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## AS OTHERS SEE US: GERARD MANLEY HOPKINS AND SCOTLAND (PART 2 OF 3)

ALAN RIACH (FRIDAY 15 JULY 2016)

On 22 June 1989, George Mackay Brown wrote of Gerard Manley Hopkins (1884-89) in The Orcadian newspaper: “I feel that his life and writing was a seeking for the sources of things, from which new life springs perpetually to renew the earth that is forever being soiled and filthied by industrialism and the wounds that men inflict on the environment. To do this work of cleansing he had to throw away the old worn moulds of language, and mint words and images as if they were being used for the first time.”

Describing a visit to a Hopkins exhibition in Oxford in the centenary of his death, Brown remarked: “In his life he was never in Orkney, but one can feel his spirit here too, in the rapture of a skylark singing, in the cold clean thrilling wash of the sea against Yesnaby and Birsay, in the midsummer rush and cluster of the wild flowers with the morning dew about them; and in the fish and animals and folk, every one distinct and unique, a never-to-be-repeated joy.”

George Mackay Brown’s world was very different from that of Edwin Morgan, who grew up in Glasgow and spent his working life as a lecturer and professor at Glasgow University. At home in the city, he travelled widely throughout the world and was probably the most intellectually gregarious poet in Scottish letters since MacDiarmid. He translated widely from numerous European languages, most memorably in a book of versions of the Soviet poet Mayakovsky, made over into Scots, *Wi’ the Haill Voice*. But he was also a voracious reader and contagiously enthusiastic teacher of modern American poetry, especially the poets of the Beat, Black Mountain and San Francisco movements. His breakthrough volume, *The Second Life* (1968), included lyrical love poems, autobiographical poems, portraits of famous figures like Marilyn Monroe, and city poems based in Glasgow. None of them demonstrate the specific influence of Hopkins in such ways as we saw last week with reference to Hugh MacDiarmid and George Mackay Brown but in their astonishing variety they demonstrate the virtuosity of a writer who matches his own description of Hopkins: “a man who was a poet to his finger-tips”.

Committed as he was to city life, it's little wonder that when he did come to write explicitly about Hopkins, it was the Glasgow experience that interested him. For Morgan, the memorable Hopkins was the human being tormented by need, suffering the life of the industrial city and its victims to rest on his shoulders as he tried to make their lives more liveable. Morgan's portrait is a true picture of a Hopkins it is easy to overlook if we're caught up by his technical abilities and his distinctive vision of nature. It appears in a collection entitled *Sonnets from Scotland* (1984), written in the decade immediately following the rise to political power of Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government in Westminster and the disqualification of a Scottish majority vote for devolution by the Westminster government, both in 1979.

Morgan's *Sonnets* were one of a number of important works in all the literary genres and an impressive quantity of archival research into Scotland's literature, music, painting and other forms of cultural production by numerous writers, critics and scholars, that appeared in the 1980s and 1990s. These were all part of a major statement about Scotland's independent cultural status and authority which helped bring about the self-confidence that led to the successful referendum of 1997, the re-establishment of the Scottish Parliament and the Scottish National Party government. Understanding what the arts all do is vital to what we can make of Scotland, and no less urgently needed today.

These matters are a broad context for Morgan's *Sonnets* but they help to elucidate the unusual narrative form they take: an unspecified group of interplanetary time travellers visit Scotland, encounter the country from earliest times (the first poem starts with the words, "There is no beginning...") to possible futures. We see with them imaginary scenarios both bad (nuclear holocaust) and good (a newly-constructed Solway canal running the length of the Border – oh, if only!), and a number of visitors to Scotland we might not have expected, including Edgar Allan Poe, the Greek poet George Seferis, and Gerard Manley Hopkins in Glasgow.

For Morgan, Hopkins in Glasgow is "nervous yet forthright," lighting "a ready fuse from face to face" as he meets "drunken Fenian poor ex-Ulstermen" in the city's darkest streets. "He blessed them, frowned, beat on his hands. The load / of coal-black darkness clattering on his head / half-crushed, half-fed the bluey burning need / That trudged him back along North Woodside Road."

This is a Hopkins “biography” with the added nuance of Morgan’s perception and suggestive interpretation of what moved Hopkins, what he saw, what he hoped to achieve, trying to help people to live through his own faith-driven commitment. This is not merely fanciful projection, but it surely represents aspects of Morgan’s life as well as Hopkins’s.

A less-familiar Scottish poet upon whom Hopkins had a decided effect is Margaret Tait (1918-1999), better known as an experimental film-maker. She served in the Royal Army Medical Corps in the 1940s (as did Morgan, and as had MacDiarmid during the First World War). In the 1950s, she studied at the Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia in Rome, then, returning to Scotland, she founded her own company, Ancona Films. Over forty-six years she produced thirty films, three books of poetry and two collections of short stories, living in Edinburgh and her native Orkney. So here we have a woman whose upbringing and schooling encompassed both the Orkney archipelago and the city life of Edinburgh. Her commitment to screen media was never compromised by the desire to subscribe to commercial priorities and she made only one full-length feature-film, *Blue Black Permanent* (1992). She described her work as the making of “film poems” and rejected descriptions of it as documentary or diary-film, quoting with approval the Spanish poet Federico Garcia Lorca’s phrase, “stalking the image” in the belief that the close observation of an object will allow it to speak for itself of its own nature. Tait said of her films that they were created out of “sheer wonder and astonishment at how much can be seen in any place that you choose...if you really look.”

Her films include character-portraits, including one of MacDiarmid (1964, 9 minutes); a study of a small stream, *Orquil Burn* (1955, 35 minutes), following a walk beside a burn, travelling upstream to its source: “it turned out that the sources were many, the origins widespread”; *Where I Am is Here* (1964, 35 minutes), a record of the everyday things that surrounded her life in Edinburgh: with “none of the obvious shots” but rather “a cold, sad, essentially Scottish strangeness: the dream of a city as it flows in the bloodstream of the people who live in it.” There are also *The Big Sheep* (1966, 41 minutes), a journey through the Highlands of Scotland, where memories of the Clearances still haunt landscapes and people; *Place of Work* (1976, 31 minutes), a “close study of one garden and house and what could be seen and heard there within the space of time from June 1975 to November 1975”; the sequence of films called

*Aspects of Kirkwall* (five films, 1977-1981); and *Land Makar* (1981, 32 minutes), “a landscape study of an Orkney croft with the crofter, Mary Graham Sinclair, very much in the picture.”

Although her poems are Modernist in form, using free verse, oblique angles of approach and ironic humour, there is little in them to suggest the direct influence of Hopkins. They were published in three books, *origins & elements* (1959), *The Hen and the Bees* (1960) and *Subjects and Sequences* (1960).

There are a number of traces that connect all four of the Scottish poets we’ve been looking at to each other as well as to Hopkins: a complex affinity of interest.

Through the 1950s Hugh MacDiarmid had published a number of Tait’s poems in his magazine, *The Voice of Scotland*. Edwin Morgan favourably reviewed *origins & elements* in the Autumn 1961 issue of *New Saltire* (no. 2), in an essay entitled “Who will Publish Scottish Poetry?” He noted that some poems “have a Lawrence-like concern with moment and movement, with a poetry of immediacy to be taken ‘Quickly / Without water’.” Tait wrote an article, “George Mackay Brown remembered” for the magazine *Chapman* (no.84, 1996, pp.33-34) and George Mackay Brown wrote in praise of her films, in *The Orcadian*, especially of the film *The Leaden Echo and the Golden Echo* (1955, 7 minutes), a setting of the Hopkins poem with the same title (written in October 1882, a year after “Inversnaid”). Brown’s comment on the film is this: “The theme is a common one in this most difficult and yet most transparently simple of all poets: all things lovely and young are doomed inevitably to decay and death – nothing can keep them away. Yet (comes back the golden echo from the grayness of the lamentation) having once existed they can never pass away; beauty is gathered and stored in granaries beyond corruption...”

Although Tait’s poems are of significant value and have suffered undue neglect, her writing on the relation of poetry and film suggests the intensity and commitment she felt towards her favoured medium. Her rejection of the term “documentary” is instructive: “The contradictory or paradoxical thing is that in a documentary the real things depicted are liable to lose their reality by being photographed and presented in that ‘documentary’ way, and there’s no poetry in that. In poetry, something else happens. Hard to say what it is. Presence, let’s say, soul or spirit, an empathy with whatever it is that’s dwelt upon, feeling for it – to the point of

identification.” She goes on: “On the other hand, I have at times been imbued with the idea of making a film to illustrate, or to set (in the sense of setting a poem to music) an existing poem, a known poem, and an early effort of mine was to set to pictures Hopkins’s ‘The Leaden Echo and the Golden Echo’.”

Tait wrote: “I tried matching images of my own to the poem of Gerard Manley Hopkins. When it came to editing, I read the poem, for recording first, and the pictures fitted, because I had the relevant lines in mind at the time of shooting; and I think I had to insert only one pause in the pre-recorded track.”

Reading Hopkins silently, or even aloud in company, it’s easy to feel the intimacy and power of his language and form working viscerally and stimulating the imagination as you read, personally, intensely. But in the film, what we see both heightens and distracts from the poem, then returns you to it with the eerie sense that it belongs not to you, but to other people as much as to you. Tait’s film, for me, wrenches you away from the complacency of accepting or assuming personal possession, and pushes you to a realisation that what this poem is about is other people as well as all things, as well as yourself. As you watch the people in the film, living, working, making their mouths move to give shape to what utterance the poem demands, you are aware of how their presence on film signifies their absence in fact, their distance in time from you, witnessing now. And this recognition is also what the poem itself is asking you to acknowledge with humility. Both poem and film enact a common human truth beyond any specific religious orthodoxy.

“I think film is essentially a poetic medium,” Tait wrote. In this film, the images may be secondary to the words, but they are a real interpretation of them, just as the best musical settings of fine poems can surprise you by an enhancement of the meaning in the words themselves.

Margaret Tait’s film of Hopkins’s poem, *The Leaden Echo and the Golden Echo* is available on DVD from The Moving Image Archive, National Library of Scotland, 39-41 Montrose Avenue, Hillington Park, Glasgow G52 4LA. Web: [www.nls.uk/mia](http://www.nls.uk/mia) Telephone: 0845 366 4600 Fax: 0845 366 4601 E-mail: [movingimage@nls.uk](mailto:movingimage@nls.uk)

Margaret Tait's writings are collected in *Subjects and Sequences: A Margaret Tait Reader*, ed. Peter Todd and Benjamin Cook (London: LUX, 2004) and *Margaret Tait: Poems, Stories and Songs*, edited with an introduction by Sarah Neely with a Foreword by Ali Smith (Manchester: Carcanet, 2012).

**[OFFSET:]**

**Extract from Gerard Manley Hopkins, "The Leaden Echo and the Golden Echo"**

THE LEADEN ECHO

How to keep – is there any any, is there none such, nowhere

known some, bow or brooch or braid or brace, lace, latch or

catch or key to keep

Back beauty, keep it, beauty, beauty, beauty,...from vanishing

away? [.....]

O there's none; no no no there's none:

Be beginning to despair, to despair,

Despair, despair, despair, despair.

THE GOLDEN ECHO

Spare!

There is one, yes I have one (Hush there!);

Only not within seeing of the sun,

Not within the singeing of the strong sun,

Tall sun's tingeing, or treacherous the tainting of the earth's air,

Somewhere elsewhere there is ah well where! one,

One. [.....]

See; not a hair is, not an eyelash, not the least lash lost; every hair

Is, hair of the head, numbered. [.....]

O then, weary then why should we tread? O why are we so

haggard at the heart, so care-coiled, care-killed, so fagged,

so fashed, so cogged, so cumbered,

When the thing we freely forfeit is kept with fonder a care,

Fonder a care kept than we could have kept it, kept

Far with fonder a care (and we, we should have lost it) finer,

fonder

A care kept. – Where kept? Do but tell us where kept, where. –

Yonder. – What high as that! We follow, now we follow. –

Yonder.