

Perhaps the most striking feature of your poetry is its diversity, a feature summed up in the title of your book "From Glasgow to Saturn". That contained everything from love poetry to science fiction. Some people might call this diversity, the lack of focus, a fault. What would be your reaction to such criticism?

I think people like to have a thematic centre, like to know where they are. They feel more comfortable if they know what is central to any poet they're reading or thinking about. But I would tend to defend what I do. I think you have to be true to what you feel, and how you feel you should go about your work. I have always had the sense that I should do different things both in subject and form.

At the same time, it may not be true that my work lacks centre. The very fact that one person is responsible for all these poems means that there's some sort of unity about them. And there's a centre of place and background in Glasgow, to which I often return in my poems. Some themes recur in my work: exploration, for example, is a subject which I often go back to again and again. But probably the place you belong to is an obvious centre of your work - you go from Glasgow to Saturn but always come back again.

Social comment plays a major part in your work. Do you believe that the poet is the "unacknowledged legislator of the world", and that he has a responsibility not only to present-day society but also to the future?

I don't know about that - no-one does - you're lucky if a handful of poems survive at all. I think most writers have the hope that their work will survive, but I don't think it's such a strong hope or even a necessary hope as it used to be. Shakespeare, for example, in the Sonnets, speaks of immortality for himself and for the person he's writing about. That strong sense of immortality, of posterity, isn't so evident now. There's a great feeling

of flux and transience today; we know that, at any time, we could all simply disappear. Given that knowledge, you're not inclined to think of your work lasting for thousands of years.

I hope my work will survive for a while, perhaps long enough to have some kind of effect. But not forever.

Still on the question of social comment, do you feel that, as a poet and academic, you are removed from the people you write about and that, therefore, poetry of yours which attempts to be socially involved is a contradiction in terms?

I'm aware of this. Naturally, you want people outside the highly-educated academic circle to read and, hopefully, respond to your poems, but at the same time you know that this is rarely the case. The audience for poetry is a narrow one, and there's no simple answer to the problem. The solution has to be gradual, working through projects like the Writers in Schools scheme, and trying to give as many people as possible the chance not only to experience poetry but to experience many different kinds of poetry.

In Britain, poetry rarely achieves large audiences at public readings, and poets never gain the kind of cult-hero status of, say, Yevushenko and Mayakovsky in Russia. There, the non-academic public are interested in and influenced by poetry. How do your aims - obviously closely aligned to those of poets in Europe - fit into a British context?

I think those three you mentioned had no great faith and no great interest in the scientific progress of our century. I do tend to be more optimistic about the effects of technology on our lives. But I think interest in science is more important than optimism or pessimism; if the interest were there then writers might be able to respond to, and draw on, science. Even the token gestures towards science by some poets is preferable to mere blank opposition to everything technological.

Also, there's a stronger tradition in European countries of the poet being involved with his society, a tradition that has no real parallel here. When

BETWEEN THE LINES

Stephen Andrews interviews Edwin Morgan

poets are writing work of immediate civic concern, the public are less likely to view them as a class apart, and find them more easily accessible.

You're a poet, teacher, critic and translator. Which role do you enjoy most?

Funnily enough, I enjoy all of them, though teaching tends to be very time-consuming, and most of the criticism I've ever done has been journalistic, done against deadlines and so on. . . . if you don't enjoy these kinds of things there isn't much point to doing them. No matter which you're doing they must, if you're going to have any kind of impact, show some pleasure in the person who's doing them; you've got to feel that. In some way, the writer is enjoying what he's doing, even if it's just a book-review he's been working on. Lack of enjoyment communicates itself to the reader.

Your poetry shows an acute awareness of technology and science. You criticise Yeats, Eliot and Lawrence for their "sterile antipathy" towards modern technology, so presumably your own attitude is more positive.

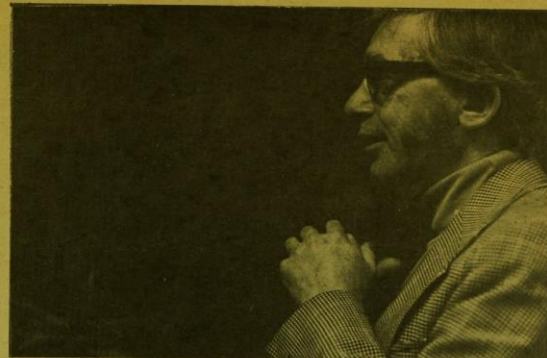
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which so many people feel and so many writers express. It seems to me that writers like Eliot transferred their general pessimism into pessimism about science, because modern technology was not doing all that might be expected. In many ways our situation is worse than in Eliot's time, and even more terrible threats hang over us. But at the same time we're more aware that science and technology can be useful in solving the problems that they create, and we're looking for scientific solutions to scientific problems. The computer, for example, is widely feared and mistrusted, but looked at objectively it has been of enormous benefit to us all. It has to be watched, obviously, and one can have many doubts and fears about the computer, but people are too ready to oppose it without considering its benefits. You have to consider all that the computer and things like it are doing.

I don't think that the overall picture is as dark as some people tend to believe.

To match one specific example with another, television - though it has many benefits - has perhaps outweighed those benefits by the damage it's done.

Well, although T.V. can have a deadening effect on people's minds, it can also expose them to information and experience they would otherwise never have had. Who can say what the whole picture is of what people get from television? Arguments about things like this depend on your own reaction to television, and I would tend to approach it from a more positive aspect. People who regard T.V. as an enemy in their living room would emphasise the ill effects.



What effect does the fact that you are Scottish have on your poetry? Of course, you write about Glasgow but does it also influence your attitudes in some wider sense?

I think it does, though it's very hard to define. I don't think there's any escape from it. It doesn't mean that you're always going out of your way to 'be Scottish', but just that the knowledge that you are Scottish is nearer the surface than maybe the sense of being English is to an English writer. It's inevitable, considering the open, unfinished political situation. But then again, to go back to your question, where you asked about my poems about Glasgow, to me the Glasgow poems are a part of being Scottish - they are my Scotland, and it's the Scotland of a lot of people too, if you think of the size of the whole Glasgow conurbation.

You say in relation to the Scottish writer, in your essay "Scottish poetry in the 1960's", that "Obligations bark

at him on all sides . . . there is so much that he is asked to, or may legitimately want to, relate himself to."

What do you say to the young poet starting to write today in Scotland? How does he overcome the confusion?

Well, he must be true to himself. He has to find out what is most real for him, whether it's something personal or political or aesthetic or whatever. Whether it's a widespread area of interest, recommended by a host of voices, or whether it's something almost secret, something strange that he has to guard over with his life. In Scotland especially he's got to be prepared to be misunderstood, because there are so many people who are so sure that they are right, and are unwilling to extend their sensibilities. He shouldn't make up his mind too quickly about what he wants to do in poetry, but try different things, get some craftsmanship, gradually discover what it is that means most to him, and that he can deal with in his own way.

Edwin Morgan has published several volumes of poetry, including the award winning *From Glasgow to Saturn*. His latest collection, *The New Divan*, published by Carcanet Press, is now available. Mr. Morgan is a lecturer at the University of Glasgow.

"Siesta of a Hungarian Snake" and "King Billy" are taken from *The Second Life* published by Edinburgh University Press, 1968.

"Particle Poem Three" is previously unpublished.

Notes to "King Billy": "Conks" and "Billy Boys" - Glasgow gangs of the 'thirties, Conks being Catholics, Billy Boys Protestants. "King Billy" - Billy Fullerton, gang leader and legend in his own time. "Sillitoe" - Sir Percy Sillitoe, the English judge whose rigorous sentences were credited with ending the rule of Glasgow's "razor Kings" "sherricking" - settlement by gang judgement of a private quarrel; see *No Mean City* for a graphic account of such an event.



SIESTA OF A HUNGARIAN SNAKE

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PARTICLE POEM 3

Three particles lived in mystic union.

They made knife, fork and spoon, and earth, sea and sky.

They made animal, vegetable, and mineral, and faith, hope, and charity.

They made stop, caution, go, and hickory, dickory, dock.

They made yolk, white, and shell, and hook, line, and sinker.

They made pounds, shillings, and pence, and Goneril, Regan, and Cordelia.

They made Sharach, Meshach, and Abednego, and game, set, and match.

A wandering particle kidnapped one of them, and the two that were left made day and night, and left and right, and right and wrong, and black and white, and off and on, but things were never quite the same, and two will always yearn for three. They're after you, or me.

KING BILLY

Grey over Riddrie the clouds piled up, dragged their rain through the cemetery trees. The gates shone cold. Wind rose flaring the hissing leaves, the branches swung, heavy, across the lamps. Gravestone huddled in the drizzling shadow. flickering streetlights scanned the name and an urn, a date, a dove picked out, lost, half regained. What is this dripping wreath, blown from its grave red, white, blue, and gold

"To Our Leader of Thirty Years Ago" - Bareheaded, in dark suits, with flutes and drums they brought him here, in procession seriously, King Billy of Brigton, dead, from Bridgeton Cross: a memory of violence, brooding days of empty bellies, billiard smoke and a sour pint, boots or fists, famous sherrickings, the word, the scuffle, the flash, the shout, bloody crumpling in the close,

bricks for papish windows, get the Conks next time, the Conks ambush the Billy Boys, the Billy Boys the Conks till Sillitoe scuffs the razors down the stank - No, but it isn't violence they remember but the legend of a violent man born poor, gang-leader in the bad times of idleness and boredom, lost in better days, a bouncer in a betting club, a quiet man at last, dying alone in Bridgeton in a box bed. So a thousand people stopped the traffic for the hearses of a folk hero and the flutes threw 'Onward Christian Soldiers' to the winds from unironic lips, the mourners kept in step, and there were some who wept.

Go from the grave. The shrill flutes are silent, the march dispersed. Deplore what is to be deplored, and then find out the rest.