

New Currency or Old? - 'The Coin', by Edwin Morgan

By Gavin Wallace

The Coin

We brushed the dirt off, held it to the light.
The obverse showed us *Scotland*, and the head
of a red deer; the antler-glint had fled
but the fine cut could still be felt. All right:
we turned it over, read easily *One Pound*,
but then the shock of Latin, like a gloss,
Respublica Scotorum, sent across
such ages as we guessed but never found
at the worn edge where once the date had been
and where as many fingers had gripped hard
as hopes their silent race had lost or gained.

The marshy scurf crept up to our machine,
sucked at our boots. Yet nothing seemed ill-starred.
And least of all the realm the coin contained.

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from *New Selected Poems*, Carcanet Press, 2000

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'The Coin' is the forty-fourth in the sequence of fifty-one sonnets which make up Edwin Morgan's *Sonnets from Scotland*, first published in its entirety in 1984. *Sonnets from Scotland* can, and should, be regarded as much as a long poem as a sequence, and it is one of the most important and significant contributions to that genre Scotland has ever produced, to be considered in the company of Burns' *Tam O' Shanter*, MacDiarmid's *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle*, or W.S. Graham's *The Night-Fishing*.

Sonnets from Scotland is a catch-all of Morgan's extraordinary poetic personality: his hyper-imaginative inventiveness; formal and technical brilliance; fascination with change, energy, transformation, and startling conjunctions; and his

indomitable cultural and political optimism and faith in renewal. It was in fact a political failure which was a powerful motivation for the work: the botched Devolution Referendum of 1979, when a majority of Scots voted for devolution, only to be told by the then Labour Westminster government that the majority wasn't big enough. The aftermath was baleful in its impact on Scottish political and cultural self-belief. Characteristically, Morgan's response — as both poet and critic — was to view this enormous national anti-climax not as an ending, but a new beginning, or, to use his own description, a 'feeling of "nevertheless" ...'

"Nevertheless", or re-imagining the possible, suffuses *Sonnets from Scotland* in every conceivable way. It re-invents Scotland through an audacious telescoping of Scotland-in-history from primeval swamp to post-apocalyptic wasteland, incorporating real historical figures from Pontius Pilate to Matt McGinn. As if this wasn't sufficiently metaphysically challenging in itself, Morgan goes further in opting for an omni-directional narrative technique which hurtles the reader across dizzying temporal extremes — not simply through past, present, and future, but through conjectured 'past futures' and 'future pasts' as well. The work's unifying device will come as no surprise to readers familiar with the Morgan oeuvre: the extraordinary journeys depicted are mediated through the perspective of unspecified time-and-space travellers, who are on a mission which is just as tantalisingly vague. The juxtaposition of the antiquity of the sonnet form as a corner-stone of the Western poetic canon with the postmodern imaginative transport (literally) of science-fiction, time-travelling, and meta-narrative is the quintessential embodiment of Morgan's poetics. 'The Coin' is its DNA.

The first feature to strike the reader in a close analysis of the text of this poem is the consummate aplomb with which Morgan rises to the challenge of the precise formal restrictions demanded by the sonnet. Of the sonnet's two characteristic types — the Italian (or Petrarchan) and the English (or Shakespearean), Morgan adheres to the rules of the first, which is distinguished by its bi-partite division into the 'Octave' and the 'Sestet', with eight and six lines respectively, the first with the rhyme scheme *abbaabba*, the second rhyming *cdecde*. Morgan introduces further layers to this poetic texture through subtle patterns of alliteration and half-rhyme — *fled/fine/felt; shocked/across; guessed/edge; scurf/sucked*. In contrast to this technical sophistication is the directness, immediacy, and freshness of the poem's language and structure, with its accessible idiom — except for that *Respublica Scotorum*, which is, literally, a

‘shock’ — and the poem’s clear division into six sentences.

Yet the simple narrative core of the poem — the space-travellers find, or possibly excavate, a One Pound coin — belies the almost-shocking premise we are being asked to imagine, and accept: a machine has brought space travellers to land on the earth of a remotely future Scotland, at a time when an independent Scottish republic has been in existence long enough for a coin of its state to have had its date rubbed away by successive generations of fingers. Can we believe this? This small, lone coin begets a veritable mint of questions. What has become of this ‘race’, which we are told is now ‘silent’? The Scots seem to have had their day, and to have struggled to have it — their grip on their hopes and destiny has been ‘hard’ — but have they really gone? Is the currency the coin symbolises ‘new’, or ‘old’? Is this a Scotland yet-to-be, or has-been? Or both? Why would a presumably post-21st century, ‘post-historical’ republican Scotland adopt Latin — a dead language — as an official state lingo? Has antiquity, too, in this brave new world, experienced a re-birth?

The closest the poem comes to answering these awesome imponderables is in the lines ‘The marshy scurf crept up to our machine,/scuffed at our boots.’ This suggests both a post-apocalyptic/nuclear wasteland, and primordial slime, both carrying a powerfully implicit sense of threat: is this a trap set by the wily, hidden Scots? Or is the fate which wiped them off the planet about to ‘creep up’ and claim the alien speakers as well, just before they take-off? The sonnet’s conclusion is a beguiling fusion of foreboding and affirmation, teetering over an abyss between nostalgia and hope — ‘Yet nothing seemed ill-starred./And least of all the realm the coin contained.’ The Italian sonnet traditionally retains for its conclusion a powerful epigrammatic synthesis and summation of the foregoing, and in the observance and transcendence of that convention, Morgan produces one of the most extraordinary closing lines in the whole of Scottish poetry. It offers a perfect structural and enactive reflex not simply for the sonnet’s theme, but for the nature of the sonnet form and for the poetic act itself: poetry creates a formal whole that can apprehend, or ‘contain’, a ‘realm’ of emotion, thought, or argument. The sonnet contains the coin that contains the realm; the realm contains the coin that contains the sonnet.

In fourteen astonishingly compact lines, ‘The Coin’, lapidary-like, slips infinite riches of cognitive possibility into the reader’s mental pockets. In the words of Morgan’s late, great contemporary Iain Crichton Smith, this poem is a ‘fresh

hypothesis', and, more than that, a modest down-payment investing in the glint of new-minted, brighter futures.

Poetry as a Poundstretcher — what stronger proof of literature's value for money in the realm of the arts could there be?

References & Further Information

'The Coin' and all the poems from *Sonnets from Scotland* are available in *New Selected Poems*, published by Carcanet Press.

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