes to Starryveldt* and *Emergent Poems*, the poet coming out of and through the aftermath of the Second World War.

The early Morgan is not the playful shape-shifter or the marvellous ventriloquist, computer programme-subverter and science fiction singer, translator, teacher, transmission-master. The other side of wonder is terror, horror, loneliness, equally the product of a human response to the sublime. The sea is ‘as various / As vast’ but it also drowns all puny human agitations, momentary motions are constantly lost in time, yet fixed in place. The early Morgan is lonely, voicing a difficult soliloquy in the Day of God’s Wrath, ‘Dies Irae’, the first poem in the *Collected*: uttered in ‘the blaze and maelstrom’ by a ‘Mortal voyager in the far flood of the north’ whose ‘ship long since had struck its rock, and sunk’, who wakes from the nightmare ‘hurricane of the wrath’ and feels ‘the hoar chill of dawning on the sea / And shrieking of the wind and savage gulls’.¹² And he is the poet of the late 1940s who records the clashing armies and monsters of the night in *Beowulf*:

The man old in worth sat unrejoicing
 Bearing, enduring grief, strong
 Sorrow for his soldiers, when they saw the footprint
 Of the hated, of the accursed spirit; that strife
 Was too strong, too long and too malignant!¹³

Morgan’s *Beowulf*, first published in 1952, is a hard, grinding poem of clenched knuckles, thwart and frustration, tones palpable in both language and narrative. It is an accurate translation but also displays and deploys the character Morgan himself was at that time. In the ‘Preface’ to the 2002 edition, he tells us that it was begun ‘shortly after I came out of the army at the end of the Second World War’ and ‘was in a sense my unwritten war poem’. He concludes: ‘I would not want to alter the expression I gave to its themes of conflict and danger, voyaging and displacement, loyalty and loss. *Inter arma musae tacent* [“In time of war the muses are silent”], but they are not sleeping.’¹⁴

For Morgan’s poetry, this is the first transitional moment, from the 1940s and 1950s through to the 1960s, and the development into that

endlessly playful, open encourager, that benign inspiration he was to become, from *Beowulf* (1952) to *The Second Life* (1968).

So the second life is the period of the book of that title and its successors, *From Glasgow to Saturn*, *The New Divan* and *Poems of Thirty Years*, flourishing, in serious play, redressing his own history and affirming potential (1968–84). Throughout the 1970s, we could chart the poetry of the Morgan most people know and love, the instamatic Morgan, the humane and sympathetic observer and recorder, unafraid of Glasgow Green at night and how to speak of it in a Scotland still so sexually repressed, or of the desperate blind man in the snack-bar, the woman urinating openly in Central Station, but equally, joyously, unafraid of celebrating the giggling girls with their ‘linoleum chocolate’ or the trio of festive young people walking up Buchanan Street on a cold Christmas evening, or the energy that pulses and ‘promulges’ visibly, in the children in Joan Eardley’s painting, as they run under the broken sign of a sweetie shop in Rottenrow, before the bulldozers do their necessary, rightful job.¹⁵

Each one of these poems is a short narrative, a kind of epiphany, a momentary vignette, not a fragment, because each has a coherence, but an episode isolated and connected to the process. Each one is only part of the story. Each one reminds us of Whitman’s phrase again, ‘anything is but a part’. From them we can infer the poet, not as romantic ego, active intervention, moral judge, but rather as citizen, someone in the play who is also watching the play. The poem is the made thing but there is the world beyond it, full of its own celebrations that are cognate with but not the same as poetry. Morgan is in dialogue, engaging with odd things, like typographical mistakes, or articulating unpredicted speech, writing the songs and monologues of creatures without voices of their own.

Morgan’s playfulness was not universally popular. In 1980, Norman MacCaig published a book of poems called *The Equal Skies*, where the contents list promises a poem called ‘Little Boy Blue’ on page 21. Turn to page 21 and you find the title, ‘Little Blue Blue’: simply a mistake, in MacCaig’s eyes, but, for Morgan, an inspiration. Morgan’s poem ‘Little Blue Blue’ appears in his first ‘Collected’ volume, *Poems of Thirty Years* (1982), in the final section of hitherto uncollected poems, and gives us this unforgettable hybrid character, the last of the children of the 1960s, son of sea and sky, with his electric-blue guitar, denim jeans and jacket and dove-blue boots, sailing the seas and whizzing up to Scrabster in a cobalt Talbot Sunbeam. ‘Everybody loves a blue angel’, the poem tells

us. Not so. I once asked Norman MacCaig what he thought of the poem. The snarl was more prominent than the appreciation of inventiveness: 'Typical clever Eddie,' he said.¹⁶

That cleverness was how he was thought of then, not always as benign or enabling but rather as evasive, eluding directness; even, perhaps, dishonest. See him alongside his contemporaries, MacCaig, Sorley MacLean, George Mackay Brown, and the quality of vatic authority in their poetry is a strong contrast to Morgan's tentative, provisional identities, his deliberately exploratory forms.

We can identify this historically of course. Morgan's commitment to what he calls Futurism has its connections back to the first Futurists, poets and painters, artists of the collage, and as such at some distance from – indeed opposed to – the authority of the individual lyric poet. Such an authority rises emphatically in the Romantic tradition that runs at least from Shelley to Yeats and Sorley MacLean. For the Futurists, however, collage is a visual experience of multiple perspectives and colliding points of view. The priority of visualisation, evident in Morgan's scrapbooks, is present also in verbal and intellectual presentation, an articulation comprising different voices, sounds, ideas, musical forms, as collage was a method applied to literary works as various as Marinetti's *Zang Tumb Tuuum*, Apollinaire's *Calligrammes*, Eliot's *The Waste Land* and poetry by any number of writers from William Carlos Williams's *Paterson* on.

For W. B. Yeats, poetic form had to be cohesive, grammatically justified, comprehensive and coherent, whereas for Ezra Pound, in *The Cantos*, it is structured by compilation, making an epic of fragments. The opposition is between a singular voice giving full expression from a central position, and a multitude of voices in continual play, a representation of differences, personae.

Consider Morgan in this context, engaged very much in representing and playing with differences, and therefore standing at some distance from his contemporaries, MacLean, MacCaig, Mackay Brown, each one writing poems that would articulate full expression, in bardic directness or sly irony, from a single position. Almost all Morgan's work keeps regular syntax and observes grammatical rules, using conventional and accessible sentence-structures and verse paragraphs (with the exceptions of sound- and language-game poems), and yet he seems prophetic of a general twenty-first-century condition much closer to collage. The internet and social media make writers of everyone, and differences are constantly in play.

But this comes at a cost. MacLean, MacCaig and Mackay Brown are increasingly historical figures, which is not to diminish them or their work. Indeed, they are both enabled and bound by their priorities and geographies, but in a way that Morgan is not. This is more than simply the fact that they died in the 1990s, while Morgan lived on till 2010. It is more too than the fact that Morgan is a poet of the city in a way that none of these contemporaries were. And it is more than acknowledging Morgan's proleptic engagement with computer technology and virtual realities. He never owned a computer, rejecting the offer of a gift of one when in his eighties. He stuck to his portable typewriter until it finally broke down. He never worked with online resources. Yet the point is rather that Morgan's capacity for change allowed him to develop through two further transitional moments, and these are emphatic. They move him well beyond the position of the clever, playful, academic poet of the 1970s to the writer who would become Scotland's Makar, her National Poet, officially made laureate in 2004.

This is the third life, the era of *Sonnets from Scotland*, liberating the vision of the nation, and of *From the Video Box*, *Hold Hands Among the Atoms* and *Virtual and Other Realities*, when Morgan was engaging imaginatively with new technology and new history (1984–97).

The first of these transitional works is *Sonnets from Scotland* (1984). I visited Morgan once with a student who was writing a thesis on his work. She asked him which one, of all the poems he had written, was his favourite. Impossible to answer that one, he said. I asked him then, could he say if he had a favourite book of all of them? And he thought seriously for a moment and said, '*Sonnets from Scotland*.' He felt an affection for this one.

This is significant because this book sets out the proposition of a multifaceted, outward-voyaging, yet also introspective and multi-dimensional national identity, 'as various / As vast, yet fixed in place' – both aspects balanced, beginning with the proposition of an invitation: we are visitors ourselves, on earth, as Sigourney Weaver almost says as Lieutenant Ripley in the last line of the last of the *Alien* films: 'I'm a stranger here myself.'¹⁷ Interstellar travellers arrive to explore Scotland, past, present, future, actual, imaginary, ruined, razed, dystopian or illuminated, festive, self-determined, awakened from sleep by the call of a far horn over a land that lies still, there, present, waiting. At the end of the sequence they depart, but there is no ending any more than there was a beginning. It is all in process. Both ending and beginning are provisional, in actuality and imagination, which is where the sequence

itself began, with the first poem – not in order of arrangement but the first to be written – ‘The Solway Canal’. Here, anonymous travellers sail in a hydrofoil through the Cheviot Hills in a foggy April dawn, past the high steel bridge at Carter Bar and wet rock walls on either side, to see waterfalls marking ‘that northern island of the Scots’ as the sun comes up on the Eildon Hills, shining down to ‘the Canal’s drowned borderers’ graves’.¹⁸ The scene is magical, which is to say, inexplicable, but the images: a man-made canal marking the border, the mysterious Eildons, drowned graves, and visitors observing all these things, make new imagining more possible. The poem implies that the world can be changed, and will change anyway, so we’d better be part of it, and take part in it.

Morgan’s stature arises not only from the poetic oeuvre and the critical and scholarly accomplishment but also from his personal example, a man who helped enable so many of the generations immediately following him, in various ways, politically and publicly, as well as personally. It is familiar to locate *Sonnets from Scotland* in the history of resistance in post-1979 Scotland, when the aftermath of the referendum and the general election of that year had so conspicuously disenfranchised Scottish voters. The book signals Morgan’s stepping into the national tradition in a new way, placing himself in a direct line with Hugh MacDiarmid. If *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle* is our *King Lear*, then *Sonnets from Scotland* is our *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, troubling, transformative, ultimately hopeful, rising – to quote Sorley MacLean in this context – on the other side of sorrow. And that line follows through to Morgan’s poem for the opening of the Scottish Parliament, the most directly engaged civic political poem of our time, a different kind of encouragement. This is the poem in which Morgan advises Scottish parliamentarians to work responsibly for the people of Scotland, knowing that full independence has not yet been given to them. This is the Morgan who, in his will, left one million pounds to the Scottish National Party in the belief that it would help in the long process of delivering an independent Scotland once again.

The fourth life is at the turn of the millennium.

At the end of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first centuries, Morgan produced two works which are essential and complementary in his story: a slim volume called *Demon* (1999), later collected in *Cathures* (2002), and *A.D.: A Trilogy of Plays on the Life of Jesus* (2000). Here, he describes the range and purpose of the gods of human kind. In the third of the *A.D.* plays, *The Execution* (Act 1, Scene 4),

Jesus is telling a story to a crowd, inviting people to ‘Reach out; think; listen; argue with me’. Then he almost quotes a poem Morgan himself had published in the 1973 collection *From Glasgow to Saturn*, ‘The Fifth Gospel’. The poem begins: ‘I have come to overthrow the law and the prophets: I have not come to fulfil, but to overthrow.’ Later, we read: ‘It is not those that are sick who need a doctor, but those that are healthy. I have not come to call sinners, but the virtuous and law-abiding, to repentance.’ We are advised: ‘Give nothing to Caesar, for nothing is Caesar’s.’¹⁹

Now, in the play of thirty years later, Jesus is given these words:

Take a crossbow to the bloated belly of convention.
 I have not come to fulfil the prophets,
 Though some will say I have. I am myself
 A prophet never dreamed of; my remit
 (If I fulfil my life) is to free worlds,
 Not this one only, from guilt, hate, death itself.
 You have all heard of the kingdom of heaven,
 But it is not what you think it is.

The people suggest what it might be: a republic, a commonwealth, an empire, just as we might say, an independent Scotland, a free state. Jesus’s answer is this: ‘We’ll see, we’ll see.’ And then he tells the parable of the mustard seed.

Take a mustard seed. Very small, is it not?
 You wonder what could possibly come of it.
 Goodness, it could sit in a sparrow’s eye!
 But plant it, water it, watch and wait for it.
 It spreads, it lengthens up like a bush, it’s a tree,
 with branches.
 Branches with birds, birds bursting with song.

The inevitable voice from the crowd interrupts him: ‘What about the mustard?’ And he replies:

You get the mustard,
 You get the mustard all right, for your meat,
 But that is not the point of the parable.
 What is the point of the parable?

The voice from the crowd, pragmatic, offers: ‘Dinny despise the wee things.’ And Christ agrees, but goes further than piety:

That’s right.
 Never despise children. Never despise the poor.
 Never despise the outcast. But there’s more.
 The seed, the bush, the tree: it’s a process.
 The kingdom of heaven is not a thing,
 Nor is it a place, it is alive, it grows.

And he continues:

[...] it lives.
 It is not even something you can search for,
 Though the paradox is that you must do so
 With your heart and soul.

And concludes:

The kingdom of heaven is among you.
 It is this very moment waving like leaves
 And sending the most delicate roots in the world
 Out through your doubts and the fears of the time.²⁰

Morgan is not only the benign and encouraging Eddie, then, but also the man who insists ‘unknown is best’. It is too easy to undervalue the seriousness of his ‘supreme graffito’, the punning ‘CHANGE RULES’.²¹ Its message, the danger it warns of, the excess of familiar comfort, works both ways: ‘rules change’. They change through time and they can change some things immediately. The Demon poems clearly speak of this: when serenity turns to complacency, the Demon is there to ‘rattle the bars’, not trying to get in, nor out, but driving the gatekeeper dogs berserk, and in that context, the playfulness of benign inspiration keeps its edges keen. He is the lovable poet of many voices: but where did those voices come from? Out of what dark? The wonderful playful song of the Loch Ness Monster, up from the deep, profoundly unimpressed with the world around him – or her, who knows? – the sexy, coquettish apple, its words winking and its skin shining at the susceptible reader, are voices we hear alongside that of the hyena, laughing with its tongue lolling out, waiting for the foot to slide, the heart to seize, for the fight to the death to be

fought to the death.²² These voices came from long gestation in isolated dark, the mustard seed, in a world of bias and thwart, frustration and dismay, and, indeed, despair. Both Morgan's living Christ and his resourceful, irrepressible Demon triumphantly rise from such spirit and ground.

There is one final period of transition that follows from this, the fifth life, the period of *Cathures*, *Love and a Life*, *The Play of Gilgamesh*, *A Book of Lives* and *Dreams and Other Nightmares*, being himself (2002–10).

Critical appraisals of Morgan often make the point that the most salient characteristic of his work is its variousness, the diversity of forms, voices, styles he used, over six decades of writing. His friend and publisher Michael Schmidt puts the matter critically: 'The case against him is that he is *too* versatile. The real Edwin Morgan never stands up.' Yet, Schmidt says, he believes there is 'an "I", autobiographical, candid, strong and vulnerable, who articulates those poems which seem most durable'.²³ This single self occupies the last of his works most fully.

Turn the clock back again to 1990. Glasgow is designated the European City of Culture. Morgan is acknowledged unofficial city laureate – the official position is confirmed a few years later – and in this year, in the *Glasgow Herald* newspaper and other publications, he openly talks about his sexuality, and 'comes out'. Now, there are many things that might be said about this moment but here what is being emphasised is that it signals a civic and, indeed, national fact, a recognition that must be insisted upon: that sexual repression enforced by law, religious diktat and social convention with its bloated belly requires the crossbow challenge of public discourse. And there is courage required to step up to that challenge. Further, the degree of liberation brought about by this openness, this declaration of 1990, had its poetic consequences in the autobiographical sequence of 2003, *Love and a Life*. Here the great ventriloquist has given way to the single mortal man, speaking of his own life and loves explicitly and tenderly, as if to remind us that any human experience is always different.

This is at the heart of *The Play of Gilgamesh*, based on the oldest written story in the world, where the hero-king and the earth-creature Enkidu have to reconcile themselves to the 'fixed' law of mortality, and understand the value it confers, in all its 'various and vast' manifestations, upon the living. If Morgan's example is a benign inspiration, which it is, and if, as he says, 'unknown is best', it is because he has taught us never to despise the outcast, always to remember the process.

The Prize

In ‘Poetry’ from the sequence *Grafts / Takes* (1983), we are given three moments illustrating poets at work. In the first, Virgil tells prospective visitors he is installing a new hypocaust (an ancient Roman central heating system), and is not to be disturbed while writing *The Aeneid*, approaching a crucial moment in ‘tragic Carthage’. In the second, Byron excuses himself after six hours of drink and dancing, yawns, goes home, and writes six brilliant pages of *Don Juan*. In the third, Wordsworth sends his dog ahead to warn him if anyone is coming who might overhear him murmuring his poetry as he composes it in his solitary wandering in the Lake District. Morgan tells us Wordsworth might seem ‘crazed’ but then he corrects himself:

Not crazed. Bith in eorle indryhten theaw
thaet he his ferthlocan faeste binde,
healde his hordcofan, hycge swa he wille.²⁴

This is a passage from the old English poem ‘The Wanderer’ (lines 11–14), from *The Exeter Book*, c. AD 600–1000, and in Morgan’s own translation reads:

It is true I know
that the custom shows most excellent in a man
to lock and bind up all his mind,
his thought his treasure, let him think what he will.²⁵

In other words, play your cards close to your chest, until you know you have a winning hand or, as Morgan puts it in the final stanza:

Who admits he’s fought until he’s won
and drawn the victory into anecdote
or hung it by the fire upon a string?²⁶

The fight requires presence, continues through process, and the victory is not merely anecdote but a life’s work encompassed, the prize. But the prize is now part of the process, requiring the presence of others.

An old English riddle is the last poem in his last book, *Dreams and Other Nightmares*, first published on his ninetieth birthday and launched at the event described at the beginning of this chapter. The solution

is 'Creation' and this is also the answer to the notion that the limits of human understanding of the world have been reached. The three Odysseys are over. Yet the world is not ended, nor even, as Morgan says, cluttered. There is still immense space and time to explore. The placement of 'Creation' at the end of his last book, fixed in place, might suggest its significance as a deliberated point, a final judgement. For the word 'Creation' is more than a noun. It is an enactment, a reminder of the verbal movement it represents. It is an indication of the unknown, 'promulging what grows after'. This is Morgan's Futurist manifesto, a promise of how things are yet to be. It might be considered alongside Morgan's judgement, delivered in the voice of his alter ego Pelagius, in the 2002 collection *Cathures*, that what must come will arrive without taint of original sin, and with 'only human grace'.²⁷

This is the 'deep driving force' noted at the beginning of this chapter.

This collection of essays is intended to explore the world of Edwin Morgan and act as a companion to his multifaceted trajectory through space and time. 'Who admits he's fought until he's won' is a question that dogs the whole trajectory, until, admission assured and victory confirmed, the whole story can be entered into and enacted through the expositions of his readers. The process continues. The beat goes on.