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DAVID KINLOCH

The Case of the Missing War: Edwin Morgan's
'The New Divan'

Edwin Morgan's 'The New Divan' (1977) is a long poem that keeps stopping.¹ This is just one of its many paradoxical qualities that seem to have puzzled and frustrated critical appraisal over the last thirty-five years. For a work that some critics have referred to as 'major'² it has been less studied and discussed than most. But its difficulty and opacity has also been noted by others.³ In his review of Morgan's *Collected Poems*, Patrick Crotty remarks that 'it only catches fire towards the end of the sequence'.⁴ Crotty's assessment is useful because it directs attention to the most conventionally assimilable part of the poem, the point at which it becomes most explicitly personal and autobiographical, locating the action in the desert spaces of Lebanon and North Africa where Morgan saw out the Second World War.

It is this aspect of the work that has caused it to be described as Morgan's war poem.⁵ Yet comparison of it with other Scottish war poems of the period suggests that it may only be tangentially about the war. In addition, if it is a 'war poem' then it is an extremely belated one, written in the 1970s. Morgan's manuscripts dating from the 1930s and 40s demonstrate that the young soldier struggled to find a style he was happy with and James McGonigal, his biographer, may be right to suggest that his 1950s' translation of *Beowulf* with its community of heroic warriors has more claim to the status of 'Morgan's war poem'.⁶ That it might be a translation that fills this position foregrounds an obliquity that has often been the mature Morgan's preferred mode of approach and address. Nevertheless, the role of the Second World War in 'The New Divan' continues to intrigue and puzzle and the principal aim of this essay will be to try to elucidate its status and function more clearly.

'The New Divan' consists of one hundred short poems or stanzas, each between eleven and eighteen lines long. They revisit desert landscapes, histories, and possible futures that Morgan knows and intuits from both personal

experience and wide reading. The poem takes its cue and some aspects of its form from the *Divan* of the fourteenth-century Persian master, Hafiz of Shiraz. But it ranges widely and unpredictably, few of the Arabian nights and days recounted here lasting for more than two stanzas at a time. Unnamed characters appear and disappear in a variety of erotic and emotional clinches while voyages criss cross various desert times and spaces. Frequently though, we return to poems that depict alternately obscure or frank homosexual liaisons in which the narrator himself has taken part. They ground an otherwise bewildering kaleidoscope of oriental images that often dissolve into more familiar western and northern domestic scenes.

Initially, therefore, I should like to explore Morgan's own intentions in writing this work and how these have provoked and to some extent dictated the character of its critical reception before suggesting a different approach to the way war and sexuality are inscribed in the poem and in the collection as a whole which takes its title from that of 'The New Divan' itself.

What we know about the poet's aims in this work comes mainly from interviews given to Marshall Walker and others. Interestingly, Morgan links them to his practice as an experimental writer of concrete poetry:⁷

[Concrete poetry] also affects things like the length of a poem, the feeling which is fairly general that it is extremely hard to write a long poem nowadays but nevertheless there's a hankering after doing it somehow, and it is a question of just seeing how you can bring together the idea of a lengthy work and the idea of quickness or simultaneity or modernity or something of that kind.

[. . .]

I suppose the series or the sequence is one possibility.

That is the usual solution, I suppose. I am still thinking about a sequence myself in 'The New Divan' which is a hundred short poems very loosely linked together. It is supposed to be some sort of whole, though not one that is easily analysed and they don't form a sequence in a very strict sense of the term.

In a later interview given to Robert Crawford, he noted that '[i]n Arabic or Persian poetry they're rather fond of the idea that a 'divan' as they call it, a collection of poems, is something that you enter; you move around; you

can cast your eye here and there, you look, you pick, you perhaps retrace your steps'.⁸

These patterns and compositional principles have had an impact on critical reading of the poem. In the face of a long and difficult work, the strategy has consisted mainly in presenting Morgan's description, and then in attempting to demonstrate how the poem may be made to fit. Nevertheless, the most cogent analyses of 'The New Divan' to date are of two quite different types: on the one hand, dense summary accompanied by reflection on how this oriental pastiche implements postmodern literary theory; on the other, detailed close reading that attempts to make sense of each individual poem in the sequence. The former approach is that adopted by Colin Nicholson, while Rodney Edgecombe prefers the latter. Both these critics advance our understanding and appreciation of the poem. Nicholson's presentation, however, tends to foreground those lines / moments which may be read as metapoetically effective while Edgecombe, despite his clear and oft-repeated acknowledgement that the poem actively courts opacity, never stops trying to make it 'mean' in a coherent, assimilable way. In addition, Nicholson tends to simplify the homosexual thematic in the poem, claiming that by the time 'The New Divan' was published in 1977, Morgan had 'largely dispensed with coding for sexual encounters during military service in the Middle East'.⁹ As I shall show later, this does not satisfactorily account for the extremely oblique way in which such 'encounters' are presented in the earlier part of the poem or interrogate how this links to the much franker exploration of gay relationships later in the sequence.

To begin with, however, I wish to argue that in this long poem Morgan's primary ambition was neither to give poetic representation to theory, nor to turn the reader into a literary detective forced to hunt down the clues to meaning. Instead, I believe that his poem intermittently reaches out to the more radical aesthetic that lies behind some types of so-called 'innovative' language-led poetry. But I shall be as interested in the possible reasons why Morgan always steps back from a full-scale adoption of such approaches. In making this argument I shall rely to some extent on the philosophy of the French writer, Gilles Deleuze. Deleuze, whose work offers a 'metaphysics in which the concept of multiplicity replaces that of substance, event replaces essence and virtuality replaces possibility' has been fundamental to much avant-garde art and poetry.¹⁰ There is not space here to explore it in any detail but his focus on art that 'cannot be re-cognized, but

can only be sensed' was influential in the promotion of aesthetic work that – in the words of Jon Clay – 'is a real experience that proceeds by way of sensibility, the body and sensation'. Poems which take their lead from this type of philosophy are fundamentally non-representative in nature; they do not seek to produce 'a representation of a real experience that lies elsewhere . . .'.¹¹

One of Nicholson's reading strategies is to examine 'The New Divan' through the prism of the poems that succeed it and he is correct in his implicit assessment that these subsequent poems offer a more explicit guide to some of what Morgan is doing in the long poem. It may well be that these shorter poems did in fact enable the author to understand his purpose better. As we move through the collection as a whole from 'Memories of Earth' onwards there is a growing sense of excited discovery, the playing of sometimes mischievous variations on the aesthetic and philosophical principles sketched out in 'The New Divan' which forms the first poem in the book.

This critical strategy can have the effect of obscuring the distinctiveness of 'The New Divan's' questing aesthetic but the general thrust of Nicholson's interpretation here is useful as he points to Plato as Morgan's nemesis in the collection, the 'big man, with big dogs' (*CP*, 359) who would police the republic of representation. In opposition, Morgan offers a poetry that appeals above all, through rhythm and metaphor, to the senses and in this context Nicholson quotes a passage from M. F. Burnyeat that might have pleased Deleuze: 'eyes and ears offer painter and poet entry into a relatively independent cognitive apparatus, associated with the senses, through which mimetic images can bypass our knowledge and infiltrate the soul'.¹²

At this point then, it is necessary to show how some of Morgan's *Divan* poems court a poetry of sensation, how he is more concerned to touch 'senses' – to use Burnyeat's term – than to conjure sense.

A key poem in this respect is 'Shaker Shaken', probably the most experimental in the collection as a whole. Nicholson mentions it in passing, saying that it 'teases sense out of mid-nineteenth century dissenters'.¹³ Arguably, however, this does not go far enough. The final stanza coalesces out of Morgan's gradual addition of consonants and vowels to a Shaker sound poem of 1847 but is it really adequate to describe the conclusion as making 'sense'? Sense of a kind, perhaps, but the kind one expects from nonsense or surrealist verse. Sense is a key dimension of this poem but it is

not a 'given'; it has to be fought for and it emerges out of a poetry that emphasises bodily experience as a surer, more direct route to spiritual enlightenment.

Today, Shakers are perhaps best known for the plain but elegant style of furniture they made and the Shaker aesthetic is one that regarded the creation of carefully crafted objects as an act of prayer. Morgan's version, or translation, even, of the Shaker's act of glossolalia may be seen as satirical. The final stanza's semi-comic revelation of a 'tiger/yawning through a tuft of morning-glory' gives the lie to the original poem's religious aspiration. Nevertheless, he is interested in the way the material sounds of letters constitute a vibrant and real artistic experience for the listener. When performed aloud the effect is both amusing and moving as the poem conjures a tug of war between sound and sense that may have characterised the earliest human communities.

It is in poems like this that Morgan seems, then, to reach out towards a Deleuzian aesthetic. In his essay, 'The Simulacrum and Ancient Philosophy', Deleuze reflects on Plato's distinction between copies and simulacra and promotes the sensuous impact of the latter at the expense of the former.¹⁴ 'Shaker Shaken' is primarily a language act concerned to produce sensation in the listener. It is followed immediately by a concrete poem 'Levi-Strauss at the Lie Detector' which is also a playful undermining of those – like Plato and the French structuralist, Claude Levi-Strauss – who value order over chaos. Morgan wrings the changes on the authoritarian sounding maxim 'any classification is superior to chaos' until – after three Scottish sounding 'och's – we discover that 'any class fiction is superior chaos.' (*CP*, 354)

The collection as a whole, indeed, represents a blistering assault on a western ontology that privileges sense and meaning over the playful and erotic 'jouissance' offered by bodily sensation. It is vital to note, however, that Morgan never entirely abandons the former. 'Shaker Shaken' finally gives us something approaching a lyric stanza we can understand in conventional terms. In this it repeats in more condensed and dramatic form the pattern of 'The New Divan'.

One other poem published later in the collection also facilitates the application of Deleuzian ideas and its emotional texture is strikingly similar to much of the long poem. This is the first of a series of 'Five Poems on Film Directors' and is entitled 'Antonioni' (*CP*, 362). Morgan was a particular fan of Antonioni's work – as for that matter was Gilles Deleuze – and Morgan's poem suggests an interesting coincidence of views.¹⁵

In his essay, 'Deleuze and Signs', André Pierre Colombat suggests that cinema's importance and fascination for Deleuze lay in the extent to which it

is much more than a language. If it is to be compared to a language at all, it is very different from anything we usually call a language. In the case of cinema, narration and signification are only a consequence of an image, of an analogy between image and language. They are not given as such. The analogy between an image and language misses the specificity of the image itself and of the non-linguistic signs that compose it before it eventually becomes a narration.¹⁶

Morgan's poem about Antonioni generates an inconsequential and fragmented narrative about an apparently unsatisfactory relationship foundering on misunderstandings between two unnamed characters but only after foregrounding two enigmatic, disconnected images: 'Trees are drowning in salt. The keyhole whines.' Equally powerful is the evocation of the eerie sound made by tankers beyond the canal: 'their call lingers across the marches' (*CP*, 362). The poem refuses conventional narrative closure and ends by offering three alternative lines, each separated by an 'or', that purport to summarise the activity or life of the male character in the poem.

He lives on peppermints and blues
or
He is tearing photographs for a living
or
He has been sent death, is opening it
or (*CP*, 362)

Here, Morgan is not interested in making sense of the characters' story but is clearly concerned with 'the specificity of the image itself', what Colombat calls an 'assignifying sign' which does not find 'its ultimate condition of possibility in the necessary abstraction of a signified'.¹⁷

Indeed, it is worth comparing Morgan's poem to Antonioni's own commentary in a piece entitled 'The Event and the Image' in which the director writes about seeing a drowned man dragged up onto the beach at the beginning of the Second World War:¹⁸

It was wartime. I was at Nice, waiting for a visa to go to Paris to join Marcel Carné [. . .]. They were days full of impatience and boredom, and of news about a war which stood still on an absurd thing called the Maginot Line. Suppose one had to construct a bit of film, based on this event and on this state of mind. I would try first to remove the actual event from the scene, and leave only the image described in the first four lines. In that white sea-front, that lonely figure, that silence, there seems to me to be an extraordinary strength of impact. The event here adds nothing: it is superfluous. I remember very well that I was interested, when it happened. The dead man acted as a distraction to a state of tension.

As John Marks comments: 'The actual event, the incident that occurred, can be dispensed with, in favour of a sort of immanent event which is contained in the waiting, the boredom, the emptiness of the landscape. Antonioni creates a bloc of percepts and affects'.¹⁹

Antonioni's description is resonant and reminds us – as does the film poem itself – of both the landscapes and characters of 'The New Divan', a poem described by some as Morgan's 'war poem' but from which, arguably, the central event of the War itself has been removed. As Colombat remarks, 'Deleuze's thought has been characterised [. . .] as an immanent thought of the multiple'.²⁰ In 'The New Divan' the War is the central event that is immanent, one whose effects and affects echo, sometimes intensely, through the vast spans of time and space traversed by the poem itself. It is mostly an eerily absent presence, like the sound of that tanker in the poem about Antonioni. Occasionally – as in the vivid poems towards the end of the sequence – it flares into memory or wavers uneasily into sight like a desert mirage, like an unexpected image from a film by Tarkovsky.

Indeed, the aesthetic innovations of post-war Europe, particularly those of the 'nouveau roman' and the films of Antonioni, are cited by Marks as the context in which Deleuze's work on the event in cinema must be read. 'War', Marks writes:²¹

as an 'event' tends to reveal the inadequacies of conventional realism. Moments of conflict are inextricably linked with an immense network of effects, long-term causes and consequences

(. . .) The event of war becomes associated with other, enigmatic ‘events’ such as the ‘phoney war’, and the Cold War introduces a new war of waiting and displaced conflict. The empty space, the tiredness of the human body, that which comes before and after, the story that can only be told *in filigree*, all find expression in the films of Antonioni.

And so we have here, perhaps, a more profound explanation for the linguistic textures and strategies of ‘The New Divan’, a poem that implicitly acknowledges the impossibility of adequately representing the Second World War in language and choreographs instead an evocation of its sensational reverberations through time and space.

Is it possible, therefore, to pick out specific poems from ‘The New Divan’ that point the way forward to the aesthetics of poems like ‘Shaker Shaken’ or ‘Antonioni’? It is easier, certainly, to find examples of the latter but the sound-based gymnastics of the former may also be detected.

Poem 6 in the sequence, for example, opens with an exclamation remarkable for its awkwardness: ‘What a tottering veil to call an expanse / of desire demure by!’ (CP, 296). The sense, presumably, is that the ‘tottering veil’ or mosquito net inadequately obscures the bed on which two lovers have been engaged. But veils don’t usually ‘totter’ and the colloquial syntax which forces a line ending with a preposition makes it more rather than less difficult to see what is actually depicted. These lines are as ruffled as the bed they seem to evoke. As in some of Antonioni’s scenes, the main event that has brought the lovers together is missing and we are left with an aftermath traversed by haunting images: the ‘engine hissing past the harvest’ (why not a ‘train’ or a ‘tractor?’) and the ‘girl walk[ing] her dog in mist’. Both images make the location of this episode uncertain. This is compounded by the introduction of a parrot, lightning, a coffee-boy and grape-seeds which lightly colour in an oriental setting once more. Rodney Edgecombe relates the crouching figure of the final lines to the bear-like character of an earlier poem (no.4) in the sequence, identifying him as a disguised version of Morgan’s lover, John Scott, but it is equally worth considering the extent to which the poem is simply language-led at this point, the addition of a single consonant, ‘r’, to the word ‘couch’ *shaking* the scene into a different position, possibly a different place.²²

Critics such as Edgecombe might object that the ‘main event’ as I have

described it is much more forcibly presented in the previous poem and that it is quite possible to make the connections and read poems 4, 5 and 6 as a triptych. This is true, but the fact is that Morgan presents them as discrete entities, as if each one is a 'shot' he wishes us to savour or experience in its own right. This sequence of shots may be connected at this point in the poem but linkages will soon be broken, the narrative distances we have to travel over to keep the poem making a kind of conventional sense will become greater. The cumulative effect of this process is to force readers to live as intensely as the poet's language will allow in the moment of the individual poem, downgrading the business of sense making and upgrading the sometimes wayward sensations produced by difficult syntax and disconnected imagery. The reading experience is deliberately frustrating for us because 'sense' is always there, intermittently present within individual poems but often just beyond the bounds, the frame, of the one on which we are currently concentrating. As with 'Shaker Shaken' we keep wanting to add a syllable or a consonant here or there, notice a link, but when we do that the pay-off is not always enlightening.

Similarly, Edgecombe reads poem 48 as being about 'the origin of all religious feeling worship of power prompted by fear'²³ – but there are lines where the image coheres to make sense in ways that foreground opacity, difficulty and polysemy. Thus, in line 3 'only cracks broke in whipped thunder': the image may evoke the gods cracking the whip of thunder but it could also mean that the attempt to whip thunder was cracked / broken / unsuccessful. 'A cigarette adventuring / missed the swift gaff': one can see the glow of the cigarette and the fish hook cast swiftly into the lake but in what sense does it 'miss' 'the swift gaff'? And 'gaff' has other meanings too. It can mean trick, swindle as well as mistake, thus the word prompts thoughts of the overall mistake the poem attacks, namely religious belief. The following line reads: 'The site / of grounded nightfishers glowed red as tracer.' What *exactly* is a 'nightfisher'? In what *precise* sense are they 'grounded'? The use of the word 'site' in this context is disorienting and the way it glows 'red as tracer' suggests military connotations. *Whose* 'Behaviour / grumbles but mocks black zodiacs yet.?' Why 'zodiacs' rather than 'stars'? And who is absent in the final lines of the poem, the lords or the villagers? (CP, 311) I make no apology for leaving these as questions in the face of Edgecombe's heroic attempts to answer them. This is a poem that *enacts* rather than simply *signifies* its subject matter.

Morgan himself suggested that poem 50, being the half way point, might be a significant one for the poem's overall sense.²⁴ And Robert Crawford, arguing for the poet's unquenchable optimism, extracts a positive message for the future from the image of the frail sycamore seed lying 'on the battered rim / of a tin bowl' near 'the grave of the sisters' discovered in a burnt-out village.²⁵ But is this the experience / sensation conveyed to the reader via the contracting lines, the sudden 'falls' brought about by line breaks?

Years

leave what, ashes? to put a stick into –
until we came to the grave of the sisters
and there on the battered rim
of a tin bowl war had disdainfully
spared we saw the winged
seed of a sycamore, all
their memorial, oh our loved and fated! (*CP*, 311)

The Second World War, perhaps, hoves into view again, briefly, at mid point – although it is generic enough to be any war – but it does not stay, offers no sense of resolution; it is again an aftermath that we witness, a Tarkovskian image of fragility, an *atmosphere* rather than a *meaning*.

In poem 56, where we are offered a metaphor for the Cheshire Cat-like behaviour of linguistic meaning in the poem as a whole, a waterfall simultaneously presents and withdraws the shapes of a hieroglyph. '[T]here was no legend to tell us' whose eyes and mouth momentarily coalesce from the water. Instead, we hear disconnected sounds – 'the hooting of far-away ships', 'crickets in the grass' – reminiscent of the engine going past the harvest in the earlier poem and anticipating the tanker call in 'Antonioni'. These sounds then give way in the imagination of the narrator to an undefined 'procession of scenes' that hesitate, 'rejected by the melancholy / of a frozen mile-off regard / signalling without sense from its shroud.' (*CP*, 313-14) The senselessness is key. One is reminded strongly here of Deleuze's recognition in Antonioni's work of 'the treatment of limit situations which pushes them to the point of dehumanised landscapes, of emptied spaces that might be seen as having absorbed characters and actions, retaining only a geophysical description, an abstract inventory of them'.²⁶

The 'regard' of the unidentified, barely-present consciousness is simply there, an existence that signals, but what it signals beyond existence itself is not the point.

Other, later poems in the sequence offer glimpses of the guardians of an older order grasping in vain at a 'pattern / a swirling moment gave'. These 'disoriented angels hooked on sense' (*CP*, 319) give way hopelessly to the amoral, only partially competent inventories of computers that seem equally as capable of missing, of misrepresenting 'the injuries / of merely mortal times' as their celestial forerunners (*CP*, 327). This poem, number 92 in the sequence, is semi-concrete in style as it incorporates the apparently random 'voice' of the computer. This is important because it reminds us of Morgan's comment about the way concrete poetry makes the writing of traditional long poems a difficult business, suggesting implicitly that *this* long poem takes its cues from more contemporary sources of inspiration.

At this point it is worth turning to the complementary evidence provided by Morgan's private library, gifted to the Mitchell Library over the course of the 1990s. My analysis of these poems within 'The New Divan' suggests that in the 1970s Morgan was attracted by attitudes to language that lie at the heart of the experimental poetics typified by figures such as Charles Bernstein, Lyn Hejinian, Susan Howe and Michael Palmer. At some point in the early 70s he read and was extremely taken by the younger American experimentalist Rosemary Waldrop's thesis *Against Language?* which traces avant-garde attitudes to language over the course of the twentieth century.²⁷ His copy of this book is heavily annotated and it would be impossible to list all the passages he underlined that have clear parallels with the kind of techniques and principles I have been examining in 'The New Divan'. Yet what is perhaps most distinctive about Morgan's attitude to language poetics in general is the implied reservations and the limited acceptance of its techniques into his own poetry. In Waldrop's book, for instance, he carefully noted that André Breton 'does not want to destroy the cognitive aspect of language of which he is very aware'.²⁸ His own lecture on language poetics given at the University of Liverpool in 1989 is enthusiastic: 'Much language poetry', he writes

has neither image clusters nor a recognisable syntax . . . this makes it harder, but does it make it worse? If there is no human situation, do we switch off, or on the contrary do we bend closer? Whether or not

all this will stay in the mind is perhaps less important than whether the reader is going to be forced to bring forward a new kind of short term attentiveness.²⁹

Perhaps he was thinking here, too, of the type he cultivates within the short individual lyrics of 'The New Divan'. Nevertheless, despite his openness to what writers like Silliman and Hejinian were doing and his astute close readings of their poems, the figure he prefers above all is the poet, Michael Palmer, who, as Morgan says 'would never belong to the purist rebarbative end of the language writing spectrum'.³⁰ Palmer is the language poet whose work is most represented in Morgan's library and towards the end of his lecture Morgan focuses attention on Palmer's 1988 collection, *Sun*, and notes how it closes 'with a remarkable and powerful poem, also called 'Sun', which kicks very hard against the traces of non-referentiality and seems to offer a new phase of development'.³¹

The fact is that Morgan always felt it necessary to return at some point to the 'human situation' and to trace its emergence or permit its re-emergence and I should like to end this essay by considering how his treatment of love and sex within 'The New Divan' is paradigmatic of precisely this pattern within his work as a whole and how it offers a way of understanding better the distinctive opacity of this long poem in particular.

I have already indicated my reservations regarding Colin Nicholson's description of the homosexual dimension in 'The New Divan' and it is worth looking in more detail at the way he approaches this topic because it takes us to the heart of the rather limited role sometimes accorded to homosexuality within Morgan's poetry. Nicholson opens the chapter that deals with 'The New Divan' by tracing Morgan's 'representations of sexuality' through the previous major collection, *From Glasgow to Saturn*, and the translations of *Rites of Passage*, right up to collections published during the 1990s.³² 'The New Divan' figures in this trajectory as a poem that 'has largely dispensed with coding for sexual encounters during military service in the Middle East.' This statement is reinforced by a quotation from an interview Morgan gave which Nicholson uses to suggest that 'the range of Morgan's attention socialises by opening out homoerotic experience, and he is not attracted by the idea of writing for an exclusive readership'.³³ Nicholson notes that Morgan made his comments about these matters in 1988 but the way this information is presented glosses over the fact that this

was at least a full ten years after the writing and publication of 'The New Divan'.

There are two main points I should like to make here. First of all, Nicholson's description does not account for the specific trajectory of 'The New Divan' as far as representations of sexuality are concerned. 'The New Divan' is remarkable in that it contains poems where homosexual relationships are coded or hinted at in a very oblique manner as well as poems that are quite frank in their treatment. I shall return to this issue shortly. Secondly, Nicholson's critique is aimed at directing attention away from Morgan's depiction of homosexual experience in and for itself. Nicholson acknowledges it as an important element in Morgan's work but seems more interested in the gay love lyrics, for example, as 'Morgan's versions of subject-formation'³⁴ while the phrase 'opening out homosexual experience' is reminiscent of the way in which critics of John Ashbery's poetry, for example, often use homosexual themes mainly as a tool 'best deployed at the service of other, larger, more shared systems of meaning'.³⁵

Roughly one quarter of the poems in 'The New Divan' are about love and / or sex. There are others where these are tangential issues. Our introduction to this theme is via an early poem where some knowledge of homosexual slang helps the reader to identify the participants. Here is poem 4 in its entirety:

I suppose having a bear for sentinel
 you don't need passwords? In your grotesque
 courtyard a pot of honey's all we had
 for sesame, two salmon for shazam. Relations
 are excellent with a full bear. Also
 some wine, we left him dancing like
 a madman in a play. So you threw on
 your pyjamas for a chess party, got
 the cook roused up, who brought oiled paper
 hot with sweetmeats before checkmate. On
 the stroke of one the bear snored. (*CP*, 296)

Rodney Edgecombe reads the figure of John Scott into the 'bear' of this poem, justifying this by relating some details back to lyrics in *From Glasgow to Saturn* and pointing to the northern location of the bedside scenes pre-

sented in poems 5 and 6.³⁶ But it is not simply that the man is ‘bear-like’, as Edgecombe puts it. He is ‘a bear’, which is a term for a large, hairy, often older gay man. This helps to understand the reference to ‘a full bear’ which – although its primary sense here is simply ‘full up’ or ‘sated’ – may also imply the existence of ‘cubs’ and indeed of many other types of gay bear. This term has been in circulation since the 1970s at least and pre-Aids was used of primarily rural, blue collar masculine gay men. John Scott does not necessarily fade from view in this context but that is not really the point. Morgan is writing in code and he could scarcely give us a clearer hint than he does in the first two lines which ironically and mischievously suggest the lack of any need for ‘passwords’.

I have already drawn attention earlier to the awkwardness of expression at the start of poem 6 and to the dislocating effects of its imagery. Other early poems in the sequence deploy non-gender specific pronouns in ways that we have come to recognise as markers of homosexuality, while in poem 12 there is a reference to ‘the common rumpled bed’ where the adjective ‘common’ is also a tell-tale signal that might be redundant in a heterosexual scene.³⁷ The fact remains, however, that Morgan is actually quite explicit about these modes of indirection which is one reason for believing that the nature of the trajectory I am in the process of describing was conceived by Morgan as one of his poem’s main subjects. The first four lines of poem 26 plainly state the motive for writing as he does: ‘To take without anxiety the love / you think fate might have left you is / hard, when the brassy years without it / have left an acid on the ease of purpose.’ (*CP*, 303) The key word here is ‘hard’. If the poem as a whole is ‘hard’, is difficult, it is partly because the narrator’s experience of love has been hard. After this admission, poem 26 immediately takes off on the road of misdirection, cueing the appearance of yet another Antonioni-like heterosexual couple. Progressively the manner becomes less oblique. There is not space here to examine it in detail but poem 38 then offers a half-way house of sorts between the coded antics of the opening numbers and the documentary style vignettes of poems 86 and 87 where the soldier and friend, Cosgrove, makes his appearance.

What I am suggesting, therefore, is that – as in the poetry of John Ashbery – homosexuality ‘hypostasizes’ in many of the poems in this sequence ‘via his style, whose most striking operations are concealment and misdirection’.³⁸ But again – and this is the crucial nuance – as in Ashbery’s

work this hypostasization of homosexuality is 'simultaneous with its presence'. John Emil Vincent has drawn attention to a number of Ashbery poems where references to homosexuality are relatively clear, but pointed to the fact that these poems 'still behave differently'.³⁹

What we are dealing with in 'The New Divan', therefore, is nothing less than a depiction over the course of some 100 poems of a process of difficult 'coming out', of coming to terms in all senses of that expression, a veritable rite of passage. This aesthetic, like Ashbery's, is essentially mimetic in character. Like Ashbery, Morgan 'writes homosexual lives as difficult on a quotidian lived level, a difficulty that invites an analogy to his own poetic *difficulty*'.⁴⁰

Vincent states that while Ashbery's poetry is 'not *only* addressed to homosexuals, it does suggest that he has particular designs for serving an audience of homosexuals'.⁴¹ This returns us again to the terms of the interview quoted by Nicholson to back up his description of Morgan's outgoing aesthetic: 'But a great many things', Morgan states, 'seem to me to have a general appeal, even though they have a special appeal as well'.⁴² It is frankly *not simply* a question of emphasis. Nicholson uses the passage to stress the way homosexuality in Morgan's work acts as a kind of 'irrigation canal', – to adopt Vincent's expression – opening up areas of obscurity, leading to more generally shared (read 'heterosexual') subject matter. And it is true that Morgan himself often thinks of the non-gender specific nature of some of the love poetry as a way of making it available to many different kinds of people. Nevertheless, in this passage, Morgan keeps the needs of a gay readership in mind as well. One of the reasons this is important is because – as Vincent explains – 'figurations of generality as heterosexual must always be interrogated, because not only do they elbow homosexuality out of the frame, they also deny (by ignoring) any complicated way of inhabiting a *heterosexual* subjecthood'.⁴³ Passing acknowledgements of the sexually coded nature of Morgan's writing enables a criticism that foregrounds, often in accurate and sophisticated terms, its profoundly postmodern character. My point is that this is not *sufficient* and actually obscures the human pain at the heart of this poetry, a pain which keeps it alive and active.

Again, somewhat paradoxically, it is the specific character of the gay affairs detailed in 'The New Divan' that sheds light on what some have recognised as the shifting, imprecise, enigmatic qualities of many of the individual poems. Few of these poems, for example, are poems that evoke in-

tensely an individual, specific place. The exceptions are those closing poems where the homosexual affairs are treated explicitly, where the romantic crush on his friend Cosgrove is evoked (poem 86). Otherwise, the Orient we are presented with by Morgan is deeply unstable, a space – historical, intellectual, emotional – rather than a place. In passing, one might note here links to a Deleuzian valorisation of nomadic space over ‘socioideological’ place.⁴⁴ Equally useful parallels are those to be made with John Ashbery’s poetry. Vincent notes how Ashbery offers ‘a poetics whereby a cruising reader does not look to “get to know” the poet or speaker, but rather seeks an encounter with a poet or speaker who will afterward walk away still anonymous’. Vincent quotes Michael Warner who notes that Ashbery’s poetry is not one that features the pleasures of stable relationships: ‘Contrary to myth, what one relishes in loving strangers is not mere anonymity, nor meaningless release. It is the pleasure of belonging to a sexual world, in which one’s sexuality finds an answering resonance not just in one other, but in a world of others’.⁴⁵ Here, the many ‘others’, heterosexual as well as homosexual, who coalesce momentarily in ‘The New Divan’ come into view. And it is worth recognising that the very last gay encounter (poem 98) described here and placed immediately before the poem’s most visually intense evocation of violent death (poem 99), is one that celebrates ‘the body, not the heart’. (*CP*, 329). Here romantic Cosgrove is replaced by an anonymous Squaddie. What’s more it focuses on an incidental of the act itself that clearly figures its absolutely disposable character:

We’d our black comedy too
the night you got up, on Mount Carmel,
with a dog’s turd flattened on your shirt-front:
not funny, you said.
Well, it was all a really unwashable laundry
that finally had to be thrown away.

What is cast away here is as much a poetry of epiphanic, lyric closure as an old shirt. The moment of climax is one of deflation; it is discarded as quickly as all the other evocations of sexual liaisons that pepper the ‘Divan’ before the protagonists cruise on to some other destination, some other time.

Inevitably, because of its position in the sequence it casts an awkward light on poem 99 which is remarkable for its vividness. To suggest that this

juxtaposition implies the disposability of human bodies in war as in sex would be monstrous although it is a cliché of so much comment on the experience of war that it does concentrate the appetite. To interpret these poems in this way would be to ignore the specific tone of each: the rueful regret of 98 at a farewell made in silence, the implicit tenderness and pity that leaks from the image of the dead soldier 'light as a child / rolling from side to side of the canvas' in poem 99. But the most important function of the juxtaposition lies elsewhere. Both these poems foreground the frail, bestained human body as the only reality worth fighting for. I have stated that this is a war poem in which the war is present by virtue of its absence. This is true right up until its appearance in the very late poems of the sequence. But now it confronts us viscerally in the penultimate poem, stripped back to its essence: a body from which life has departed. It is a mark of humanity's shame. It follows poems about human sexuality some of which – to deploy Vincent's description of Ashbery again – 'gesture back to the missing origin of the central evasion and omission, homosexual content'.⁴⁶ It follows a poem where, finally, the unmistakable mark of the act itself is presented, a mark not of shame but, in this instance, of sheepish complicity that dissolves in humour. The war that is present in 'The New Divan' is, in other words, a gay man's war, one that cannot be articulated in the same manner as his heterosexual compatriots. As Vincent writes, '[h]omosexual and heterosexual desire and bonds, given their different cultural valuation, have entirely different available narratives, legality, forms of expression, as well as different available relations to abstraction, specification, self-definition, community, ritual, temporality, and spatiality'.⁴⁷ As with sex, so with the War: missing, hypostasized, fleetingly present, fundamental.

Notes

- 1 Edwin Morgan, 'The New Divan', *The New Divan* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1977). Further references to this long poem and to other poems in the collection will be to the versions published in the *Collected Poems* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1990) and incorporated into the text after quotations in the form CP followed by the relevant page number.
- 2 See for example James McGonigal, *Beyond the Last Dragon: A Life of Edwin Morgan* (Dingwall: Sandstone Press, 2010), p.44.

- 3 Iain Crichton Smith, 'The Public and Private Morgan', *About Edwin Morgan* edited by Robert Crawford and Hamish Whyte (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1990), p.46.
- 4 Patrick Crotty, 'That Caledonian Antisyzygy', *Poetry Ireland*, 63 (1999), 89-96 (p.90).
- 5 See Rory Watson, "'Death's Proletariat": Scottish Poets of the Second World War', *The Oxford Handbook of British and Irish War Poetry*, ed. by Tim Kendall (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp.315-39.
- 6 Morgan's manuscripts are deposited in the Special Collections of Glasgow University Library at 'MS Morgan: 1-920'. See also McGonigal, p.87.
- 7 Marshall Walker, 'Let's Go', *Nothing Not Giving Messages*, ed. by Hamish Whyte (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1990), pp.54-85 (p.56).
- 8 Robert Crawford, 'Nothing is not giving messages', in *Nothing Not Giving Messages*, pp.118-43 (p.136).
- 9 Colin Nicholson, *Edwin Morgan: Inventions of Modernity* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), p.105; R. S. Edgecombe, *Aspects of Form and Genre in the Poetry of Edwin Morgan* (London: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2003).
- 10 D. Smith, and J. Protevi, 'Gilles Deleuze', in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2008 edn), ed. by Edward N. Zalta, <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2008/entries/deleuze/>>.
- 11 Jon Clay, *Sensation, Contemporary Poetry and Deleuze* (London: Continuum, 2010), p.19.
- 12 Nicholson, p.124, quoting M. F. Burnyeat, 'Art and Mimesis in Plato's "Republic"', *London Review of Books*, 21 May 1998, pp.8-9.
- 13 Nicholson, p.125.
- 14 Gilles Deleuze, 'The Simulacrum and Ancient Philosophy', an appendix to *The Logic of Sense*, trans. by Mark Lester, with Charles Stivale, and ed. by Constantin V. Boundas (London: Continuum, 2003).
- 15 See Crawford, p.128, for Morgan's early love of film. Mark Smith also confirmed, in conversation with me, Morgan's particular admiration for Antonioni.
- 16 A. P. Colombat, 'Deleuze and Signs', *Deleuze and Literature*, ed. by Ian Buchanan and John Marks (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), pp.14-33, p.23.
- 17 Colombat, p.18.
- 18 M. Antonioni, 'The Event and the Image', *Sight and Sound* (Winter, 1963-4), p.14, quoted by John Marks, 'Underworld: The People are Missing', in *Deleuze and Literature*, pp.80-99, p.83.
- 19 Marks, pp.83-4.
- 20 Colombat, p.18.
- 21 Marks, pp.82-3. McGonigal, pp.203-4, makes clear how memories of the War came flooding back to Morgan in the early 70s via a series of dreams and television reporting of the Yom Kippur war.
- 22 Edgecombe, 64.
- 23 Ibid.
- 24 Crawford, 'Nothing not giving messages', pp.135-6.
- 25 Robert Crawford, 'The Whole Morgan', in *About Edwin Morgan*, ed. by Robert Crawford and Hamish Whyte (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1990), pp.10-24, p.22.
- 26 Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. by Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis, 1989), p.5, quoted by Marks, p.83.

- 27 Rosmarie Waldrop, *Against Language?* (Mouton: The Hague, 1971).
- 28 Waldrop, p.25.
- 29 Morgan, 'Language, poetry, and language poetry', *The Kenneth Allott Lectures* (Liverpool Classical Monthly, Department of Classics & Archaeology, 1990), p.10.
- 30 *Ibid.*, p.12.
- 31 *Ibid.*, p.12.
- 32 Nicholson, p.104. Morgan, *From Glasgow to Saturn* (Cheadle: Carcanet Press, 1973); *Rites of Passage* (Manchester, 1976).
- 33 Nicholson, p.105.
- 34 Nicholson, p.104.
- 35 John Vincent, *Queer Lyrics: Difficulty and Closure in American Poetry* (New York, 2002), p.31.
- 36 Edgecombe, p.50. McGonigal states that Scott was 'small and wiry' (p.132) so Edgecombe's interpretation seems dubious here.
- 37 See Christopher Whyte, *Modern Scottish Poetry* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004) for a discussion of the coded nature of Morgan's love poetry.
- 38 Vincent, p.34.
- 39 Vincent, p.38.
- 40 Vincent, p.32.
- 41 Vincent, p.38.
- 42 Nicholson, p.105 quoting Morgan's interview with C. Whyte, 'Power from things not declared', *Nothing Not Giving Messages*, pp.144-87, pp.185-6.
- 43 Vincent, p.31.
- 44 For an interesting discussion of Deleuze's impact on poetic depictions of space and place in contemporary innovative poetry see Clay, pp.133-51. The term 'socio-ideological' is attributed to Mikhail Bakhtin by Dennis Walker in a passage cited by Clay, p.133.
- 45 Vincent, pp.9-10 quoting Michael Warner, *The Trouble with Normal: Sex, Politics and the Ethics of Queer Life*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), p.179.
- 46 Vincent, p.34.
- 47 Vincent, p.30.

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