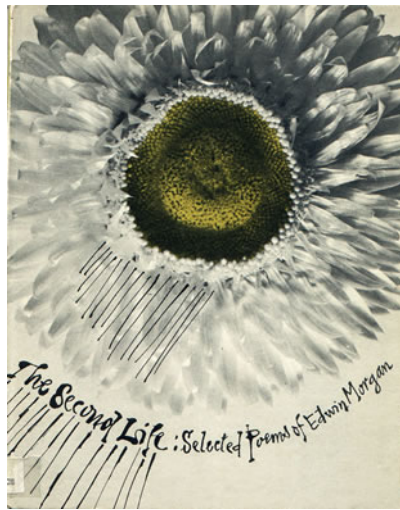# On *The Second Life* (1968) by Edwin Morgan

Ken Cockburn

Preface

This essay was one of eight written for the Scottish Poetry Library's website, offering an introduction to 20th century Scottish poetry by considering the work of the eight poets represented in the painting [Poets' Pub](#) (1980) by Alexander Moffat. Covering the decades from the 1920s to the 1990s, a collection by each poet is considered in detail under the headings The Book, The Title, The Decade, A Contemporary Reading and Further Reading.

> 1920s, Hugh MacDiarmid, *Sangschaw*
> 1930s, Sorley MacLean, *17 Poems for 6d: in Gaelic, Scots and English* (with Robert Garioch)
> 1940s, Sydney Goodsir Smith, *Under the Eildon Tree*
> 1950s, Norman MacCaig, *The Sinai Sort*
> 1960s, Edwin Morgan, *The Second Life*
> 1970s, Robert Garioch, *Doktor Faust in Rose Street*
> 1980s, George Mackay Brown, *The Wreck of the Archangel*
> 1990s, Iain Crichton Smith, *Ends and Beginnings*

The essays were written in 2003 by Ken Cockburn for the Scottish Poetry Library's website, where they were available from 2004 until c.2010. They are presented here with some abridgements, corrections and amendments.

The Book

Morgan, Edwin
The Second Life
(Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1968)
235x188mm, hardback, 88 numbered pages, plus 10 unnumbered preliminary and 6 unnumbered end pages

The book is dedicated 'to J.G.S.', that is John Scott, who Morgan met in 1963.

On the Contents page the page number is set on the left, followed by the poem title and, unusually, its date of composition. With one exception (from 1955), the poems date from March 1962 to May 1967, with over half the fifty-nine poems dated 1963 or 1964. The poems are sequenced thematically, not chronologically.

Writing in *Scottish International*, Tom Buchan described the book as follows. 'The book was typeset by computer. (...) It is supplied ex-works with a transparent plastic dustcover, has many unusual typographical features and all copies are in duotone white and off-concrete buff - white for the conventional poems and buff for the concrete ones. The cover is a yellow-and-white sunflower.'

The Title

The title poem opens the third section of 'conventional' (as opposed to 'concrete') poems, which concern love; but the phrase also occurs in the book's longest poem, 'In Sobieski's Shield', which is in the fourth and last section of 'conventional' poems, on science-fiction themes.

Dated 'May 1963' the first line of 'The Second Life' is a question without a question mark:

       But does every man feel like this at forty -

the whole of the long (23 lines) first stanza being in fact a long question, or a series of connected questions, reaching the question-mark only at its close. It is typical of Morgan's energy that the line begins with a 'but' - a conversational tone, and implying that this thought has developed out of, in opposition to, another - and the postponed question-mark, the series of

linked questions, suggests less confusion than curiosity, an evolving train of thought rather than thought coming up against its own or external limits; the poems' free-verse form giving a sense of improvisation, adventure, discovery, rather than conforming to previously established patterns. The energy of this first stanza is related to the rebuilding of his home city, Glasgow, and the season: 'an aspiring place... that rising spirit / all things are possible... the daffodil banks that were never so crowded and lavish... a city's renewed life'. The question becomes not what he feels, for that is certain, but the cause or source of his feelings, whether the city or the season, or the two connected, and in what way. The second stanza is descriptive and remembered, rather than questioning and of the moment, though the recalled scene - activities on 'Bingham's pond', first ice-skaters and then 'the painted boats [which] are ready for pleasure' - are used to answer, as it were, the preceding questions, to confirm the feeling of renewal, to act as the starting-point or seed for the present feeling. The poem then becomes more speculative and abstract, with images of seeds and sloughed snake-skins. The transformation of the world through the transformation of individual perception is emphasised, before the snake-skin metaphor of renewal is transferred to the buildings and the people of the city, and the poem ends with a call to action (a favourite Morgan device):

> Slip out of darkness, it is time.

'In Sobieski's Shield' is a monologue, spoken by the leader of a group 'dematerialized the day before solar withdrawal' (the latter phrase is still a striking euphemism), and 'now rematerialized / ... on a minor planet / of a sun in Sobieski's Shield'. However they are not quite the same as when they left Earth: the narrator has 'only/four fingers on my left hand' and has vivid memories of the First World War which long preceded his birth; his teenage son's voice has broken; while he is repeatedly amazed by the 'extraordinarily/strange and beautiful crown of bright red hair' his wife has acquired. Of her he says:

> ... the sobbing
> shuddering first breaths of her second life I don't
> know what made me use that phrase who are we
> if we are not who we were we have only
> one life...

Of his son he says:

> ... his blue eyes
> are the same but there's a new graveness of the
> second life that phrase again...

In his new form the narrator acknowledges a new sense of connectedness to the past, to the mother-planet however distant they now are from it, and to humanity. The poem ends dynamically with everyone reawakened and the narrator resolving to explore the new planet but there is also a darker element, implying that such a rebirth into a 'second life' is neither physically nor psychically unproblematic. The phrase 'the old moon's in / the new moon's arms' might describe connectedness, growth and continuity, but its echo of the ballad 'Sir Patrick Spens' (such an echo forming another kind of connectedness) implies their impending death, as these lines in the ballad anticipate the fatal storm:

> 'I saw the new moon, late yestreen,
> Wi' the auld moon in her airm;
> And, if we gang to sea, master,
> I fear we'll come to harm.'

The Decade – 1960s

> I would have to say that the whole decade was for me a period of liberation. I would almost date my life from 1960 instead of 1920. I was productive in poetry; I was in love; I was fascinated by space exploration; popular music came of age and was a huge delight; films (film has always meant a lot to me) ... burst across the imagination; and even an enormous negative like the Vietnam War (which seemed to go on forever) released such powerful jets of human concern that it made the decade an unforgettable gouge on the parchment. Yes, I go along with the idea of a Scottish Spring.

Edwin Morgan, in *Justified Sinners: an archaeology of Scottish counter-culture* (1960-2000), (Edinburgh: pocketbooks, 2002)

A contemporary reading

The book is in seven sections: four of 'conventional' poems, interspersed with three of 'concrete' or experimental poems. Generally the 'conventional' poems are written in free-verse and are based on spoken language, while the 'concrete' poems work (or rather play) with a variety of strict formal devices. The subject matter of the four sections of 'conventional' poems can be categorised as follows: people, animals, places; Glasgow; love; and science-fiction.

The book opens with three deaths (two of them suicides) of celebrities, those of Hemingway, Marilyn Monroe, and Edith Piaf, as if Morgan wants to get death out of the way at the beginning: the winter before the spring. The poem in memory of Piaf is a celebration of her life, and anticipates the later love poems; writing in the voice of a woman allows Morgan to write of male sexual attractiveness in a way he does not in the later love poems. If it is technology (print, cinema, records) which has allowed the poet to 'know' these individuals, in the following trio of animal-centered poems it is also through technology that the natural world is encountered, whether via hunting rifles or the more benign train which gives a vision of a pheasant, its attention captured by 'a piece of glass', an industrially manufactured project. There are also three poems to other (living) Scottish writers: MacDiarmid, Ian Hamilton Finlay, and (more obliquely) Maurice Lindsay. MacDiarmid and Finlay were, in the 1960s, enemies: Iain Crichton Smith commented that '[Morgan] must be the only poet in Scotland who can address both... with an equal respect and appear logical in so doing.' Morgan was able to take MacDiarmid's 'hazard of naming' and Finlay's 'pleasure / of made things' and if not combine them at least integrate them thematically.

Morgan is the first Scottish poet to celebrate the modern city, specifically Glasgow, in all its variety: both its intimate or domestic aspects (snack bar, bus, flat etc), and its social, monumental or institutional aspects. Previous writers, perhaps understandably given the appalling living and working conditions of many Scottish city dwellers, tended to ignore or despise the industrial city as a subject for poetry, preferring either non-urban landscapes, or the past. Taking a lead from American writers like Hart Crane, and Europeans such as Lorca and Mayakovsky (both of whom Morgan translated) who visited New York and sang its praises in their own tongues, Morgan took as a subject his home city of Glasgow as it was in the 1960s: old, run-down and brutal, as well as modernising, affluent and various. Local speech patterns are reproduced, and Morgan's gift for monologue literally gives voice to both the beauty and brutality of the city. There is respect, but no

nostalgia for the past; the reader is encouraged to share Morgan's own curiosity and attentiveness, and a need to understand what is happening in the here and now. There is also something very physical about the Glasgow poems, the world perceived not through technology (as an extension of the body) but directly through the senses and with the body. In the new city of technology human imperfections remain, and people need each others' physical presence, sometimes to undertake the most basic of tasks, a fact expressed most forcefully in 'In the Snack Bar'.

'Meeting [John Scott] in 1963 was probably the thing that unleashed most of the poems in the 1960s, quite apart from what they were about. It was something that had a big effect on me. All the love poems from the 1960s were started off by meeting him and were about him in various ways.' Morgan came out publicly as a gay man in an interview with Christopher Whyte in *Nothing Not Giving Messages* (1990), where he discusses his sexuality and its relation to his writing. In the twenty-two years between the publication of 'the big book' (as Morgan refers to *The Second Life*) and his coming out, the love poems had become an established part of the Scottish school and university poetry curriculum, and were generally read as heterosexual love poems. In the interview Whyte comments that 'you have trodden a middle path, between explicitness and concealment, very successfully'. Reading the poems now, with the knowledge that Morgan is gay and that the poems were written about, or inspired by, his love for John Scott, they seem obviously gay, if only in their absence of any details specific to a heterosexual relationship; but perhaps their strength is in this non-specificity of the beloved, who is defined by related objects such as strawberries, cigarettes, gorse and rain, leaving the reader free to create their own image of the beloved within these scenarios (as with Shakespeare's sonnets, which Morgan refers to in the interview). The eroticism of these scenes is, as ever, heightened by the reader's awareness that something remains hidden; to discover what it might be invites an imaginative and participative act of reading.

The section of science-fiction poems which conclude the book are another way of reinventing, reimagining or reinterpreting the present. It is dominated by 'In Sobieski's Shield', which is followed by 'In the Domain of Arnheim'. In this poem two visitors travel back in time and observe a birth-celebration. They are invisible to the participants though their presence is sensed by them, perhaps like the presence of a ghost, a spirit, or a god. The visitors acknowledge their inability to intervene, and anyway they are granted no reverence:

A sweating trumpeter took
a brand from the fire with a shout and threw it
where our bodies would have been-
we felt nothing but his courage.
And so they would deal with every imagined power seen or unseen.
There are no gods in the domain of Arnheim.

Whatever meaningful 'second life' is envisaged by Morgan, it is not in this ethereal, unembodied, passive form, but rather as active, present, imperfect energy. A poem early in the book, 'The Domes of St Sophia', prefers ruins to the 'supreme beauty' of St Sophia Cathedral:

Unless the eternal eye is purified beyond meaning, perfection of form will not please forever.

That phrase 'purified beyond meaning' seems central to Morgan's concept of poetry, and of life: that meaning is found in imperfection, in the becoming rather than in the achieved, in the gaps between completed things where the imagination can find space to work. The Christian religious festivals featured in the book, Easter in 'Good Friday' and Christmas in 'Trio', are not about deferential respect for tradition, but are concerned with creating meaning from the coincidence of ordinary human activity, in all its transience and incompleteness, with the essential concepts of these festivals. 'Good Friday' is set on a bus at three o'clock, traditionally the time Christ cried out to God, 'why hast Thou forsaken me?', and has a slightly drunk man on his way to buy Easter eggs for his children talking about his uncertainty about exactly why he has a holiday from his work. 'Trio' has three young people 'coming up Buchanan Street, quickly, on a sharp winter evening': one carries a guitar, one a baby, one a chihuahua. They represent a new, transient, urban Trinity, a secular affirmation of the symbolic truth of Christmas; new human life flanked by animal life and music, a guitar standing in for the heavenly choirs.

The poems in the three 'concrete' sections are characterised by an interplay of rigour and playfulness. As in the work of American composer John Cage (1912-1992), certain given 'rules' or limits are established at the outset, within which however the poet is free to do what he likes. Cage himself provides the material for 'Opening the Cage', subtitled '14 variations on 14 words'. In theory any given 14 words can be arranged in 14 times 14, that is 196, possible ways. While Morgan is in one sense simply undertaking a mechanical rearrangement of a given phrase, his selection of 14 out of 196 possibilities, and their sequencing, require the making of aesthetic decisions. The two 'emergent poems', 'Message Clear' and 'Seven Headlines' take a

single phrase and, by extracting certain letters from it, always in the order in which they occur in the original phrase, make a new set of words and phrases, a new set of meanings, from the original without introducing any additional material. Other poems rework the sounds of a word or phrase, for example 'Pomander' and 'Orgy', to explode their possibilities. As with the seed, as with Glasgow, from the old, the familiar, the known there emerges the new: an unsuspected potential realised.

Further Reading

Morgan, Edwin
Collected Poems
(Manchester: Carcanet, 1990)

Morgan, Edwin
Collected Translations
(Manchester: Carcanet, 1996)

Morgan, Edwin
Nothing Not Giving Messages: reflections on his work and life
Edited by Hamish Whyte
(Edinburgh: Polygon, 1990)

Morgan, Edwin
Selected Poems
Audio tape; also featuring an interview with Michael Schmidt
(Bournemouth: Canto, 1985)

Akros
vol. 3, no. 7, March 1968
Review of The Second Life by Iain Crichton Smith, p.61

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no. 26, Summer 1968
Review by George Bruce of The Second Life, and Emergent Poems, by Edwin
Morgan, p.33

Scottish international
no. 3, August 1968
Review of The Second Life by Tom Buchan, p.62

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no. 1, February 1969
Review by Janet Harkness of The Second Life, by Edwin Morgan; and
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Morgan; p.36