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READING THE CITY: EDWIN MORGAN'S "GLASGOW SONNETS" AS A CONTEMPORARY URBAN SONNET SEQUENCE

"I don't have a car, so I walk about the city quite a lot . . ."
Edwin Morgan

A b s t r a c t. This essay is an analytical study of a ten-poem sequence of sonnets written by Morgan in the seventies of the twentieth century. In it the late Scottish Makar creates a sophisticated poetic map of the city's dynamic architectonic and sociological mutations by means of sophisticated language patterns. The poetic strategies used by Morgan in this cycle of sonnets aim at rendering the social and political problems of a modern city through equally advanced and amorphous linguistic operations. A detailed analysis and interpretation of all ten sonnets creates a poetic map of Glasgow with its characteristic and randomly chosen places, populated by people who find it difficult to accommodate there. Morgan's sequence of sonnets becomes a refined and compound structure which, while relying on traditional motifs and patterns of Renaissance sonnets, transforms most of them and creates their modern unconventional lyrical equivalents.

Key words: Poetics; sonnet; British literature; Scotland; Edwin Morgan; "Glasgow Sonnets."

In his interview with Gerry Cambridge for *The Dark Horse Magazine*, Edwin Morgan was asked if he enjoyed the idea of subverting various poetic forms? In confirming this fundamental quality of his poetic practice, the late Scottish Makar used the example of his excellent short sonnet sequence "Glasgow Sonnets." Morgan's comment on this cycle of sonnets is so characteristic that it seems reasonable to include his words here in full:

> That's true, yes, and I enjoy doing that type of thing quite deliberately. Certainly the sonnet is an ancient form and might have been thought to be quite

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> dead, but it's still very useable in different ways. Though it seems to be associated in most people's minds with the Elizabethan period, if you think of some of the poems of John Donne or John Milton it clearly can be used for religious or political subjects. I felt it would be a challenge to write a series of sonnets about the social and political problems of a modern city. I even enjoyed extending the impact of the sonnet by giving myself difficult rhymes, just to make a kind of gritty point. They're not poems you can read lazily. I'm trying to force the reader to get to grips with the subject: Glasgow has real social, human problems, and at that time—in the 70s—many things seemed to be going wrong, so I felt that the difficult rhymes, even the difficult syntax at times would suit that. That kind of thing can be criticised because some people feel that if there's a rhyme that really stands out and you wonder what on earth it's doing that somehow the decorum of the sonnet has been upset, but I don't go along with that. I think if the sonnet is well made all over you can have the occasional outré rhyme as long as it is a rhyme and fits in with the meaning of what's being said. [1]

Morgan's explanation of the method and the subject matter of his cycle of "Glasgow Sonnets" makes it clear that he is consistent in his technique of composition in which he has always aimed at creativity and experimentation while subverting the expectations of the reader and disturbing his peace of mind of a "competent reader" who felt comfortable in the labyrinth of well established conventions and strategies for deconstructing so-called traditional forms of poetry. Because indeed the sonnet is such a poetic form which lulls to sleep the modern reader who ceases to be alert to possible pitfalls of misinterpretation due to his application of conventional methods of analysing the sonnet. The form as such was created in Italy in the beginning of the 13th century by Giacomo (Iacopo) da Lentini—a minor Sicilian poet and notary at the court of the Holy Roman emperor Frederick II. Its long history and countless formal variations make it one of the most popular and well defined poetic forms in almost all major European literatures. Popular in virtually all epochs with the exception of the Augustan Age of neoclassical rationalism, the sonnet has survived until modern times and has become one of the most popular forms of poetic expression. The poets who used this form, as separate poems or longer sequences or cycles of sonnets, have used it in order to cope with all spheres of human experience not only love, which was its original subject matter. Seen from diachronic perspective, the more contemporary the sonnet the more extraordinary its form and content. Major critical works on the history and evolution the this poetic form give evidence

[1] Gerry Cambridge and Edwin Morgan, "Edwin Morgan in conversation," *The Dark Horse*, Summer 1997: 34.

of dynamic transformation of the sonnet over the ages.[2] Many poets go to great lengths in order to explode the form and content of such a traditional poem as the sonnet. Edwin Morgan is undoubtedly one of them. He used the form of the sonnet in several cycles like "Sonnets from Scotland," "Jordanstone Sonnets" or "New Year Sonnets." In this paper we will be preoccupied with Morgan's sonnet sequence entitled "Glasgow Sonnets" which was published in 1972. It is a collection of ten modern poems which are markedly different from their classical Renaissance counterparts as far as both the subject matter and style is concerned. In keeping with his words quoted above, Morgan consciously "modernizes" the reality presented in his poems and goes as far as to debunk its usually serene and ethereal atmosphere. Glasgow in Morgan's poems is not a *locus amoenus*; not only is it a city—not a very common location for a typical sonnet—but it is a place of total degradation characterized by "grinding poverty: decaying tenements, unemployment, industrial decline and the cycle of deprivation" characteristic for "Glasgow in the 60's and early 70's."[3] Douglas Dunn expresses this dilemma in a more spectacular and emphatic way stating that "High Culture, in one of its most precious forms, encounters the issues of Glasgow... [and] the title is almost an oxymoron ...[while] each poem feels like a verbal fist in which the immediacy and passion of his concerns squeeze the form until its pips squeak."[4] For Williams, on the other hand, Morgan's cycle of sonnets is "the sequence [which] chronicles the consequences of modernisation in the city, the effects of planning upon social processes as well as the decimation of large-scale heavy industries."[5] He also aptly notices that according to Morgan:

> The city is just as capable of stirring a writer's creative imagination as the world of nature is, and this is true whether the relations are positive or negative. It may well be that the straightforward celebration of a city . . . will not so

[2] See for example such anthologies of the sonnet as Robert M. Bender and Charles L. Squier, (eds.), *The Sonnet: An Anthology* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1987); Boland Eavan, and Edward Hirsh (eds.), *The Making of a Sonnet. A Norton Anthology* (New York: Norton, 2008); Stephen Burt and David Mikics (eds.), *The Art of the Sonnet* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2010).

[3] Aileen Ballantyne, *Politics and the Personal in the Sonnet and Sonnet Sequence: Edwin Morgan's "Glasgow Sonnets," Tony Harrison's "from The School of Eloquence" and selected sonnets by Paul Muldoon* (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh, 2014), 81. Unpublished doctoral dissertation.

[4] Douglas Dunn, „Morgan's Sonnets," in Robert Crawford & Hamish Whyte (eds.), *About Edwin Morgan* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1990), 75.

[5] Nerys Williams, *Contemporary Poetry* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), 146.

> easily achieve lift off in a doubtful and self critical age like ours, but the complexities of reactions to cities, especially in the last two centuries have initiated what is virtually a new kind of urban writing, in heightened prose as well as verse.[6]

It is already in Sonnet I that we are introduced to the grim and post-apocalyptic landscape of modern Glasgow where:

> A mean wind wanders through the backcourt trash.
> Hackles on puddles rise, old mattresses
> puff briefly and subside. Play fortresses
> of brick a bric-a-brac spill out some ash.
>
> (I, ll. 1–4)

In a characteristic way for the whole cycle the elements of the world presented undergo a process of a peculiar desacralization or defilement. Here, we see how the *spirit* of the place turns into a "mean wind," the *sacred waters* become "puddles" and royal *castles* are converted into "play-fortresses/of brick and bric-a-brac." The all-pervading sense of aimless movement is rendered by images of wandering through backcourt trash wind and old mattresses that puff and subside. The place is not only dilapidated with virtually nothing of any value but the residents of the mansion are equally desolate and miserable. In the place of a *donna angelicata* from Renaissance sonnets we meet "mother and daughter the last mistresses/of that black block condemned to stand, not crash." They resemble in their shape of posture the chipped sill of the broken window one floor below, the only window which survived the demolition:

> Four storeys have no windows left to smash,
> but in the fifth a chipped still buttresses
> mother and daughter the last mistresses
> of that black block condemned to stand, not crash.
>
> (I, ll. 5–7)

Another characteristic element of the Renaissance sonnet—a rose—the flower of love undergoes a degrading transformation this time into "roses of mould [which] grow from ceiling to wall." Here, vegetation, like material objects and people, signify staleness, impotence and ennui. The other resi-

[6] Edwin Morgan, 'The Poet and the City', *Comparative Criticism*, 18 (1996): 91–105 (p. 92), qtd. in Williams, 146.

dent of the building is equally unheroic and scruffy as he "lies late since he lost his job"; his only entertainment is smoking "on one elbow" which pollutes even more the air with his every puff and cough. Tragically, the man is dehumanized as he resembles the old mattress which puffs and subsides or playfortresses which spill out some ash from the first quatrain. The lifeless atmosphere in this sonnet is strangely made alive by means of a bizarre use of personification: in the first quatrain the puddles are like dogs whose hackles rise, old mattresses breathe, while in the third quatrain, the kettle whimpers harshly. It does not bring life to this place, far from it, it even makes it more ghostly and dangerous as the personified objects become spectre-like and bring associations of fear (vicious dog), sterility (mattress) and pain (kettle):

> Around them the cracks deepen, the rats crawl.
> The kettle whimpers on a crazy hob.
> Roses of mould grow from ceiling to wall.
> The man lies late since he has lost his job,
> Smokes on one elbow, letting his coughs fall
> thinly into an air too poor to rob.
>
> (I, ll. 9–14)

Sonnet II continues the process of subverting the canonical elements of the Renaissance sonnet. It opens with a coarse travesty of the courtly love convention which is downgraded here to a view of "a shilpit dog [which] fucks grimly by the close." All the magic and ethereality of the sublime union of the lovers' souls is changed into an animal act of instinctive mating stripped off any emotion or subtleness. The romantic atmosphere of an evening secret meeting is rendered as gloomy "late shadows [which] lengthen slowly"; the distant slogans of the city, mutilated like the people and places of this reality, fade in the distance:

> The YY PATRICK TOI grins from its shade
> like the last strains of some lost *libera nos*
> *a malo*. No deliverer ever rose
> from these stone tombs to get the hell they made
> unmade.
>
> (II, ll. 3–7)

It is not the name of the beloved lady written by the lover in the sand with his hand—like in Spenser's Sonnet LXXV—but the Glasgow gang slogans on the tenement walls which the speaker see as "it grins [ominously] from its shade." In a grotesque way the mundane gang graffiti words are contrasted with a sanctified

passage from the Lord's Prayer mentioned in Matthew 6:13—*libera nos a malo* —and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. But here the tenements are real graveyards, not stone tombs with crucified Christ ready to be raised to life and "get the hell they made/unmade." This is a reality of an everlasting limbo where "the same weans never make the grade/The same grey street sends back the ball it throws." In the poetic code of love poetry the stars usually signify the lady's shining eyes—the object of the poet's adoration. In Morgan's sonnet these are a cat's eyes which glitter in darkness as the cat is hiding terrified under a broken pram. The stars, however, send no signals of acceptance or hope but they are lost in the labyrinth of chimneys and encroaching darkness:

> Under the darkness of a twisted pram
> a cat's eyes glitter. Glittering stars press
> between the silent chimney-cowls and cram
> the higher spaces with their SOS.
>
> (II, ll. 9–12)

The final couplet of the sonnet introduces a solitary human being, a woman drinking liquor to keep herself warm and drugged as her "coats keep the evil cold out less and less." She is a matching spectral character for the depressed smoking man from the conclusion of Sonnet I.

Admittedly, Neris Williams is right to observe that "Glasgow Sonnets is a polyphonic text in that it is multi-voiced, sampling speech and dialect."[7] Thus, in Sonnet III we notice a dialogic form so common in numerous Renaissance sonnets. However, the traditional sonnets from Wyatt through Shakespeare to Donne would be based on a seductive dialogue of the lover with his lady who was being coaxed into accepting the lover's caresses and body. Morgan degrades this conventional parlance to a colloquial dialogue between a landlord and his potential tenant. The language used in this sonnet is not just colloquial standard English but a stylized Glaswegian dialect, especially in the part of the landlord's monologue:

> 'See a tenement due for demolition?
> I can get ye rooms in it, two, okay?
> Seven hundred and nothing legal to pay
> for it's no legal, see? That's my proposition,
> ye can take it or leave it but. The position

[7] Williams, 147.

is simple, you want a hoose, I saaay
for eight hundred pounds it's yours'.
(III, ll. 1–7)

The substandard language and illegal subject matter of conversation effectively destroy the status of the speaker which would conventionally be very high in classical sonnets. Here, it is reduced to a mere pastiche of an eloquent male and courtly poet-lover. The closing eight lines reintroduce the "objective" perspective of the poet who, seeing the modern lovers with their five children, all in need of lodging, notices the ruin and desolation of the place with "the foul, crumbling stairwell, windows wired/not glazed, the damp from the canal, the cooker/without pipes, packs of rats that never tired." The sonnet concludes with a picture of an inscription on the wall: "Filthy lucre." Like dangerous gang slogans in Sonnet II also this graffiti is a bitter travesty of a typical lady's fancy name written or inscribed by the lover with devotion. Filthy lucre is what *dramatis personae* of this urban tragedy have on their minds, not spiritualized love.

As Morgan's sonnet sequence develops we move on to more universal problems of tragic existence in a dilapidated modern city like Glasgow in the sixties and seventies of the twentieth century. Interestingly, Morgan employs here his favourite technique of intertextual reference for conveying his senses. In order to create the cumulative effect of irony, in Sonnet IV Morgan brings up Hugh MacDiarmid's bitter-sweet poem "Glasgow 1960." MacDiarmid published it in 1935 as a prophetic vision of the residents of working class districts in Glasgow who travel by bus to the Glasgow Rangers football stadium where they are to participate not in a soccer match but in an intellectual debate on "'la loi de l'effort converti'/Between Professor MacFadyen and a Spainish pairty." ("Glasgow 1960," ll.9–10). Morgan is skeptical about MacDiarmid's ironic criticism as he is realistic and knows that the basic needs like hunger and warm shelter need to be catered for first, before any intellectual needs.

Down by the brickworks you get worm at least.
Surely soup-kitchens have gone out? It's not
the Thirties now. Hugh MacDiarmid forgot
in "Glasgow 1960" that the feast
of reason and the flow of soul has ceased
to matter to the long unfinished plot
of heating frozen hands.
(IV. ll. 7)

Another meeting point of Morgan's text with MacDiarmid's poem is when he sarcastically states that the citizens of Glasgow, unlike their utopian counterparts in the year 1960, never had "an abstruse song that charmed the raging beast" (Sonnet IV) in contrast to the "Turkish Poet's Abstruse New Song" ("Glasgow 1960") in MacDiarmid's poem. It is no wonder therefore that the poet sees value and truth in the words of Marx and Engels' "The Communist Manifesto" when he addresses his time and age with their idiom: "so you have nothing to lose but your chains, dear Seventies."[8] Yet, Morgan is not a naive idealist like the two forefathers of socialism as he even doubts the power of poetry and the poet when he adds a stylized dialect version of a nursery rhyme to his intertextual network of references: "better sticks and stanes/should break your banes, for poet's words are ill/to hurt ye." The final image of the wrecker's ball glazed with the falling rain which we see in the closing couplet, strengthened with Morgan's supreme pun on the meaning of the word "greeting" as welcome and as Scots idiomatic expression for crying[9], crowns the sonnet:

> On the wrecker's ball the rains
> of greeting cities drop and drink their fill.
> (IV, 13–14)

Sonnet V opens on a similar note of frustration and despair laced with bitter irony. The intertextual quotation: "Let them eat cake" leads us in several interpretive directions. For one thing, it is a travesty of the image of the sublime lady of the heart whose beauty, goodness and sapience is unquestionable. In its reference to the words of Marie Antoinette, the Queen consort of Louis XIV who, on hearing that French people had no bread to eat, suggested that they should eat cake, Morgan continues again the severe criticism of class inequality, the echo of which we heard in the reference to the "Communist Manifesto" in Sonnet IV. Yet again, Morgan goes even a step further and by means of a biblical allusion to the Book of Proverbs 13:12 with its list of wise advice of the father to his son[10], bitterly realizes the consequences of the politics of procrastination and exploitation of the working

[8] Cf. Colin Nicholson, *Edwin Morgan: Inventions of Modernity* (Manchester & New York: Manchester University Press, 2002), 76.

[9] Nicholson, 76.

[10] The Bible (King James Version, Prov. 13:12): "Hope deferred maketh the heart sick: but *when* the desire cometh, *it is* a tree of life."

class in Glasgow of the 1970's. Resignation and passive surrender to the will of the ministers in Whitehall resulted in 'silent slipways' and unemployment. A cultural icon of Rosie the Riveter, a symbol of active work, feminism and progress, is alluded to as a painful reminder of a lost opportunity for change and better life for the working class of Glasgow:

> 'Let them eat cake' made no bones about it.
> But we say let them eat the hope deferred
> and that will sicken them. We have preferred
> silent slipways to the riveter's wit.
> And don't deny it—that's the ugly bit.
> (V, ll. 1–5)

Morgan's subtle interplay between the serious and the trivial, the sacred and the profane is to be observed as the most unexpected juxtapositions. The grotesquely tragic fate of the shipyard workers is represented in Sonnet V by means of a high culture reference to Christopher Marlowe's play "Dr Faustus" and the scene where Faustus muses upon the beauty of Helen of Troy with the following words: " 'Was this the face that launched a thousand ships,/And burnt the topless towers of Ilium?'"[11] In Morgan's poem these are the Ministers who "might well have launched a herd/of bucking tankers if they'd been transferred/from Whitehall to the Clyde." The grotesque effect is intensified even more by a nifty pun on the adjective in the phrase "bucking tankers" in place of a more emphatic four letter common f-word expletive. Not untypically for Morgan, his "Glasgow Sonnets" are a blend of imagination and reality. In Sonnet IV real districts of Glasgow like Dalmarnock, Maryhill, Blackhill and Govan are called up while Sonnet V, for a change, relies on historical and political referencing. The character of James Reid, a Scottish trade union activist and one of the leaders in the Upper Clyde Shipbuilders Work-in between June 1971 and October 1972, whose memorable at that time words: "there'll be no bevvying," becomes an element of Morgan's grotesque composition. Reid's words quoted in the poem refer solely to a trivial aspect of the workers behavior during the strike, their likelihood of drinking alcohol. These words, taken out of context and cunningly abbreviated, belittle the seriousness of their protest and effectively

[11] For the exact reference see Christopher Marlowe, *Dr Faustus*, Sc. XVII, ll. 97–98, in *The Oxford Anthology of English Literature*, ed. Frank Kermode and John Hollander (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 893.

exemplify the concluding image of "distant blackboards [which] use you as their duster"[12]:

> 'There'll be no bevvying' said Reid
> at the work-in. But all the dignity you muster
> can only give you back a mouth to feed
> and rent to pay if what you lose in bluster
> is no more than win patience with 'I need'
> while distant blackboards use you as their duster.
> (VI, ll. 9–14)

Sonnet VI draws our attention to the issues of business, economy and ecology and its impact upon everyday life in Scotland. Such apparently modern problems are evidently absent from Renaissance sonnets although Nature in all its manifestation played a crucial role in traditional sonnets. Whereas in those sonnets Nature usually functioned as a reflection of the emotional state of the lover, in Morgan's poems Nature, or rather its degradation, reflects the state of Scottish economy and ecology. In sonnet VI Morgan goes as far as to create a surrealistic image of tilted to one side Scotland, which makes "the great sick Clyde shiver[s] in its bed" from pollution and drought. In a similar way, such universal elements of Nature like for example the sun are meagre and feeble in contrast to golden, literally and figuratively, distant emblems of modern companies like Mitsubishi and Krupp:

> The North Sea oil-strike tilts east Scotland up,
> and the great sick Clyde shivers in its bed.
> But elegists can't hang themselves on fled-
> From trees or poison a recycled cup —
> If only a less faint, shaky sunup
> glimmered through the skeletal shop and shed
> and men washed round the piers like gold and spread
> golder in soul than Mitsubishi or Krupp –
> (VI, ll. 1–8)

In his sonnet-elegy for the decay of Scotland of the past Morgan is so pessimistic that he doesn't see much hope for any revival even with the help of

[12] "We are taking over the yards because we refuse to accept that faceless men make these decisions... . We want to work... . There will be no hooliganism, there will be no vandalism, there will be no bevvying [drinking]. It is our responsibility to conduct ourselves with dignity and maturity." in Nicholson, 77.

the poet as the reality now is a copy of the real life, recycled at best. And even though the poet might be right with his "ageless images" the problems are actual and real. In the closing sestet Morgan's voice as a poet is unequivocally manifested with its sarcastic message of the art's impotence in confrontation with mundane existence *hic et nunc*:

> Without my images the men
> ration their cigarettes, their children cling
> to broken toys, their women wonder when
> the doors will bang on laughter and a wing
> over the firth be simply joy again.
> (VI, ll. 10–14)

But people don't give up in their attempt to falsify the true picture of the city with makeshift activities and projects. All kinds of latter-day gurus of improvement like "environmentalists, ecologists and conservationists" work hard to "splint the dying age" by means of their provisional contraptions. In a similar way, space degenerates to a uniform row of houses, new or renovated but totally deprived of its style or architectonic beauty in contrast to old and foreign places:

> …the sandblaster's grout
> multiply pink piebald facades to pout
> at sticky-fingered mock-Venetianists.
> (VII, ll. 6–8)

Again, the sestet offers a broader perspective on the general meaning of the sonnet. The whole idea of gentrification of the inner-city when "pedestrianization will come out/fighting riverside walks march off the lists" turns out to be but a prop-up:

> Prop up's the motto. Splint the dying age.
> Never displease the watchers from the grave.
> Great when fake architecture was the rage,
> but greater still to see what you can save.
> The gutted double fake meets the adage:
> a wig's the thing to beat both beard and shave.
> (VII, ll. 9–14)

The city with its buildings, pavements and roads is twice removed from reality with those attempts to make it new and modern; it loses its original iden-

tity and distinctive style and becomes a "double fake" like a wig on man's head, false and ridiculous at the same time.

The central phrase which organizes the senses in Sonnet VIII is to be found in line 10 and reads "Less is not more." This motto is believed to be the trademark of a German architect Ludwig Mies van der Rohe[13] whose cult of minimalism appears to be one of the organizing principles of Morgan's Sonnet VIII. Like in the previous poem also here Morgan wants to expose the unnaturalness of the entire process of gentrification and revitalization ("she could never gain in leaves or larks or splashy/lanes"), its dangers and violence ("the bulldozer's bite by day"), and ensuing tragic consequences ("what's lost in a dead boarded site"). Morgan is even impressed with some elements of the new infrastructure like the spectacular flyovers which:

> …breed loops of light
> in curves that would have ravished tragic Toshy—
> clean and unpompous, nothing wishy-washy.
> (VIII, ll. 1–3)

In order to make it more real he brings up another name for reference; the enigmatic "tragic Toshy" appears to be Charles Rennie Mackintosh—a Scottish architect, designer, water colourist and artist.[14] Morgan believes that he would be pleased with the simplicity of design of some projects like these picturesque flyovers which transport the residents in and out of the city centres to the outskirts and back. What is "clean and unpompous" is juxtaposed to the forced and bizarre ("the life that overspill is overkill to … and garden cities are/the flimsiest oxymoron to distill to"). The ideal form of coexistence of Nature and the city is to be found in Japanese ukiyo-e prints—"pictures of the floating world"—which were a popular form of printed art in Japan during the Edo period, relatively inexpensive and usually depicting unsophisticated scenes from everyday life.[15] The familiar and real urban landscapes which harmoniously balance in their design is what impresses

[13] See in particular Peter Barry, *Contemporary British Poetry and the City* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2000), 237

[14] Cf. Barry, 237, Nicholson, 78, Ballantyne, 102

[15] On the problems related to ukiyo-e see for example: Tadashi Kobayashi, *Ukiyo-e: An Introduction to Japanese Woodblock Prints* (Kodansha International, 1997); David Bell, *Ukiyo-e Explained* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 2004); Richard Lane, *Images from the Floating World: The Japanese Print*. (New York: G.P Putnam's Sons, 1978); Julia Meech and Gabriel P. Weisberg, *Japonisme Comes to America: The Japanese Impact on the Graphic Arts, 1872–1925* (New York: Abrams, 1990).

Morgan more than even most breathtaking views of Nature:

> Less is not more, and garden cities are
> the flimsiest oxymoron to distil to.
> And who wanted to distil? Let bus and car
> and hurrying umbrellas keep their skill to
> feed ukiyo-e beyond Lochnagar.
> (VIII, ll. 10–14)

In the penultimate sonnet of the cycle Morgan creates a ghastly image of Glasgow. The city, personified and in pain, pupates back and forth from one form to another as "man and the sea make cities as they must." The sounds of pain which permeate sonically the entire poem are beautifully rendered from the very beginning of the poem with a forceful roll of onomatopoeic diphthongs [ou], [ei] and [ai] as the city:

> …groans and shakes, contracts and grows again.
> Its giant broken shoulders shrug off rain.
> (IX, ll. 1–2)

Moreover, the diphthongal assonance is reinforced here with a jarring music of "harsh" consonants like [g], [ʃ] and [dʒ] which add to the total effect of devastation and malaise. The ever expanding and contracting city, oppressed with foul, rainy weather and clamouring street noise ("shauchling refrain"), dented with "roadworks and graveyards like their gallus men," suffers from diseases of urbanization:

> It fattens fires and murders in a pen
> and lets them out in flaps and squalls of pain.
> It sometimes tears its smoky counterpane
> to hoist a bleary fist at nothing, then
> at everything, you never know.
> (IX, ll. 5–9)

Glasgow, like other highly industrialized but today impoverished metropolises, will be a place "laid with no one's tears like dust/and barricaded windows." Man's attempts at change and development which bring about waves of prosperity followed by decay, alter the place like the sea which effects its bed and waterfront. Nature like economy has its universal laws which are beyond human control and we may only hope for the miracle of change:

…till the shops, the ships, the trust
return like thunder. Give the Clyde the rest.
Man and the sea make cities as they must.
(IX, ll. 12–14)

Sonnet I opened the whole cycle with the ground perspective of the unemployed man in his bed and the wind wandering through the backcourt trash. The final sonnet takes us on a vertiginous ride in a lift to the thirtieth floor of a multi-storey residential high-rise in Glasgow's Red Road. The vantage point of observation is important as it is now the time for a broader view on the city with all its modern problems. Paradoxically, we look at it with the eyes of William Shakespeare, or more specifically the eyes of blinded Gloucester from Shakespeare's *King Lear*. The peculiar words "choughs" and "samphires," as well as the phrase "dreadful trade," send us directly to Act IV scene 6 where Edgar prevents the blind Gloucester from committing a suicide by making up a landscape different from what it was in reality. No matter that he means well and saves Gloucester's life in the effect but, like the Glasgow where "prop-up's the motto," "a wig's the thing" and "garden cities are/the flimsiest oxymoron," it is false and irreparably different:

From thirtieth floor windows at Red Road
he can see choughs and samphires, dreadful trade—
the schoolboy reading *Lear* has that scene made.
(X, ll. 1–3)

Like Dante Gabriel Rossetti who saw the sonnet in terms of architecture as "a moment's monument"[16] also for Morgan the sonnet is like a modern high-rise building—"a multi is a sonnet stretched to ode." This time, however, it is extended as it encompasses the lives of many residents who stay there and whose lives are really "no joke." The overwhelming sense of determinism and stagnation combined with numerous references to soul, spirit, probing and weighing can bring to mind the classical Greek concept of *psychostasia* which possibly inspired Morgan in this closing sonnet.[17] Like the fate of

[16] Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Ballads and Sonnets* (London: F.S. Ellis, 1881), 161

[17] Psychostasia is the academic term used as "an umbrella term for the ancient notion that a divine or supernatural figure judged ordinary people through weighing their worth on scales." (Howes, 2) The concept had its origins in ancient Egyptian mythology but it was also popular in Greek as well as Christian traditions.

For further information see especially the following studies: Samuel George Frederick Brandon, "The Weighing of the Soul," in Joseph Matsuo Kitagawa and Charles H. Long (eds.), *Myths*

Achilles and Hector in *Illiad* was determined by Zeus, impatient of the outcome of their fight by means of his golden scales, so is determined the fate of the residents of slum tenements of Glasgow, no matter whether old or newly built. They live their lives there "patient, ah'd and oh'd" as their 'social value' is being daily "probed and weighed" by the society they are doomed to live in. And even though this phantasmagorical scene with "gentle load/of souls in clouds [which] vertiginously stayed/above the windy courts" is a bit nebulous yet the repetitions of some key words denoting movement like "stalled," "set loose," "budge," "linger," "trudge" and "carry," appear to organize the senses of the poem:

> Each monolith stands patient, ah'd and oh'd.
> And stalled lifts generating high-rise blues
> can be set loose. But stalled lives never budge.
> They linger in the single-ends that use
> their spirit to the bone, and when they trudge
> from closemouth to launderette their steady shoes
> carry a word that weighs us like a judge.
> (X, ll. 8–14)

The music of the spheres in such places is a despairing "high-rise blues" of the clattering lifts which can take them up if only they are not stalled. Yet more importantly, it is the people's lives that "never budge." The inhabitants of such residential quarters get stuck in a vicious circle of trudging between "closemouth and launderette." Tragically, there is no escape from a prison of their one-room apartments—"single-ends"—which oppress them physically and emotionally with cramped space and stale air. They are always "probed and weighed" and in the final run evaluated and classified by the society—"a world that weighs us like a judge." Such modern urban *psychostasia* which determines man's fate and life by means of the place he was born and raised is part of the fate of both man and the city itself. Cities like people have their identity imprinted on them no matter what new experiences bring with time. Changes transform a slum tenement into a thirty storey block of flats just like a sonnet grows to an ode to cope with all the problems which accrued with time. But "a mean wind wanders through the backcourt trash"

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and Symbols: Studies in Honor of Mircea Eliade (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969); James V. Morrison, "Kerostasia, the dictates of fate and the will of Zeus in the Illiad," *Arethusa*, 30 (1997), 2: 276–296; Samuel George Frederick Brandon, *The Judgment of the Dead: The Idea of Life after Death in the Major Religions* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1967).

in Sonnet I, just like it sweep the clouds "above the windy courts" in Sonnet X. The unemployed, numb man who smokes lazily a cigarette in his bed (Sonnet I) is equally torpid and metaphorically blind as the schoolboy reading Shakespeare's *Lear*, especially that the place has the air "too poor to rob" (Sonnet I) and it "us[ed] their spirit to the bone" (Sonnet X).

In the interview with Gerry Cambridge with which we started our essay Edwin Morgan explained that in creating "Glasgow Sonnets" he planned "to write a series of sonnets about the social and political problems of a modern city."[18] This sequence of ten sonnets is no doubt such a map of places and people, urban and natural, dilapidated, rebuilt, and crumbled again in a never-ending cycle of change in the name of progress and in keeping with the current political and economic theories. Glasgow, like Scotland itself, emerges here as a protean city which, like its inhabitants, reluctantly struggles to adapt to the ever-changing modern reality.

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[18] Cambridge and Morgan, 34.

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ODCZYTYWANIE MIASTA – 'GLASGOW SONNETS' EDWINA MORGANA JAKO WSPÓŁCZESNY CYKL SONETÓW MIEJSKICH

Streszczenie

Artykuł niniejszy to studium sekwencji dziesięciu sonetów napisanych przez szkockiego poetę narodowego Edwina Morgana na początku lat siedemdziesiątych XX wieku. W artykule tym autor próbuje prześledzić sposoby odwzorowania współczesnej rzeczywistości szkockiej metropolii w końcu dwudziestego wieku za pomocą kanonicznej formy sonetu, stworzonej w trzynastym wieku głównie do wyrażania uczuć wysokich takich jak miłość. Szczegółowa analiza wszystkich dziesięciu wierszy cyklu potwierdza oryginalną tezę, iż złożoność uwarunkowań ekonomicznych, społecznych i politycznych w jakich funkcjonuje współczesny Glasgow, determinuje użycie równie skomplikowanej materii językowej do jego właściwego literackiego odwzorowania.

Słowa kluczowe: poetyka; sonet; literatura brytyjska; Szkocja; Edwin Morgan; 'Glasgow Sonnets'.