‘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.

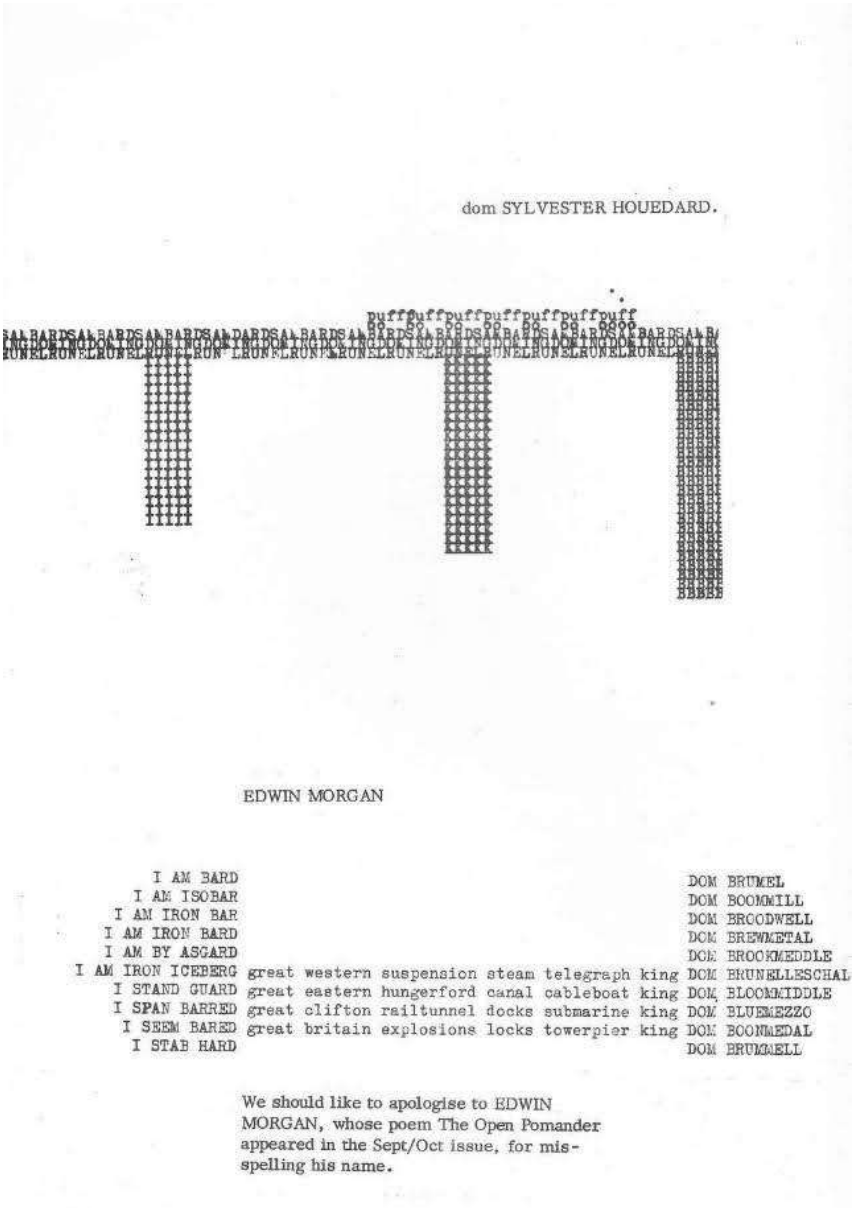

Fig 1. Edwin Morgan, 'Construction for I. K. Brunel' and Dom Sylvester Houédard, ['puffpuffpuffpuffpuffpuffpuff'], in *Link*, 8 (1964), [p. 12]. Reproduced by kind permission of the Edwin Morgan Trust, Carcanet Press, and the Prinknash Abbey Trustees.

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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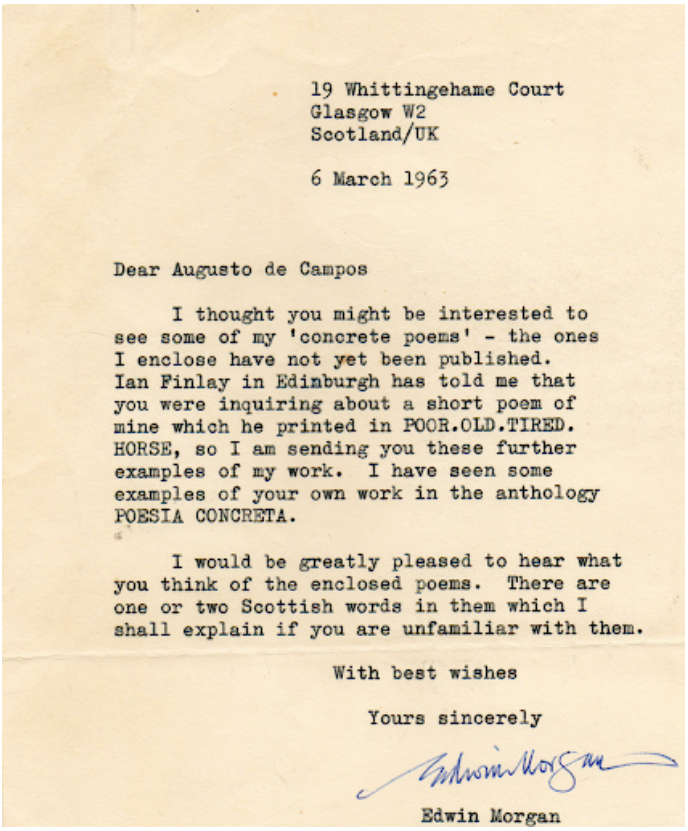

19 Whittingehame Court
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Scotland/UK

6 March 1963

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I would be greatly pleased to hear what you think of the enclosed poems. There are one or two Scottish words in them which I shall explain if you are unfamiliar with them.

With best wishes

Yours sincerely

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Fig 2. Edwin Morgan's first letter to Augusto de Campos. Part of Augusto de Campos's private collection. Reproduced by kind permission of the Edwin Morgan Trust with acknowledgements and sincere thanks to Augusto de Campos.

For now, I simply want to emphasise the architectonic visual qualities of Morgan's poem – and perhaps also to note the influence of cantilevering (of the kind Brunel made famous above the Avon Gorge) on the shift from nineteenth-century architecture, with its thick, stolid, regular verticals, to twentieth-century architecture, with its emphasis on light, space, and unbroken horizontals. After all, it was one aspect of the legacy of that modernism – specifically Glasgow's quixotic post-war town-planning and high-rise construction – that gave the word 'concrete poetry' its most site-specific connotation for Morgan.

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]

The graphic compositions in Morgan's scrapbooks created prior to his concrete phase seem to capture a half-developed sense of the relationship between architectural modernism, a form of visual-linguistic compositional sense and a certain post-colonial national buoyancy: the same sentiment Bessa alludes to above and which Morgan probably connected with partly on the basis of his anti-imperialism and Scottish nationalism. Moreover, the landscape and skyline of his home city was changing with dynamic speed during the 1950s and 60s, through the construction of huge swathes of social housing on increasingly vertiginous

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.

Introducing their co-authored book *Glasgow: High-Rise Homes, Estates and Communities* (2020), the historians Lynn Abrams, Ade Kearns, Barry Hazley and Valerie Wright note that, despite the later association of Glasgow's high-rise housing with deprivation, crime and intergenerational trauma, at the time they were built they partly manifested 'a utopian vision for communities and families'. True enough, this was accompanied by a basic, 'urgent need for new housing', (Glasgow was chronically short of inhabitable urban dwellings) and by 'hubris on the part of some politicians and officials at how quickly the city's housing problem could be fixed'.[6] Famously, a Glasgow City Council delegation visited Le Corbusier's Unité d'Habitation in Marseille in 1954. The site's influence found its way into many projects, most infamously at the Hutchesontown C district of the Gorbals, whose centrepiece of Brutalist slab blocks designed by Sir Basil Spence – demolished in 1993 – borrowed various design elements from the master.

'The first feature of Glasgow's encounter with high-rise living', Abrams et al note, 'was how sudden it was'.[7] Mirroring that view, architecture critics Miles Glendinning and Stefan Muthesius surmise that 'if Manchester had been the '"shock city" of the Industrial Revolution … Glasgow was the new "shock city" of the Modern housing revolution. Nowhere else, at such an early date, were so many large, high blocks completed or under construction at once'. They note that

‘in Glasgow from 1961 to 1968’, multi-storey flats ‘accounted for a staggering 75% of all new public housing’.[8] This was a uniquely high figure within Britain at a time when public housing in general was undergoing rapid, state-wide expansion.

The optimism about these changes, at least amongst much of Glasgow’s progressively minded intelligentsia, was often expressed in marvel at the height, grandeur and sheer number of new buildings. It is epitomised in a 1970 quote from Ronald Miller, Professor of Geography at Glasgow University: ‘the city which once had a monotonous skyline of four-storey tenements is now punctuated by over a hundred blocks of towers and slabs soaring to 10, 20 and even 31 storeys high’.[9] Morgan’s correspondence from this period fizzes with a similar excitement at the idea of a possible urban utopia being constructed in his home city – or at least at the strain of utopian optimism in the work underway.

This much is clear in a letter Morgan sent on Christmas Day 1966 to his friend, the concrete poet Ian Hamilton Finlay, responding to Finlay’s poem ‘Arcady’, which consisted simply of the lower-case letters of the alphabet arranged in a line on blue card. The work seemed, to Morgan, to sum up Finlay’s postlapsarian sense of a lost, classical golden age. In his reply Morgan mused that, while

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which Morgan embraced this three-dimensional expression of the new.[11]

Fig 3. Edwin Morgan's flat at Whittingehame Court, illustration from 1960s sales information. University of Glasgow, Archives & Special Collections, GB 247 MS Morgan R. Reproduced by kind permission of UoG Archives & Special Collections department.

Just as the concrete poets of Brazil were inspired in their literary endeavours by the construction of Brasilia during the late 1950s, Morgan's work often implies a connection between the rebuilding of Glasgow and his contemporaneous poetry, both facets of the same 'concrete revolution'. In his retrospective poem 'Epilogue: Seven Decades', he recalls how he:

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At the same time, Morgan was always sensitive to the limits of the minimalist project implicit in concrete poetry's responsiveness to architecture. He sought to test its boundaries through the incorporation of surprisingly dense swathes of semantic reference into his concrete poems. That much is clear in the description of his 'Brunel' poem in the 1964 transcript quoted above:

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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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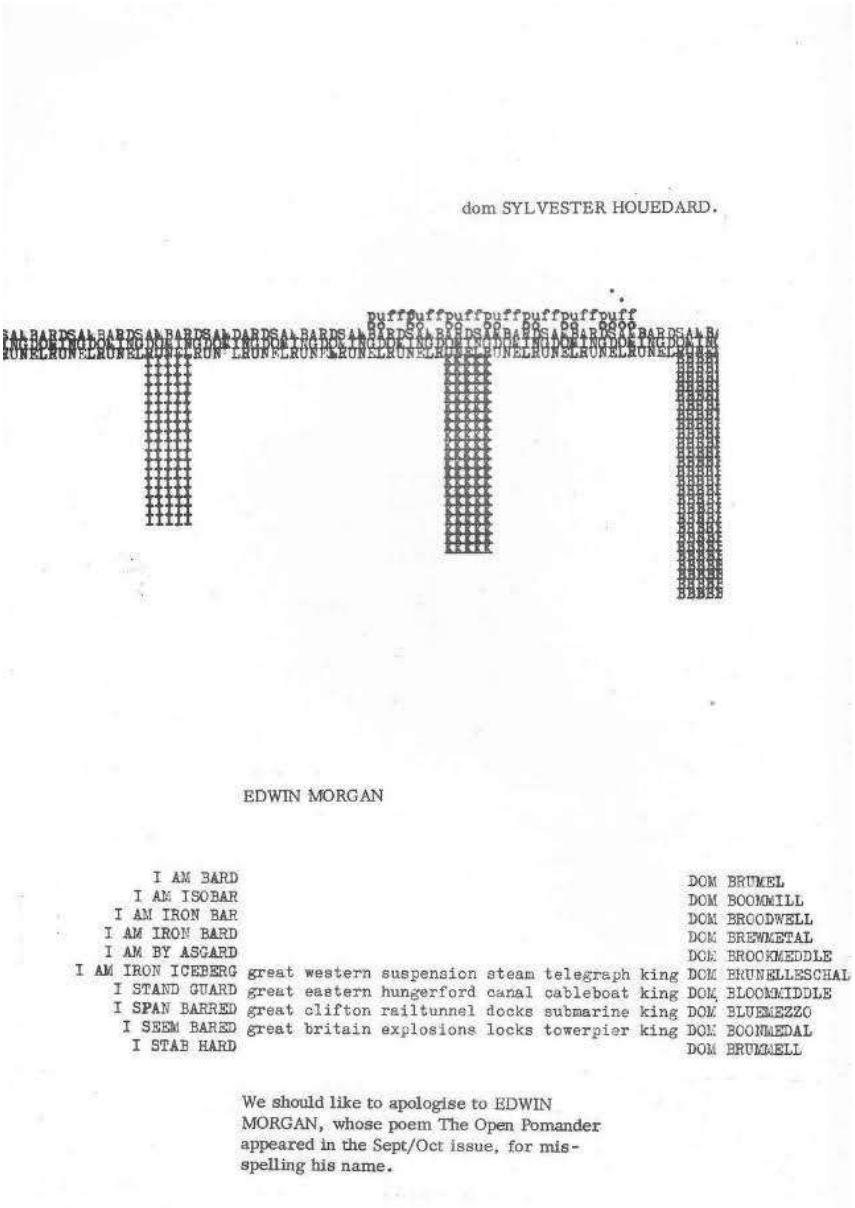

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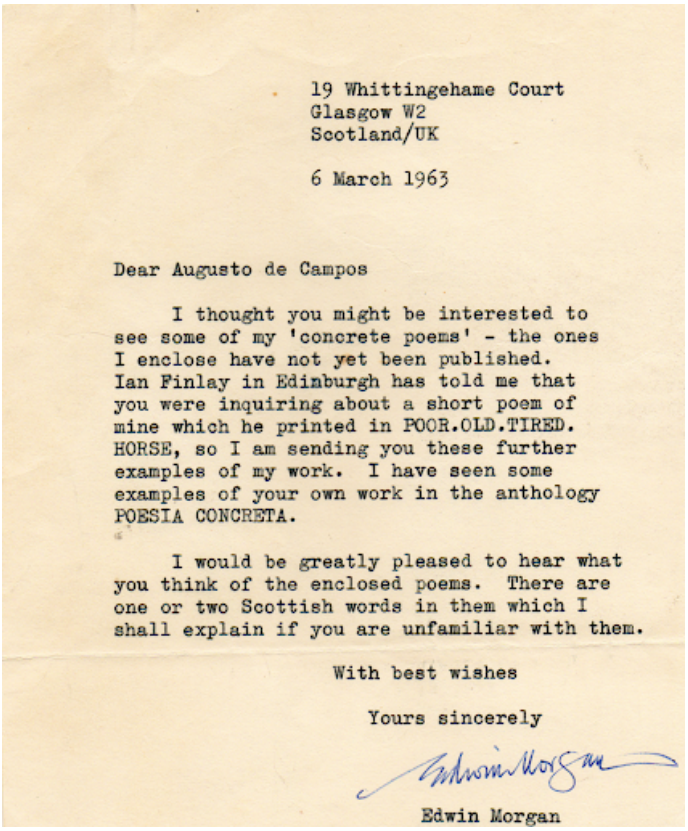

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