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Computer Error: Voices and Translations in Edwin Morgan's Science Fiction Poetry

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"Bawr stretter! Bawr. Bawr. Stretterhawl?"

("First Men on Mercury", *Collected Poems* 267)

My favourite scene in the movie *Independence Day* (1996) is when Captain Steven Hiller (Will Smith) knocks out an alien with a single clout, whips out a smart "welcome to Earth"-esque punch line and then lights up a cigar. Sheer. Smith. Action. But what if aliens aren't all doomsayers, what if all they want is a nice chat? This article will examine the variety of voices in Edwin Morgan's Science Fiction Poetry (hereby referred to as SFP) and consider their continuities and differences with Morgan's non-SFP. It will discuss the importance of Morgan as a translator and experimenter of language, highlighting the freedom which SFP allows Morgan as a poet. Morgan's SFP introduces a menagerie of voices to its reader, from humans who have undergone dematerialisation and subsequent molecular reassembly ('teleportation' to most of us) and ended up with one nipple, a DNA-altered hair style, or an extra finger, ("In Sobieski's Shield", CP 196-198) to a charismatic, talking particle who 'Opened up his bosom, showed me a quark' ("Particle Poems: 1", CP 384) so put on your space boots, take a good lung full of O_2 and prepare to engage…

"Bawr stretter! Bawr. Bawr. Stretterhawl?" are the first words we hear from the alien species in Morgan's "First Men on Mercury" (CP 267-268). How do we make any sense of this seemingly non-translatable introduction? The astronauts, indeed the First Men on Mercury (Morgan felt that Mars was overused in Science Fiction, claiming that "Mercury is much too hot for any kind of tongue we'd recognise… But I just did that to get away from the ubiquitous Mars background" (Author Interview, April 2009)) seem uncertain how to respond, presenting the aliens with "a little plastic model / of the solar system, with working parts" (CP 267). A closer examination of the line, "Bawr stretter! Bawr. Bawr. Stretterhawl?" reveals more than we might first assume, however. Morgan provides the reader with a visual interpretation of the language spoken. Unlike the astronauts who can only hear the words and must therefore make assumptions through intonation and tone (which we

could realistically imagine would be completely different to our use of intonation and tone in English), we are privy to an exclamation mark, a question mark and two full-stops, as well as upper and lower casing. Rigid upper-case lettering consumes more space on the page and often implies excitement or shouting whereas the curvier, gentler appearance of lower-cased lettering seems much more serene and thought out. Lower casing it is more frequently used in professional, considered documents and we are more familiar with it, so Morgan's standard use of casing in the poem implies a level of sophistication in the aliens' speech. Similarly, altering punctuation will alter our interpretation of the written speech: replacing an exclamation mark with a full stop, for example, may imply a greater sense of calm. "Bawr Stretter!" is very different from 'Bawr STRETTER!?!', (from this we might conclude that the aliens are excited or angry, depending on our demeanour). We are also aware that in this situation the aliens finish their sentence with a question, "Stretterhawl?", which is in itself a sign of linguistic intelligence. The repetition of the "aw" sound combined with the jolted, somewhat harsh sound created by the r and t of "stretter" also demonstrate a pattern in the speech, giving the impression that these are not random noises but thought out, constructed elements of a language used for communication. Furthermore, a reader who knows a little Scots may identify that "Bawr" translates into standard English as 'practical joke', that "stretter" is remarkably similar to 'strett' which means 'straight', and that "hawl" closely resembles 'haw' which translates as 'livid' or 'pale' (*Concise Scots Dictionary*). Any translation we make is mostly assumption, but with some consideration we are not left completely on the dark side of Mercury. It would not be vacuous, either, to assume that Morgan's semi-Scottish aliens are representing more than they might first appear to be. Under its surface the poem makes a social comment/mockery of the delusions of prowess held by the English language. The men who land on Mercury appear to believe that they are the supreme beings of the universe, only to be faced by equal or superior life forms. Their language faces similar opposition as they (and their observers, us readers) are forced to listen, learn and evolve their mother tongue to take messages away from their hosts.

"The First Men on Mercury" offers us two voices which become interchanged and yet we only ever fully understand one half of the conversation. Our ability to take away meaningful messages from the poem is controlled by the demands it places on its reader: we must be watchful, open to change, patient. Our willingness to accept

different voices is essential in expanding our appreciation of Morgan's poetry and to exist as rational humane creatures. I shall not go in to more detail about "The First Men on Mercury", but for the sake of a good story, which the poem is, the humans and aliens progressively exchange their languages until the humans are speaking 'alienish' and the aliens are speaking English. "Go back to your planet", the aliens say (avoiding the *Independence Day* all-out-Armageddon alternative), "Go back in peace, take what you have gained. … You'll remember Mercury."

I hope to have introduced the concept of Morgan as a translator of voices. Morgan's translation – be it from one human tongue to another, from spaceman to alien, apple to audience – appears to attempt a departure from social and linguistic barriers. His SFP brings new voices, new worlds and new approaches to its readership through the translation of fictional narrators and scenarios into comprehensible accounts of shared human experiences. The idea of translation from one language to another, from the verbal to the visual or oral, from internal to external, is a major aspect of Morgan's poetry. The effects of translation, however, can be a cause of some discomfort to say the least and truly destructive at the worst of times. The works of Morgan's predecessor/peer/contemporary Hugh MacDiarmid (Christopher Murray Grieve), which were often written in Scots, might well have alienated a large readership in their original guise, but translating them and making them more 'accessible' is to distort the culture and climate which is encapsulated in language. There may be no single word in the English language which accurately translates a particular word in Scots, and so the immediacy of the original is lost. The natural sound world of the Scots verse also becomes lost in the translation and so the tone or atmosphere of the poem may alter. Concepts in a poem might be very culture-specific, the poem's form might have to adapt to take on new vocabulary, the translator may very well miss the intended meaning of the poet completely. Similarly, Morgan's 'translations' of voice, from deep-space survivors in "A Home in Space" (CP 387), to the apocalyptic overtones of "Stanzas of Jeopardy" (CP 24-25), to "The Computer's First Christmas Card" (CP 177), it might be argued, are not truly representative of their origin even though their origins are imagined ones. A brief examination of an extract from Morgan's "The Computer's First Christmas Card" may strengthen the case against translating voices further:

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j o l l y me r r y
h o l l y b e r r y
j o l l y b e r r y
me r r y h o l l y
h a p p y j o l l y [...]
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The poem is 35 lines long in total, in a solid rectangular column. It progresses to become more and more obscured, confusing phrases and words we might associate with Christmas, seemingly in an attempt to gain understanding and translate them in to something more meaningful to a computer. Eventually the computerised version ends on, "as MERRYCH/YSANTHEMUM", having missed its Christmas card target completely. In the above extract we already see familiar Christmas words becoming confused in their translation by the computer. The form of the poem, a tight, rigid block, appears to be more of a misinterpretation of what a Christmas message might be; far too structured and mechanical to be a useful recreation. Sentimental computerphiles might have a better regard for our card-producing computer though; after all the card produced is unique (the computer has taken obvious time and effort to try to make something genuine and personal), its rigid layout is not light-years away from the layout in many mass-produced cards and it even attempts to produce Christmas present (a merry chrysanthemum!) But perhaps we are missing another point: it is the mistranslation by the computer which adds to the poem's intended effect. If the computer were completely successful in writing its first Christmas card then any sense of alternative modes of representation may be lost. An 'accurate' card might not be considered a poem at all, but this alternative attempt at a Christmas card, through the mind and voice of a machine, leads the reader to question greater issues: 'Could a computer even 'write' a Christmas Card?', 'Do we all process words like a machine to make sense of them?' and most importantly, 'Are my Christmas cards as well written as this one?' In this example the alteration of language through mistranslation is not accidental but intended and meaningful. Morgan has translated the attempts of an imagined machine to entertain and challenge his reader without misrepresenting or weathering an original source.

Unlike the translation of one human language to another, which can often lead to the erosion of the cultural or linguistic depth that the original document contained, SFP has a unique opportunity to give voice to the voiceless. It is the fictional element of SFP which allows this successful transition. How often have you seen such menu

obscurities as "Black egg on top of pig snout boiling" or "Big bowl gold mushroom cowboy meat" (these are real translations that I have seen on menus), and been ever so slightly tempted to order them just out of curiosity? Something has certainly been altered in this translation, and yet inside the fiction of SFP, such delicacies are believable, they become real. SFP takes our understanding of reality a stage further, detaching what we know to be true and speculating about what *could* be true. This, among other reasons, is why SFP is often known as 'Speculative Poetry'. A favourite quote of Morgan's, by P.B. Shelley, details one role of the poet (particularly the SF poet) quite tidily: "Poets are the mirrors of the gigantic shadows which futurity casts upon the present" ("Edwin Morgan"). Less experimental genres are bound to the past and those things in it; it is the unique position of SFP to not only look backwards, but at the present, to the possibilities of the future and even to alternate dimensions. Morgan's SFP offers such great variety of voice because it is not bound by the conventions of usual realities, narratives, or times. It allows anything to have a voice, absolutely anything. Morgan explains the concept of giving anything a voice in a very practical, forward-thinking sense:

> Talking about communication: can *anything* communicate? In Solaris it's an ocean, a body of water, which is trying to communicate with human beings. Which is…See, at first of all you think 'no no no, not really' but it makes you think about it and wonder if there is perhaps nothing which is incommunicable. And this is an idea which I put in quite a lot. 'Nothing not giving messages', one of my statements. And I think I do believe that, that as we've learned more and more about science and about the world, more and more things that seemed impossible have found to be just possible.
>
> (Author interview, 2009)

Morgan's phrase, "Nothing not giving messages" is truly one of an experimental voice, one which finds intrigue in everything and is unafraid to explore it. In a very real sense it encapsulates the voice of a true scientist and an unflinching scholar. From his *Sonnets from Scotland* (CP 437-457) collection, which maintain a deep sense of reality, to concrete poems such as "The Chaffinch Map of Scotland" (CP

179) which presents the idea of alternative perceptions and varieties in language, we are presented with experimentation. Morgan points out that "the experiment is just experiment. It may be successful, it may not" (Author interview, 2009), and in many ways it is up to the reader to decide on Morgan's successfulness, or not, as a voice-box for variety. In a British academy lecture in 1977, Morgan claimed that "the last refuge of the sublime is in the stars" (Nicholson 8), which to many would suggest that the sublime is no longer available in human realms. This interpretation, however, is not completely accurate, at least for Morgan's work. Far from complete fantasy, Morgan's SFP, like many of his other poems, maintains a definite home in our understanding of reality and the usual important human conditions. His "Home in Space" (which we shall examine shortly) follows a group of isolated individuals who have to abandon what they are used to (Earth) for personal advancement. "In Sobieski's Shield" follows a family who have had to make great sacrifice (being dematerialised and then reformed on a new planet) for survival. Morgan's SFP does not abandon humanity; it offers an alternative, often hopeful, way of looking at it.

Humanity's various modes of understanding and interpreting the world around us differ greatly. Cultures and individuals might not only have very different moral or ethical values than each other but the relationships our brains build between words and images or emotions are also unique and hugely influential on our attempts to make sense of the world. Say 'mug' to a potter and she/he will likely think of a cylindrical drinking cup with a handle. Say 'mug' to a thief and they may well think of purple hair dye and handbags. Morgan destabilizes what we know and expect in language, taking an every day concept such as writing a Christmas card (and the common words we might associate with Christmas messages) and allowing an alternative voice to take charge and speak to us. Colin Nicholson expands this point further still, telling us that "trading actively in ideas of endless change and exchange, Morgan subverts engrossing regimes of value by routing syntax and rhythm through speaking voices in search of an operative dialectic between signifying systems and the world as it is and as it might become." (160) Through his SFP, Morgan introduces new ways of voicing and looking at the world, not simply through the fictional nature of his poems but also through his alternative representations of language. Morgan's translation of a computer's attempts to produce a Christmas card and his presentation of quick-learning bilingual aliens from "The First Men on Mercury" experiment with form and language in such a way that the reader is forced to re-examine their own

modes of understanding in order to access the poems more fully. It is this discomfort, the unease of stepping outside of one's 'comfort zone' to consider alternative views which adds intrigue to his SFP. Indeed the idea of SFP, which to some is a merging of two seemingly opposing genres and languages, can cause its own discomforts.

When I speak to people about SFP I often get a look of bemusement. 'I didn't know that could even exist!' is often their reply, 'but it sounds interesting.' You didn't know it *could* exist? Are there some limits, some unmentionable boundaries which poetry should not cross? I simply smile, of course, and say 'Yes, it exists', but I realise that for many people the languages of science and poetry seem completely separate. Poetry has no realm which it cannot and should not explore and as our language evolves, as we incorporate words such as 'internet', 'nuclear' and (the dreaded) 'twitter' into our common speech, so poetry should follow suit. SFP insists on this acceleration because, similar to our species, it relies on science for its survival. To ignore this change in voice would not only be ignorant, but unpoetic, unreflective of our generation's attitudes and struggles. Let us examine an extract from Morgan's SF poem, "Foundation" (CP 387) which asks "What would you put in the foundation-stone?" and goes on to list a variety of objects ranging from "A horseshoe" to "a spiral nebula":

[…] a microtektite, a silicon chip, a chip pan,
a Rembrandt, a Reinhardt, a Reinhardt jigsaw –'
'That's some foundation-stone –'– a hovercraft,
a manta ray, a bulldozer, a windjammer,
a planetarium, an oilrig, a Concorde, a cornfield,
a gannetry, a hypermarket, a continental shelf,
a brace of asteroids, a spiral nebula – ' […]

It is unimportant for the reader to understand exactly what every item in the poem is, simply because that would not be a true reflection of life. Readers who are looking for THE ANSWER in a poem are missing the point. The foundation stone, a collection of items for future generations (and indeed the poem itself, which is a written representation of these items for future generations to dig up and examine) is a mangle of worlds and ideas, things which we recognise and things which we do not, things which we may be aware of but do not fully understand. The poem does not provide definite answers for you but equally it does not leave you completely alienated. "I think there must be some connection", Morgan states, "though it may be

very very far fetched or unusual. But I think, er, that a science fiction poem which doesn't really work is usually one which has no connection that you can see in any reality at all" (Author interview, 2009). It seems unlikely that a reader would not recognise *any* of the items in "Foundation" or perhaps not have any appreciation for Morgan's use of poetic devices, such as alliteration, which move the poem so fluidly and with such energy. His use of SF fields in his poetry is probably much more subtle than people might imagine; it provides its reader with openings, areas of sanctuary, things which they can hold on to. They are not left drifting in space.

"A Home in Space" (CP 387-388) is a SFP by Morgan which, quite literally, leaves people drifting in space. I raise this poem as an example of the strong narrative elements in Morgan's SFP. Morgan is a storyteller throughout his work, from his romantic piece, "Strawberries" (CP 184), a vivid account of eating strawberries with a lover, to his fantasy sound poem "The Loch Ness Monster's Song" (CP 248), in which Nessie's mutterings are heard as the monster comes up to the surface of Loch Ness, looks around, realises there are no other Loch Ness Monsters alive, and then submerges, seemingly upset. Morgan's interest in unusual narrative is vivid in his SFP, possibly because SF is so frequently accessed through movies, often presenting concepts through storytelling. In "A Home in Space" we witness Morgan's ability to present human concepts through a SF narrative:

[…] One night – or day – or month – or year – they all –
all gathered at the panel and agreed –
agreed to cut communication with –
with the earth base – and it must be said they were –
were cool and clear as they dismantled the station and –
and have their capsule such power that –
that they launched themselves outwards –
outwards in an impeccable trajectory […]

Here Morgan considers the idea of separation, the necessity to abandon what is safe and known ("the earth base") for improvement. The astronauts must undergo the mental challenges of deciding to let go, but also the physical challenge of pushing outwards on their "impeccable trajectory". It is prudent that the space travellers also take apart their station, a refuge of sorts, something stationary, manageable, familiar and home-like, to truly gain their freedom. This is not necessarily the most original concept and although no specific poem or poet comes to mind, the idea is probably not a new one. What makes Morgan's poem effective and memorable is not only his

deft use of poetic technique, his ability to place and pace a poem so well, but its unusual circumstance. Morgan's SFP is capable of using narrative voice to present complex ideas of humanity in a way which makes them both understandable and entertaining; they demonstrate very human thoughts and feelings in a very alien environment. Marshall Walker expresses this view much more succinctly and beautifully than I have:

> His science fiction poems delight in the ways and means of present and future science for their own special beauty and, fundamentally, for the expanded awareness of earth and of human potential they can provide. Space beckons — we must take the voyage out — but the return is eternal
>
> (62)

And so ends our trajectory through a small part of Morgan's SFP. Morgan is a great experimenter who is never afraid to give voice to the voiceless in his poetry. SFP allows Morgan the true breadth of his imagination without being bound to the conventions of usual realities, narratives, or times. We have considered Morgan's role not only as a poet, but as a translator of voices. These translations are able to force readers to move out of their comfort zones (linguistically and thematically) to reconsider their own views and their willingness to evolve. Morgan's obvious optimism, his deft attention to form and the importance he places on the power of language are as central and important in his SFP as his non-SFP, yet the alien scenarios he presents are able to breach an extra dimension. Morgan alienates his readers, disrupting their expectations with far-off languages and narratives in one respect, but also allowing them a home in amongst it all; never abandoning the human elements of his verse. If ever lost in space, let Morgan's SFP remind you: "the last refuge of the sublime is in the stars".

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