

The Milk of Space

By Hamish Whyte

Take the voyage out then! Drink the milk of space!
—'Islands'

Some notes on Edwin Morgan's science fiction poems (written before his last voyage out)

Among Edwin Morgan's favourite authors in his 1920s and 1930s childhood and teenage years (conveniently, for us, listed in his Letts Pocket Diary for 1933) were Jules Verne, Rider Haggard, H.G. Wells, G.A. Henty, Edgar Rice Burroughs and Arthur Conan Doyle. He couldn't get enough of their tales of adventure, fantasy and exploration, so much so that he persuaded his parents to join several different libraries in addition to the ones he was a member of. Books were one thing, magazines another. EM lapped up imports like *Amazing Stories* and home-grown publications like *Scoops*, but mother and father did not approve, going as far as to throw them on the fire. Morgan resorted to the time-honoured device of torch under the bedclothes. When he was fourteen he would buy copies of *Scoops* (2d weekly) from a wee shop near Rutherglen Academy (where he was a pupil) and smuggle them into the house.

But along with science fiction was science fact—the list also contains books like *The Wonder Book of Science*, *The Wonder Book of Why and What*, *The Pictorial Cabinet of Marvels*, *The Book of the Heavens*. He was fascinated by biology and astronomy as well as the strange and fantastic. Like most boys he was both hungry for knowledge and souped-up on superheroes. The cinema too, with films like *Metropolis* (1926)—a mechanistic vision of the future—fed his imagination. 'Practical knowledge and exuberant fantasy', as Kevin McCarra put it.¹

Without going into a history of science fiction (and I confess here to writing out of relative ignorance), it is clear that writers like Poe, Verne and Wells set the scenarios for much of what was to follow: imagined exploration of time, of space, of the earth itself, surface and depths, interaction between humans and alien beings. The genre flourished particularly after World War II, with the

establishment of the United Nations and the growth of a space industry: possible future societies were described, the possibility of intelligent life elsewhere, of other worlds, was explored; space travel, time travel; and more recently, ramifications of machines, computers, artificial intelligence; cyber fiction.

Edwin Morgan's science fiction poems roughly follow the trajectory of the history of the genre. His early poems and prose pieces (such as 'Hypnophantas', 1937) show a strong fantasy streak, but they were more what Poe called 'grotesque and arabesque'. Science added its richness to the work after EM had a kind of Damascus experience when he heard that Russia had sent up its second sputnik:

... I was stirred by a deep confusion of feelings,
got up, stood with my back to the wall and my palms pressed hard
against it, my arms held wide
as if I could spring from this earth ...
- 'The Unspoken'

There was an impetus in what was happening in other sciences too—biology and biochemistry: Morgan felt that science was catching up with science fiction.

'The Creator and the Computer' appeared in 1958, 'French Rocket Cat' and 'The Computer's First Christmas Card' in 1963, and then in 1964 and 1965, the first two of his great science fiction poems, 'In Sobieski's Shield' and 'From the Domain of Arnheim' (the others being 'The First Men on Mercury', 1971; 'Memories of Earth', 1973; and the *Star Gate* poems of 1979). He was still writing about Sputnik fifty years after its orbit ('The Sputnik's Tale' from *Planet Wave in A Book of Lives* 2007).

Most of the standard science fiction fare is covered in the poems: space exploration to other planets ('The Moons of Jupiter'), encounters with extra-terrestrial life (['The First Men on Mercury'](#)), time travel ('From the Domain of Arnheim'), teleporting ('In Sobieski's Shield'), but despite Morgan's interest and delight in the genre and in science itself, there are other factors at work—the freedom of the form enables him to explore in different ways his abiding concerns: belief in the future, belief in the resilience of human beings, the cruciality of change and the importance of optimism; allowing access to other worlds, giving a voice to outsiders, even inanimate objects; telling a story. As he said in an interview, 'it's not so much the science or the scientific ideas that are important; these just set



something off which really in the end is talking about human beings and how they would react.’² Science fiction became an important strand through all of Edwin Morgan’s work, especially from the mid 1960s, through the miraculous blend of science fiction and history in *Sonnets from Scotland* (1984) and *Planet Wave* (1997), to the flyting of two cancer cells in *Gorgo and Beau* (2003), and often reflected themes and concerns being worked out in other kinds of poems.

‘In Sobieski’s Shield’ comes from what was perhaps the most creative and innovative decade of Morgan’s writing life, the 1960s, and the birth of what became his continuing mantra of ‘the second life’ (or sometimes ‘Change Rules’). Morgan discovered that in his early forties life began again, both personally—he met his great love John Scott—and in his work—he realised that he could write about anything, from the streets of Glasgow to Marilyn Monroe or Saturn. ‘In Sobieski’s Shield’ appears in the collection titled *The Second Life* (1968). Told by the father, it’s about a family escaping earth as the sun dies—they are dematerialised and reappear in another constellation. They are the same family but different—one of the differences is that the father has acquired a tattoo that seems to have come from the arm of a soldier who died in the First World War. They look at the strange new planet: the father says, ‘let’s take our second / like our first life ... it’s hard to go / let’s go’. We carry the past with us but we change, we go forward: human survival and human resilience. For what it’s worth, ‘let’s go’ are the final words of Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* and also the call to arms that runs through Peckinpah’s film *The Wild Bunch* (1969).

The title of ‘From the Domain of Arnheim’ is taken from a little-known tale by Edgar Allan Poe, ‘The Domain of Arnheim’, which describes a strange, beautiful world created by a fabulously wealthy man. Morgan’s poem is about a group of time/space travellers visiting the Domain, which seems to be earth at an early stage of human development—the visitors, invisible to the humans, see a crowd and fires, hear singing and come to realise they are watching the celebration of a birth. I’m not entirely sure what the connection with Poe’s story is (other than the title), but a key sentence from it might be ‘There *may* be a class of beings, human once, but now invisible to humanity, to whom, from afar, our disorder may seem order.’ The humans sense the aliens but are not afraid. Morgan has commented that the humans ‘are going to survive, not frightened by what to them appear to be alien spirits, gods. They have no gods: in a sense they are going to make or be themselves the gods.’³ Maybe there is an echo here of H.G. Wells’s *Men Like*

Gods? (as 'The First Men on Mercury' invokes Wells's *The First Men on the Moon*).

One of the advantages of choosing verse rather than prose for science fiction is that one can perhaps be freer in one's range, plodding plots can be abandoned in favour of impressionism, and indeed many of Edwin Morgan's science fiction poems are fragmentary, extracts or episodes from longer stories—although they can be epic when required, as in 'Memories of Earth'. Fantasy can be kept in check and issues more sharply focused on. Almost the only science fiction poem that has a kind of beginning, middle and end is 'The First Men on Mercury', a relatively short poem in which humans encounter aliens and the problem of communicating with them.

The most striking device in nearly all the science fiction poems is Morgan's use of the first person, singular and plural—this obviously make the experiences described more real (including scope for his skill in describing vividly the surfaces of planets), but also enables him to be anywhere and everywhere. 'We' is often a group of alien beings, intergalactic time travellers or explorers, as in 'From the Domain of Arnheim' and 'Memories of Earth', where they encounter humans and are disturbed (concentration camps in 'Memories of Earth') or intrigued (the birth ceremony in 'From the Domain of Arnheim') by what they see (the human/alien impact theme) or the bunch of spacefolk who keep bumping into Scotland at different stages of its history in *Sonnets from Scotland*. The encounters are usually described in terms of benefit to the aliens—they learn something useful or are envious of human feeling, even if there is the implication that the aliens are superior beings. As they say, wistfully, in 'The Summons' (from *Sonnets from Scotland*): 'we were loath to go ... If it was love we felt, would it not keep / and travel where we travelled?')

The 'we' are not usually named. 'Memories of Earth' is an exception: the alien explorers are given very science-fiction-ish names—Baltaz, Tromro, Kort—like characters in a Burroughs Mars book. The 'I' is never named, but is more often human ('planetman') than alien, recounting personal experiences, as in 'The Moons of Jupiter' from *Star Gate* ('I took a book with me' ['Amalthea']; 'I did not sing' ['Callisto']). The latter poem is the only instance of Morgan's own life intruding in a science fiction poem, when the narrator remembers a grave in Lanarkshire, 'listening in shame / ...to my thoughts / that left us parted in a quarrel'—a reference to John Scott, who had died in 1978, the year before *Star*

Gate was published.

The 'I' in *Planet Wave* (1997) is an ambiguous figure—he seems to be a space- and time-travelling bard and storyteller, present at key moments in earth's history (the Big Bang, the Flood, the Siege of Leningrad, 9/11). Sometimes he observes, sometimes takes part ('I joined them for a meal' ['In the Cave']). *Planet Wave* was inspired by H.G. Wells's *A Short History of the World*—the idea of compressing a huge subject. But the (*Dr Who*-ish) narrator could have come from that hugely influential science fiction novel by Olaf Stapledon, *Last and First Men* (1930):

'I have to present in one book the essence not of centuries but of aeons. Clearly we cannot walk at leisure through such a tract ... We must fly ... But since the flier sees nothing of the minute inhabitants below him ... we must also punctuate our flight with many descents ... even alighting at critical points to speak face to face with individuals' (Introduction).

And, of course, never forgetting that in all the poems, the 'I' and 'we' are the poet, are Edwin Morgan, observing, recording.

There are other areas of related exploration. The exploration in the science fiction poems can be linked to the exploration of language in the concrete poems (sometimes they are combined, as in 'Spacepoem 1: from Laika to Gagarin'). There are the poems of what might be called Morgan's pure fantasy mode: 'Frontier Story', 'The Ages', 'Rider' (which has one of my favourite openings: 'a grampus whacked the hydrophone'), or 'The Mouth' (science fiction as well). There are poems, sometimes love poems ('The Unspoken', 'Without It', 'Islands') which have science or science fiction elements. There are poems which explore inner space, such as 'Migraine Attack': the questing group (again) hacking their way through a jungle (like Haggard's or Doyle's), ending with Morgan's usual note of human optimism—'we shook ourselves like a dog / and tried a song'.

Edwin Morgan sees science fiction as 'appealing to the imagination and to the sense of the adventurous and the heroic' (back to London, Wells, Verne, Burroughs and the rest) and argues that 'poetry has to look outwards towards something that hasn't happened yet.'⁴ He has always seen poetry itself as an instrument of exploration, like a spaceship, navigating new fields of feeling and experience. He has also said that 'it requires a peculiar kind of imagination that is willing to bend itself to meet a world which is lying there in the rain like an old

shoe.’⁵ Or take the voyage out or drink the milk of space.

References & Further Information

¹ Robert Crawford and Hamish Whyte eds., *About Edwin Morgan* (Edinburgh University Press, 1990) p.2

² Edwin Morgan, *Nothing Not Giving Messages: reflections on his work and life* (Polygon, 1990) p. 32

³ Edwin Morgan, *Nothing Not Giving Messages: reflections on his work and life* (Polygon, 1990) p. 83-4.

⁴ *Ibid.* p. 137.

⁵ *Ibid.* p. 192.

(c) *The Bottle Imp*