‘I am Iron Bard’: Edwin Morgan, Concrete Poetry and the Glasgow High Rises

By Greg Thomas

In 1964, Edwin Morgan wrote a concrete poem in homage to the nineteenth-century engineer Isambard Kingdom Brunel, a bridge-shaped graphic verse probably intended to mimic Brunel’s design for the Clifton Suspension Bridge.[1] The piece was created for a special, Brunel-themed issue of the little magazine *Link*, an important forum for the early circulation of concrete poetry in the UK. *Link* was edited by students at the Cheltenham campus of Gloucestershire College of Art, not too far from the west Bristol site of Brunel’s most iconic construction.

dom SYLVESTER HOUEDARD.

puffpuffpuffpuffpuffpuffpuff

EDWIN MORGAN

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I AM ISOBAR   DOM BOOMMILL
I AM IRON BAR   DOM BROODWELL
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Fig 1. Edwin Morgan, 'Construction for I. K. Brunel' and Dom Sylvester Houédard, ['puffpuffpuffpuffpuffpuffpuff'], in *Link*, 8 (1964), [p. 12]. Reproduced by kind permission of the Edwin Morgan Trust, Carcanet Press, and the Prinknash Abbey Trustees.

Despite the distracting editorial correction in its immediate vicinity, Morgan's poem rings out from its foundations with alliterative zeal, just beneath a visual poem on the same theme by his friend, the poet, artist and Catholic monk Dom Sylvester Houédard.[2] The relative semantic minimalism of Houédard's work is useful in indicating by contrast how Morgan approached the possibilities and strictures of concrete poetry: by incorporating a surprising thematic expansiveness. His poem makes a series of associations between Brunel's architecture and other figures, themes, and events from history and myth which we'll return to at the close of this article. (It's also worth noting that the Forth Road Bridge, a suspension bridge on a far grander scale than Brunel's but vitally informed by its example, opened to traffic the same year as Morgan wrote and published this poem, and was probably in his mind as he clacked at the typewriter

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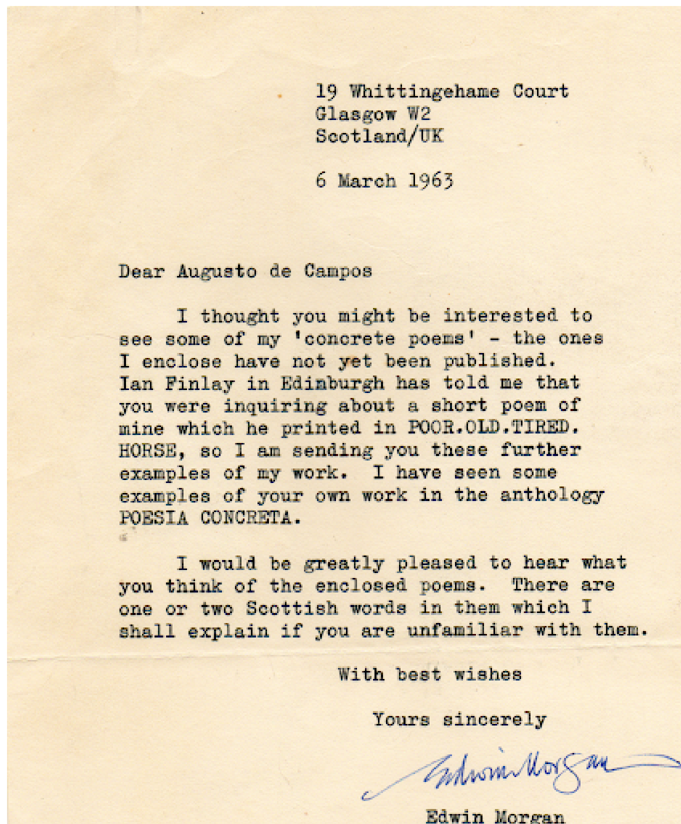

19 Whittingehame Court
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Scotland/UK

6 March 1963

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With best wishes

Yours sincerely

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It's worth taking a brief detour here to São Paulo, where the Noigandres poetry group – who fundamentally influenced Morgan's sense of the creative possibilities of concrete after he discovered their work in 1962 – were based during the 1950s and 60s. Brazil at this time was experiencing a renaissance of modernist architecture. The construction of a new capital, Brasília, in the country's mountainous interior by two followers of Le Corbusier, Oscar Niemeyer and Lúcio Costa, became the quintessential expression of this paradigm. In a country undergoing a period of rapid economic and technological advancement, the capacity for modernist building design and town planning to facilitate new,

collective-oriented patterns of behaviour, and thus to propagate a kind of egalitarian political programme, was turned towards the ends of post-colonial state-building.

In short, as the critic of Brazilian concrete poetry Antonio Sergio Bessa notes, '[t]he radical views on urban planning that swept Europe at the beginning of the twentieth century encountered a blank slate in a country striving to overcome its colonial past'.[3] The Noigandres's famous manifesto 'Pilot Plan for Concrete Poetry' (1958) namechecked, as is widely known, Costa's 'Pilot Plan' for the new city, built over the period 1956–60.[4] And the Noigandres poets – the brothers Augusto and Haroldo de Campos and their friend Décio Pignatari – often sought to emulate the sleek efficiency of modernist architecture in their poetry. They did this both at a literal, visual-figurative level (by composing poems whose verses slotted together like building blocks, for example) and through the analogous linguistic efficiency implied through minimal semantic range, copious use of white space and repetition of words.

Back on the west coast of Scotland, Morgan was still compiling his amazing scrapbooks of collaged words and image, which he had begun as a pre-teen during the 1930s and continued making up until the mid-1960s. Rooting through the volumes he created at that time (now stored in Glasgow University's special collections), we find them crammed with images of modernist architecture from around the world, many of them post-war projects in ex-colonial states such as Brazil partaking in the great second wave of modernist architecture. One colour photograph featured in an arrangement in Morgan's fifteenth scrapbook shows a futuristic sweep of city highway in central São Paulo. In scrapbook nine we find Lúcio Costa's Ministry of Education and Health building in Rio de Janeiro, a forerunner of the Brazilian modernist heyday constructed during 1939–43.[5]

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scales. If not the expression of a new cultural nationalism *per se*, these projects articulated a spirit of social change and optimism comparable in limited ways to that found in Latin America – even a utopianism – which stirred the poet's sense of civic pride.

Sure enough, in the scrapbooks alongside images of Sao Paulo, Mexico City and other metropolitan sites are newspaper clippings documenting the many construction projects underway in Morgan's home city in the post-war decades, and particularly from 1954 onwards, when high-rises increasingly became the go-to architectural option for Glasgow's town planners. Morgan's twelfth scrapbook features a panoramic shot of a new high-rise council estate at Moss Heights in 1954. Another newspaper image, showing tower blocks under construction in Paisley in 1959, gives a sense of the dizzying pace at which Glasgow's skyline and street-map was changing, the caption announcing '15 storeys completed in 30 working days'. Morgan the collagist, the picture-diarist, was documenting a housing revolution.

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By the 2000s, the much-loathed high rises of Glasgow's social housing revolution had mostly been demolished. They have left gaps in the city's urban fabric which survive to this day, and the social problems that have been blamed too readily on their sudden and jarring appearance endure, too. But there was a time when these projects stood for something like a utopian modernism, and it is this spirit that Edwin Morgan partly sought to capture with the rigid yet wriggling forms of his architectonic concrete poems.

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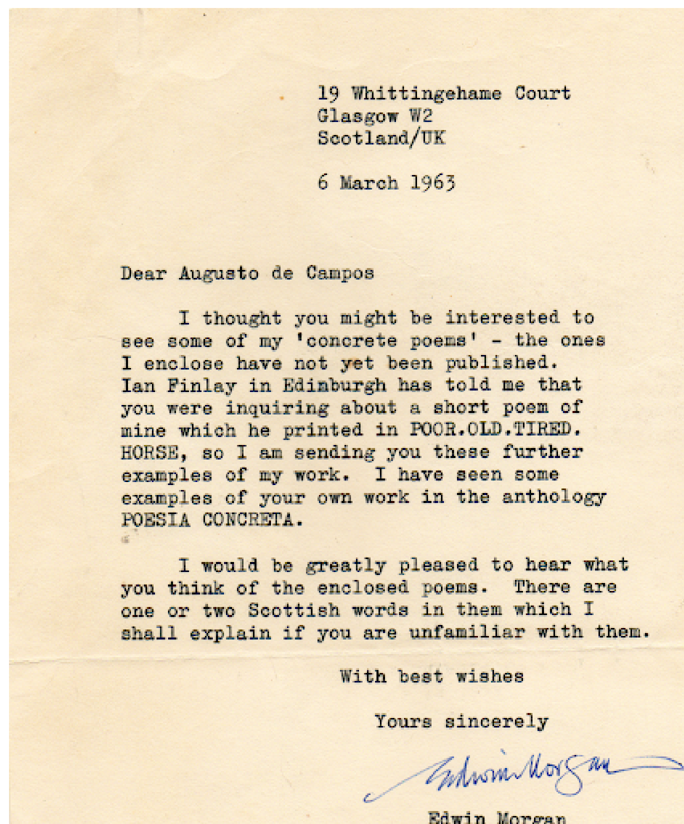

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