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INTERTEXTUAL IMPRINTS OF EDWIN MORGAN'S
SONNETS FROM SCOTLAND

A b s t r a c t. The paper postulates that Morgan's cycle is a particularly appropriate object of intertextual study as his poetry is rich with textual correspondences and cultural inter-relationships. Morgan's formal method of composition emulates in its intertextual propensity the general theme of the sequence: a multidimensional peregrination through space and time of Scotland's history and geography in search of its national identity. The intertextual correspondences in Morgan's *Sonnets from Scotland* are predominantly language-oriented or aesthetic. Morgan enhances the meaning of his sonnets with linguistic coloring which covers the whole spectrum of languages and their registers from slang and local Glaswegian dialects through modern languages like German, French or Arabic, to ancient Latin, Greek or even extinct Pictish. The second dominant variable which qualifies the senses of the entire cycle is broadly understood art, both in its verbal as well as visual form of representation. Synergic cross-fertilization of these dominant connotative fields of signification allows Morgan to create sonnets of unsurpassed dexterity in modern British poetry.

Key words: intertextuality, poetics, sonnet, Scottish literature, Edwin Morgan, *Sonnets from Scotland*.

1.

The category of *complexity* is one of the most fundamental criteria of critical appreciation of artistically constructed texts. It is common knowledge in literary studies nowadays that modern literature cannot resist the lure of saturating the text into a rich texture of interrelationships of contextual, symbolic, religious, or political nature. The influence of Thomas Stearns Eliot's critical essays written in the first decades of the twentieth century is probably decisive here. In order to justify his own complex and cerebral poetic

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compositions he even coined a critical term *objective correlative*. Likewise, his studies of the metaphysical poets of the seventeenth century stressed the necessity of "look[ing] into our heart…look[ing] into the cerebral cortex, the nervous system, and the digestive tracts"[1] in order to write good poetry. The decrees of the high priest of Modernism to "amalgamate disparate experience"[2] became standard practice and unwritten law of modern poetic composition. Garcia Barrio explained most clearly this problem stating that:

> Of all the features of the artistic text, it is complexity which has been among the most favoured in recent decades. Such notions as Barthes's polysemy or polysense and Schmidt's polyvalence derive from it, and it is through these concepts that an attempt has been made to account for literariness in the modern, linguistic-poetic and pragmatic-cultural sense of the term.[3]

In the sixties of the twentieth century, a French Post-Structuralist critic Julia Kristeva, in her crusade for "undoing the false identities of meaning and subjectivity upon which western humanist and capitalist is based"[4] noticed that all literary texts are in effect rewritings and mutations of all previous texts and represent eventually peculiar semantic palimpsests. She maintained that following Bakhtin's theories of dialogic status of literary texts we are entitled to claim that "any text is constructed of a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another. The notion of *intertextuality* replaces that of intersubjectivity, and poetic language is read as at least *double*."[5] Nowadays the understanding of intertextuality is very broad and it goes well beyond what Kristeva called *the vertical axis* of previously written literary texts which bear influence upon the newly written text.[6] Gérard Genette, in his critical book *Palimpsest*, postulated a more comprehensive formal term *transtextuality* with five distinctive subcategories: intertextuality, paratextuality, architextuality, metatextuality, and hypertextuality.[7] All these subtypes send us variously away

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[1] Thomas Stearns Eliot, *Selected Essays* (London: Blackwell, 1934), 290

[2] Thomas Stearns Eliot, *Selected Essays* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1960), 247

[3] Antonio Garcia Barrio, "Topical Tradition and Textual Complexity", in *Poetics Today*, Vol. 4, No. 4, Descriptive Poetics: Bible to Renaissance (1983), 707

[4] Michael Ryan, *Literary Theory: A Critical Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), 74

[5] Julia Kristeva, "Word, Dialogue and Novel", in Toril Moi (ed.), *Kristeva Reader* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 37

[6] Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), 69

[7] Gérard Genette, *Palimpsests*, trans. Channa Newman & Claude Doubinsky (Lincoln, NB: University of Nebraska Press, 1997).

from the textual references within the structure of the text itself to multiple areas of culture, politics or ideology for the enhancement of its meanings.

The poems of Edwin Morgan, the late Scottish Makar, are a particularly appropriate object of intertextual study as his poetry is rich with textual correspondences and cultural inter-relationships. His poetic output has always fascinated scholars and readers as its thematic and stylistic diversity is awe-inspiring and allows for myriads of complementary readings. If we turn to only one decade in the poetic career of Morgan, that of the end of the 1950s and the middle of 1960s, and observe the range of potential influences upon his future poetry, we notice that he "was greatly impressed by Black Mountain poets like Olson and Creeley, Beats like Ginsberg and Kerouac, and older poets like William Carlos Williams […] the strain of Russian Modernism from Mayakovsky to Voznesensky excited him too, as did the Brazilian and Portuguese concrete poets he came across in 1962."[8] Ian Crichton Smith for example characterizes Morgan's early work as a period in which the poet "writes a lot about people he admires, for example Lenin, Hemingway […] Jenny Geddes, John Knox, Lauren Bacall […] Mary Queen of Scots, Mac Gonagall, Mungo Park, Wordsworth: all in all a curious mélange."[9] Later Smith enumerates other collections of Morgan's poems with even more bizarre assemblage of referential characters like Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo, Newton, Beethoven, Melville, Mayakovsky (*The Cape of Good Hope*) or MacDiarmid, Joyce, Bosch, Charlotte and Emily Bronte, Faust, Marilyn Monroe and Ulanova, the Brahan Seer and Lady Seaforth (*The Whittrick*).[10] In popular reception, Edwin Morgan is famous today as a poet whose verbal experimentations match the scientific and technological themes of his idiosyncratic poems. Like insubordinate John Donne in the seventeenth century, Edwin Morgan is not afraid to exploit scientific themes and imagery, to explore the dilemmas of his times by means of the imagery and lexicon of science. Poems like "A Home in Space", "The First Man on Mercury", or "Translunar Space 1972" are characteristic examples of texts which blend technical vocabulary with equally "unpoetic" subject matter of futuristic speculations on human nature and the world he lives in. Equally important is Morgan's concrete poetry which stems from his profound

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[8] Kevin McCarra, *Edwin Morgan: Lives and Work*, in Robert Crawford and Hamish Whyte (eds.), *About Edwin Morgan* (Edinburgh University Press, 1990), 6

[9] Iain Crichton Smith, "The Public and Private Morgan", in Crawford and Whyte (eds.), *About Edwin Morgan*, 40

[10] Crichton Smith, loc. cit.

interest in the visual arts as well as music and photography. Together with Ian Hamilton Finlay they remain the most expert Scottish poets, or, one should say, concrete artists as this form of creative expression entails extra-verbal means of encoding senses. To complement all these poetic activities we should stress the fact that Morgan was an expert translator, critic and scholar. Peter McCarey in his essay entitled "Edwin Morgan the Translator" notices that he "translated into English and Scots from Italian, Russian, German, Spanish, French, Portuguese, Anglo-Saxon, ancient Greek, Dutch, Khmer, Armenian and Hungarian."[11] It is no wonder that rich and multi-dimensional personality of a scholar-poet enhanced by linguistic sensitivity and artistic genius led in consequence to the poetry of great and intellectually nourishing intertextual complexity.

The main aim of this paper is to investigate more closely the ways in which Edwin Morgan creates meanings in his poems. One of the most productive techniques of poetic composition employed by Morgan in his poems is **intertextual cross-referencing**. Therefore, special attention will be paid to this form of amplification of meanings in his most elaborate sonnet sequence entitled *Sonnets from Scotland*. This very collection of fifty two poems has been chosen as intertextual suggestiveness appears to be one of the main organizing principles of the entire sequence.

<div align="center">2.</div>

Morgan was one of the most versatile and knowledgeable poets of the second half of the twentieth century. As titular professor of English literature at Glasgow University, who published numerous critical studies, reviews and essays, Morgan was not only a sensitive and skilled poet but also a teacher-critic, aware of the vastness of the body of text which might be a source of inspiration and enrichment of his own compositions. Critics and fellow poets have always admired Morgan's adroitness and attempted to trace the faintest allusions they could identify in his poems. Douglas Dunn comments on the opening sentence of the first sonnet in the sequence entitled "Slate" which reads: "There is no beginning" with a characteristic inquisitiveness, stating that it:

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[11] P. McCarey. "Edwin Morgan the Translator", in Crawford and Whyte, "The Public and Private Morgan", 90

might echo Thomas De Quincey in his essay 'System of the Heavens', where he concludes a 'Dream Vision of the Infinite' with: 'The Angel threw up his glorious hands to the heavens, saying, "End is there none to the Universe of God? Lo! also there is no beginning."'[12]

Useful as they might be, such comments are just a first step on the way to disclosing the unique pattern of Morgan's poetic technique and the effectiveness of such intertextual cross-referencing. The ultimate goal is to map the network of thematic relationships and find a meaningful design they make. The complexity of references, however, makes it almost impossible to draw a complete pattern in an introductory paper like that. Thus, we will limit our analysis to establishing only the dominant traits which reappear most frequently and form a salient template of the sonnet sequence.

By and large, the intertextual correspondences in Morgan's *Sonnets from Scotland* are predominantly language-oriented or aesthetic. Morgan enhances the meaning of his sonnets with linguistic coloring which covers the whole spectrum of languages and their registers from slang and local Glaswegian dialects through modern languages like German, French or Arabic, to ancient Latin, Greek or even extinct Pictish. The second dominant variable which qualifies the senses of the entire cycle is broadly understood art, both in its verbal as well as visual form of representation. Synergic cross-fertilization of these dominant connotative fields of signification allows Morgan to create sonnets of unsurpassed dexterity in modern British poetry.

Admittedly, language is central in Morgan's poetics. Not only is it a fundamental tool of poetic composition, a set of building block of his verbal constructions, but also a medium for defining man's identity, a mirror of his personal as well as national features.

Morgan opens his sonnet sequence with a motto in German: "O Wechsel der Zeiten Du Hoffnung des Volks!", which he derived for Bertold Brecht's play *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*; its **original** wording attests to the validity of language with its unique sound, rhythm and melody. Morgan's concrete sound-poems like those he published in the collections *The Horsman's Word* (1970) or *The Second Life* (1968) are the most spectacular examples of auditory adroitness of the poet so sensitive to the nuances of phonetics and pronunciation. Despite the fact that Morgan knew Brecht's texts and even translated some of them into English[13], he uses the original language for the

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[12] Douglas Dunn, "Morgan's Sonnets," in Crawford and Whyte (eds.), *About Edwin Morgan*, 79

[13] For Morgan's versions of Brecht's poems see especially the poet's collection of verse translations entitled *Rites of Passage* (1976).

opening of his sequence to draw the attention of the reader to the roots of Scottish mother tongue, its being part of Germanic family of languages.[14] Secondly, his intertextual reference to a primary artistic text of Brecht highlights the hidden *leitmotif* of the entire cycle: a burning desire for change and progress after the failure of the Referendum which was to give Scotland a long awaited devolution.[15] One of the most intricate poems of the collection in which language plays a critical role is "Colloquy in Glaschu". In it we overhear an imagined conversation between two historical personae Saint Columba and Saint Kentigern. Saint Columba was an Irish missionary who is said to have set up a Christian outpost on the island of Iona from where he travelled to convert the Picts and the Scots. Saint Kentigern, who appears in the crest of Glasgow's coat of arms, was a legendary founder of the city also known as St Mungo. Most importantly the poem uses a variety of languages to relate this cryptic conversation. As it is often the case with Morgan, his poems "explore[s] tangential and speculative relationships to scripted and imagined event; and speculative relationships instantiated in sonnet structure bring into play some of the ways in which the measuring of recorded event becomes a reality on account of the emergence of measurement itself—story becoming history as conventionally written and received."[16] This time, however, the meeting between the two saints is based on a real incident but it is not the actuality of their conversation that matters here but the content of their conversation. It is not unimportant that their colloquy is interlaced with French, Latin, English and Scots to draw our attention to the Babel-like patchwork of linguistic, and hence cognitive, possibilities and nuances. More importantly, the two wise men seem to hold a conflicting opinion upon the significance of *le son du cor*, which to St. Columba "*est triste au fond silvarum!*"…"*abest silentium, le cor eclate –/ et meurt*". St. Kentigern is enthusiastic declaring: "*J'aime le son du*

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[14] We are aware of the complexity of the language map of Scotland both in the Highlands and in the Lowlands, and the triple roots of languages which developed from Old Irish, Old English and Old Norse and are spoken in present day Scotland.

[15] Morgan himself writes about the reasons for writing *Sonnets from Scotland* and general meaning of the entire collection: "*Sonnets from Scotland* began with the idea of writing one or two, I think as a kind of reaction, probably, to the failure of the Referendum to give Scotland political devolution and any idea of a Scottish Assembly. I think at that time there was a sense of kind of gap, a hiatus, a numbness in Scottish thinking . . . It's a kind of comeback, an attempt to show that Scotland was there, was alive and kicking . . . It was just a kind of desire to show that Scotland was there and that one mustn't write it off just because the Assembly had not come into being." (Morgan, 90, in H. Whyte (ed.), *Nothing Not Giving Messages. Reflections on Work and Life* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1990), 141).

[16] Colin Nicholson, *Edwin Morgan. Inventions of Modernity* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009), 139

cor" and hoping that the sound "*renait et se prolonge*". Action and stagnation, hope and apathy are the discordant emotions which complement the labyrinth of verbal alternatives organizing the meanings of this sonnet. On symbolic level this poem refers to Scotland and its hopes for and frustrations about independence. Polish readers would find the image of the awakening horn with its symbolic/ biblical connotations of power all too familiar after its artful exposition in the modernist drama *Wesele* by Stanisław Wyspiański.

Interestingly, the organizing image of the sonnet—*le son du cor*—belongs to the domain of art. Moreover, it is redoubled in the end of the sonnet with another "musical variation":

"The cell/is filled with song. Outside, *puer cantat./Veni venator* sings the gallus kern." Further still, the Latin church hymn *Veni Creator Spiritus* has been altered into a *Veni venator* song changing the creator of the hymn into the hunter of the song, which might possibly allude to the entailing violence in the process of such a profound political change.

Equally artful and condensed is the sonnet entitled "The Picts". If "Colloquy in Glaschu" used artistic code of music with its linguistic and symbolic connotations of sound, this poem refers us to the visual arts, to painting or the art of tattoo in particular. Although it is unknown today what originally the Picts called themselves, the Latin word *Picti* is derived from *pingere* and denotes painted or tattooed people. Morgan suggests that the Picts' identity was imprinted, as it were, on their bodies with "the fine bone needle dipped in dark-blue woad/[which] rings the flesh with tender quick assurance". The tattooing "rich pin" which gives identity to the warrior, becomes equivalent to the pen of the poet, the creator of reality who, like the biblical Adam in the Garden of Eden, "gave names to all the animals". And names are important and abundant in Morgan's sonnet:

> Names as from outer space, names without roots:
> Bes, son of Nanammovvezz; Bliesblituth
> that wild bafoon throned in an oaken booth;
> wary Edarnon; brilliant Usconbuts;
> Canutulachama who read the stars.
>
> ("The Picts", ll. 1–5)

They are meaningless today, like the Pictish language which is extinct and extremely difficult to trace back with scholarly objectivity. What survived of that language are precisely names and place-names,[17] which for

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[17] Cf. Kenneth H. Jackson, "The Pictish Language," in Frederick Threlfall Wainwright (ed.),

modern people are meaningless phrases with only most peculiar auditory effects. The names are phonetically as bizarre as the tattoos are florid and extraordinary in their patterns. But the Picts had been the original inhabitants of the eastern and northern part of Scotland in late Iron Age; their identity had eventually been merged with the other Scottish ethnic groups and formed a patchwork of modern Scotland.

The other extreme of language variations used by Morgan in order to render Scottish diversity is a sonnet entitled "Gangs". It is a tongue-in-cheek conversation between two drunk fellows who discuss their mundane problems of daily existence by means of very formal terminology derived from the domain of world of finance and business:

> Thaim that squeal *Lower Inflation,* aye, thaim,
> plus thae *YY Zero Wage Increase* wans,
> they'll no know what hit thim. See yours, and Dan's,
> and min's that's three chibs. We'll soon hiv a team.
> Whit's that? *Non-Index-Linked!* C'moan then,
> Ya bams, Ah'll take ye. *Market Power fae Drum!*
>
> ("Gangs", ll. 5–11)

This hodgepodge of mixed registers and dialects is a humorous variation on the theme of miscommunication and emotional chaos. Although this time we are not teleported in space and time to Scottish pre-history, the effect is exactly the same as it was in the "Colloquy in Glaschu" or "The Picts": language both defines and alienates individual men and whole groups socially and intellectually enclosing them in their mental and territorial ghettos whether they want it or not and irrespective of times they live in.

Admittedly, hybridity of representation in the form of grotesque discord of presented elements is Morgan's favorite compositional technique. Just like the poem "Gangs" also "Caledonian Antisyzygy" exploits such possibilities of creating original meanings. The title of the poem is, as a matter of fact, a brilliant variation on this artistic technique and simultaneously brings out the proverbially oxymoronic nature of every Scot who:

> shows at every turn, in his political and ecclesiastical history, in his polemical restlessness, in his adaptability, which is another way of saying that he has made allowance for new conditions, in his practical judgment, which is the admission that two sides of the matter have been considered.[18]

The Problem of the Picts (Edinburgh: Nelson, 1955). Reprinted Melven Press, Perth, 1980 or Eoin MacNeill, "The Language of the Picts," *Yorkshire Celtic Studies* vol. 2 (1939): 3–45

[18] G. Gregory Smith, "Scottish Literature: Character and Influence," in Gerard Carruthers, *Scottish Literature* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), 4

Here Morgan juxtaposes the time-honoured sonnet form with a mundane form of a joke known as a "knock-knock joke." Moreover, the facetious nature of the word game collides with its possible literary intertextual reference in Shakespeare's *Macbeth* Act II sc. 3. Interestingly, however, both fragments hilarious as they are, allude one way or another to death. In Shakespeare's famous knocking scene a drunk Porter admits members of different professions to the kingdom of Beelzebub whose doors he guards erratically.[19] In Morgan's sonnet we have references to Robert Louis Stevenson's infamous Doctor Jekyll:

> —Who's there?—Doctor Jekyll. —Doctor Jekyll
> who? —Doctor , 'd ye kill Mr Hyde?—Pig-swill!
> Nada! Rubbish! Lies! Garbage! Never! Schlock!
>
> ("Caledonian Antisyzygy", ll. 6–8)

This famed literary intertextual reference is followed in the end of the sonnet by a cultural-historical source: a popular and sensational case of the so-called "Burk and Hare murders" which occupied the attention of the residents of Edinburgh in the 1820's. "The West Port murders", as the case was also called, concerned a series of murders committed by William Burke and William Hare who killed sixteen residents of Edinburgh and sold their bodies to a popular anatomy doctor Robert Knox[20]: "Who's there?— Doctor/ Knox—Doctor Knox who?—Doctor Knocks Box Talks./Claims T.V. Favours Grim Duo, Burke, Hare." (ll. 9–11) Here, Morgan counterpoises the grand/literary intertextual references (Shakespeare, Stevenson) with the popular/sensational ones (Knox, Burke & Hare). Not unimportant is also the fact that the sonnet exploits the potentials of a language game with its puns on words like *Knox—knocks, Jekyll—kill, who—Doctor Who* activating in this way the linguistic compositional dominant so fundamental in Morgan's poetic strategy.

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[19] "Knock, knock, knock! Who's there, i'th' name of Beelzebub? Here's a farmer that hanged himself on the expectation of plenty. Come in time, have napkins enough about you, here you'll sweat for't."

"Knock, knock! Who's there, in th' other devil's name? Faith, here's an equivocator that could swear in both the scales against either scale, who committed treason enough for God's sake, yet could not equivocate to heaven. O, come in, equivocator."

"Knock, knock, knock! Who's there? Faith, here's an English tailor come hither for stealing out of a French hose. Come in, tailor. Here you may roast your goose."

[20] See especially such books as: Owen Dudley Edwards, *Burke and Hare* (Edinburgh: Polygon Books, 1980); Hugh Douglas, *Burke and Hare: The True Story* (London: Robert Hale & Company, 1973).

If understood very broadly, intertextual connotations can shape the meaning of the poem by means of very diverse codes. The poem "Not the Burell Collection" for example uses ekphrastic code in its poetic strategy to grasp the elegiac feelings of pain and suffering, which seem to be timeless and spaceless, "a lachrymatory no man can lift." In a bitterly ironic contrast of Glasgow's exclusive Burrell Collection of fine arts with real life "exhibits", Morgan, like Keats in his "Ode on a Grecian Urn", brings up a list of "flesh and blood" artefacts like:

> The Buenos Aires Vase, one mile across,
> flickering with unsleeping silent flames,
> its marble carved in vine-leaves mixed with names,
> shirtless ones and *desaparecidos*;
>
> (ll. 1–4)

Just like in a good museum, the collection is thematic yet diversified and contains exhibits from different times and places. Thus, we have "a collier's iron collar, riveted,/stamped by his Burntisland owner" from Scotland, "a spade from Babiy Yar" from Russia, "a blood-crust from the blade/that jumped the corpse of Wallace for his head" from Scotland, "the stout rack soaked in Machiavelli's sweat" from Italy, an oriental "fire-circled scorpion" and a local "blown frog", "the siege of Beirut in stained glass" from Lebanon, "a sift of Auschwitz ash" from Poland and "an old tapestry-set/unfinished, with a crowd, a witch, a log" from Puritan America or medieval Europe. They all create a "living" map of human and animal agony, a peculiar *tableau vivant* of dolor in all creation.

Edwin Morgan's sonnet sequence *Sonnets from Scotland* is definitely the poet's major contribution to the development of this most productive poetic form of artistic expression. Its profoundness of thoughts and feelings is markedly enhanced by intertextual richness of the poem's cross-references. The late Scots Makar's formal method of composition emulates in this way the general theme of the sequence: a multidimensional peregrination through space and time of Scotland's history and geography in search of its national identity.

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INTERTEKSTUALNE MATRYCE
„SONETÓW ZE SZKOCJI" EDWINA MORGANA

S t r e s z c z e n i e

Artykuł dotyczy złożonej problematyki intertekstualności w cyklu współczesnych sonetów pierwszego szkockiego Makara – poety narodowego Szkocji. Autor stara się ukazać złożoną siatkę relacji intertekstualnych między poszczególnymi utworami cyklu a innymi tekstami wchodzącymi w wyrafinowany sposób w liczne relacje semantyczne. Analizy wybranych wierszy potwierdzają tezę o prymarności estetycznych, a w szczególności językowych dominant intertekstualnych, które wzbogacają strukturę znaczeniową utworów, wprowadzając w jej tkankę kolejne warstwy znaczeń zapożyczanych z innych tekstów. Językowe matryce zaczerpnięte z tak różnorodnych języków jak łacina, piktyjski, szkocki, francuski czy niemiecki, w połączeniu z różnorodnymi rejestrami społecznymi języka stanowią o unikalności poetyki Morgana i jego cyklu sonetów szkockich.

Streścił Sławomir Wącior

Słowa kluczowe: intertextuality, poetics, sonnet, Scottish literature, Edwin Morgan, Sonnets from Scotland.