

EDWIN MORGAN IN CONVERSATION

Edwin Morgan, born in 1920, and still poetically active, is probably Scotland's pre-eminent living poet, acknowledged as an influence by a number of Scotland's younger poets. The range of his original work is remarkable both in its formal variety and in its subject matter, as can be seen from his Collected Poems, published in paperback last year by Carcanet; his Collected Translations, newly-published from Carcanet, show him as an adept translator from Russian, French, German, Hungarian, and Italian, among others. Morgan served in the Middle-East in the Royal Army Medical Corps throughout the Second World War; returning, he became first lecturer and latterly Professor in English at Glasgow University. This interview took place in the living room of the spacious third-storey flat off Glasgow's Great Western Road where the poet has lived for at least 30 years.

Gerry Cambridge: Eddie, in the past you've said you're not particularly interested in the idea of tradition, and yet I'm intrigued that you're probably one of the most fluent poets in form now writing, as demonstrated in your 'The Five-Pointed Star' [*The Dark Horse*, issue 3] though you also write free verse, concrete poetry, and so on. What's the attraction of form for you?

Edwin Morgan: I think that if you write a lot of poetry you discover that different kinds of approach are valuable in different circumstances. At various times I've used fairly strict forms, even the most difficult forms like the sonnet which has both metre and rhyme with a pattern to be followed which you're stuck with. I find that with some subjects form helps because it concentrates your mind on what you're doing. My poem 'The Five Pointed Star' I felt was on a kind of civic subject and therefore would suit rhyming couplets. It was to be read at a public occasion, the Bicentennial Burns Conference at Strathclyde University, it was written for that conference, and was a public poem in that sense. For such subjects, I don't think free verse is really very suitable — those who are listening to a formal poem for the first time are helped along, as it were, by the fact that their ear catches the regularity of what you're doing.

GC: Do you enjoy the idea of subverting various forms?

EM: Yes. Yes!

GC: In your ten 'Glasgow Sonnets', for instance, you take the sonnet and use it for something other than its traditional subject matter. Hardy did that too, but you transfer it to an urban environment.

EM: 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 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.

GC: When I read your sequence *Sonnets From Scotland* I see as well as the sonnet

template, a certain influence from Anglo-Saxon, sometimes. You use a lot of alliteration. I think one can detect the influence of Anglo-Saxon throughout your poetry, even in things like dramatic monologues, in pieces like 'Grendel', or 'The Apple's Song' which one can actually link back to Anglo-Saxon kennings, riddles, and so on. Even one of your latest poems, 'The Voyage,' about the voyage of the sperm towards the egg, which features alternating monologues by each, could be linked to that type of tradition. What was the attraction of Anglo-Saxon for you?

EM: Hard to pin it down exactly. It goes back to when I was a student at Glasgow University, just before and just after the War. Nowadays people talk about Chaucer as being the father of English poetry but it goes back to the author of *Beowulf*. I was attracted by the language itself and by the fact that it was a different kind of poetry, unlike anything which succeeded it. Its metric was real, it was there, you could describe it, but it had to be learned and contributed to a different kind of rhythm from what you found in later poetry and of course the system of alliteration which was very strong had an equivalence of rhyme; we think of rhyme as being the main structuring agent nowadays but then it was alliteration. I also liked Anglo-Saxon for its heroic, stoic quality. I thought that *Beowulf* was a great poem, and some of the shorter poems too like 'The Wanderer', 'The Seafarer', and 'The Ruin'. Often heroic or stoic but at times elegiac with a strong sense of what happens to cultures and civilisations: the way in which the Anglo-Saxon poet for example would look at Roman ruins, like the Roman city of Bath, and be amazed by it, and referred to it as *enta geweorc*, the work of giants. The wonderful vistas you get from Anglo-Saxon poetry! — already it's far from us but it also was aware of different pasts beyond itself.

GC: William Dunbar used various alliterative patterns too as in 'The Treatise of the Twa Marrit Wemen and the Wedo'. Has Dunbar been an influence on you?

EM: Probably so. Of course 'The Treatise of the Twa Marrit Wemen and the Wedo' is itself part of a North of England tradition which spread into Scotland. People talk about the alliterative revival of the early Middle English period and when Chaucer was writing there was certainly a rival poetry. Langland was a rival. Chaucer didn't like that kind of poetry at all and mocks it in one or two different places. But it was kept going from the midlands up to the north-west of England with some great poems like *Sir Gawain and the Grene Knight*, wonderful poetry. No one knows how it happened, but apparently it spread north, because some Scottish poets really liked it, Dunbar's not the only one, Henrysoun and Douglas and Lindsay all show the influence of this alliteration. To go back to Dunbar, I always enjoyed Dunbar and his kind of linguistic vigour.

GC: I'd like to link this in to later poets like MacDiarmid and Edwin Muir who both had, in a sense, different preferences, MacDiarmid with his 'Back to Dunbar' slogan whereas Muir wrote an essay about Henrysoun which was highly complimentary; he felt that Henrysoun was writing at a time in Scotland when the culture was organically whole, pre-Reformation, whereas by Dunbar's day things had started to break up a bit. In the past you've been fairly scathing about Muir, and rather complimentary about MacDiarmid: if you can discount your unconcern with tradition, would you link yourself more to MacDiarmid than to Muir?

EM: I think so. It's true I've been critical of Muir; I've also written appreciatively of some of his poetry. But MacDiarmid was a varied writer, and a risk-taker; I've always liked people who do take risks. I felt that Muir's poetry probably suffered from the fact that he maybe made up his mind too quickly about writing in a certain way, which in the end turned out to be rather bland, I think. He had a good command of blank verse especially, he wasn't attracted by any kind of linguistic strangeness, and he was able to write a very fluent and often quite moving poetry especially about events in the past or in dream. But there was a lack of vigour there which I found in Dunbar and

MacDiarmid.

GC: But he has written some wonderful poems, things like ‘The Combat’ which have never been equalled.

EM: I agree. I think I’m temperamentally more akin to MacDiarmid though.

GC: Would you feel even more akin to James Thomson?

EM: Ah. That’s very different isn’t it. I don’t know. Certainly I liked James Thomson a long time ago when I first encountered what I thought was a great poem, *The City of Dreadful Night*. There’s something there, some link as with Anglo-Saxon; I’ve lectured on his poetry and have also written about it and enjoyed bringing out the new edition of it not too long ago. It’s a poem that’s never been tremendously well-known or read. I suppose many people are put off even by the title but it always seemed to me to be one of the great things. But I think if you can persuade people to read the poem, it’s a strangely positive experience that anyone could actually write a good poem on this subject. It’s about alienation of various kinds, and the poor man had a very unhappy life, but nevertheless the way in which he writes about these things is so impressive, so strong, so imaginative, that there’s a kind of paradox really. It may be he’s been called a great pessimist, but can you really call a man who writes a great poem a pessimist? You’re conquering something, you’re conquering the material you’re using, you’re conquering form, you’re conquering alienation, and even though he himself was very unhappy, nevertheless he managed to do something with this. It’s a creative triumph.

GC: Talking of conquering form, what do you make of American New Formalism? Do you know much about it? Or what do you think of the idea of poetic ‘movements’?

EM: Well, it depends on the movement. Some movements have attracted me, but no, I’m not particularly attracted to New Formalism, partly because I’ve always myself written both formal and free verse. I just do it as I feel it seems right at the time, not from the point of view of theory. But certainly some movements which I would acknowledge as being so have interested me and probably have been of some influence. Imagism in the earlier part of the 20th century had a very useful effect on poetry at that time, though it couldn’t really develop very far, you couldn’t for example write a long poem like that, though Ezra Pound tried, and when the Beats came on the scene in the late 50s and early 60s — it’s prose as well, of course, and lifestyle, and music — insofar as it is a movement I was attracted by that, Ginsberg in particular. Bless his remains! Ginsberg I thought had a very important job which he carried out — a liberating job at that time which was very important — and perhaps because the Beats and Ginsberg gave a liberation to poetry at that time, I liked that. Perhaps that’s why I don’t particularly take to the New Formalists who are going back on that, obviously and who are very different. The Beats were of course reacting against a formalism of the forties and fifties. American poetry had become pretty academic when Ginsberg came on the scene.

GC: The New Formalist movement is supposed to be in reaction to the now-institutionalised Beats.

EM: I suppose there’s bound to be that kind of see-saw process, a period of rigour being followed by a period of freedom, though I suspect that the New Formalists are not reacting just against the Beats and what they stood for, but even against the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets. The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets might be described as a certain kind of formalism, but not the sort which appeals to the New Formalists, who’re writing a simpler kind of poetry. Part of their polemic presumably would be that the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets are far too difficult; whatever they’re doing may be interesting to those who are interested in language but as far as the general public is concerned we must get back to something more directly communicative.

GC: So what value do you think L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry has?

EM: It's a value that's difficult to describe, but I think it's there. I think there's good and bad L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry, but the best of it is I think valuable, partly because it brings back the idea that poetry can be both difficult and mysterious and yet have value. It's not in a sense going back to anything — or perhaps it is: they admire Gertrude Stein, they admire the Russian formalist poets, and in that sense it's going back to the idea of linguistic experimentation which I think is in many ways useful. It's more the effect of trying to get a reader to say I don't really understand this poem but there's something about it I like, I'm going to go back to it, and eventually I will get something more from it. And this is probably a useful thing, to remind people that good poetry can be difficult.

GC: What is L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry about? Some might say that here is something which springs really from aspects of literary theory which have said that there is no relevance in experience or that language exists as an entirely self-referential construct, and any reference to any prior experience has no meaning because the poem on the page is what it is and you can't connect that to prior experience.

EM: Some L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry is very self-referential, and once you get into a poem like that it's very hard to get out, but the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry which is most interesting perhaps is not of that more severe type — I think a lot of the poetry of, say, Ron Silliman, especially does link back in many ways to experience and is often quite autobiographical in really surprising ways. Maybe that is a kind of central poetry of the movement, or the poetry of Lyn Hejinian which is clearly in a very human context which can be understood even though it may be difficult in various ways. In the best of these poets the referentiality is external as well as internal, I think.

GC: In a brief note, *The Don as Poet or the Poet as Don*, written in 1959, you wrote: "I am opposed to the American experiment of complete rationalisation of the creative writer's position and function within the Universities because it has produced (at least in the U.S.) a generation of technically advanced and professionally cultivated poets whose response to life itself has atrophied and whose poetry is impotent to move and inspire the human heart." That's a very resonant statement (laughter). Would you still stand by that?

EM: I think I would, actually.

GC: I'm interested that you were saying that as long ago as 1959. Do you have a distrust of the institutionalisation of creative writing?

EM: I think I do, even though my working life obviously was spent in that environment as a teacher of English literature. But it seemed to work alright in my case. I think it is true that many of the best known poets in America have been through the University system or have been University teachers. Some it may have destroyed, some it may have helped. But I think that in general the close association of creative work with universities must be looked on with some suspicion. Whether in the American sense you can actually professionalise the work of getting into poetry I'm not at all sure is likely to be a good thing. You can certainly teach all the technical aspects of poetry, and that can be useful; most people who do writing workshops do something of that, especially if those involved are in their late teens, early twenties: introduce them to the different ways of writing poetry. But in America they've tended to take it further than that and have whole courses in creative writing, and to give you some qualification or diploma at the end of it and would perhaps guarantee that they could make you able to produce publishable work at the end of the course. And this may be true, of course. But what will the work really be like? Will it have a strong pith of creative vigour or will that be made bland in some way by being homogenised just according to certain canons of how to produce something that the public will pick up and enjoy buying and reading? It's the danger of making things too cut and dried, and in the end perhaps to take away something of the quirky and personal input which I

think is always important in something like poetry.

GC: In a radio interview you chose the Lou Reed song 'Walk on the Wild Side' and said that poets who didn't have a wild side perhaps wouldn't be much use as poets.

EM: I think a walk on the wild side is very useful to a poet. Gerard Manley Hopkins was very aware of this problem. He said you ought to have a 'tykish' side to your behaviour, which must have alarmed his superiors I suppose but he felt it was true. Being attracted by Walt Whitman for example, who was probably a pretty shady character, but nevertheless there was something there which Hopkins could feel a kinship with: a Jesuit priest feeling a kinship with this loafer in the United States! But he did feel that, and there is something there that you might very well lose if cloistered in some institution which is trying to do you good.

GC: In 1988 you recorded an interview with the poet Christopher Whyte in which you 'came out' as a gay man, if not necessarily as a gay poet. The interview was published in 1990. Was the date of that quite orchestrated, because it was also the year of your 70th birthday?

EM: I knew that 1990, which was Glasgow's year of Culture, would coincide with my 70th birthday. I knew there'd be all sorts of interviews with me going on. I felt it would have been quite absurd not to be open under those circumstances. It was really just the accident I suppose that Christopher Whyte proposed we do this interview that made me decide to make the whole thing completely open, and to print it in fact.

GC: Did you have apprehensions about that?

EM: At the time I had, yes. Christopher said I shouldn't have, that it was unnecessary, but I did. It probably just goes back to the inhibitions of anyone who had an upbringing as I had in the twenties and thirties and the total secrecy with which the whole subject was covered was at the back of my mind also.

GC: At the end of that interview he was reassuring you that it was ok to come out, and you weren't entirely reassured.

EM: That's quite true. Just because many people who may have read my poetry would perhaps be surprised and shocked and I was uncertain as to what kind of reaction I'd get; it hadn't really been done in Scotland before. In fact, there was no bad reaction at all. Christopher was right. But I was apprehensive.

GC: I'd like to link that in to the idea of the Scottish Literary Pantheon which Whyte mentioned. Most of the poets who may have been thought to preside in that Pantheon are now dead. Were these poets aware of your orientation? Did it matter to them?

EM: I don't think they would always be aware of it. If they were it wasn't something they'd be talking about. I've no idea about that.

GC: A lot of those poets' wild side would have been in drink.

EM: And I've never been a tremendous drinker, so I didn't fit into that pub scene very well. My wild side was different.

GC: Would it be true to say it was sexual?

EM: It was, yes. Inevitably so, when it was all criminal activity, you were leading a double life, you couldn't not lead a double life. If you had a good job or a responsible job as I had you simply had to be careful not to overstep the mark and reveal too much of what you were doing, yet on the other hand you felt it would have been wrong to be totally inhibited and wrong not to express your sexual feelings. So it was a very difficult time. It was something you didn't speak about. One of my poems is called 'The Unspoken'. It was partly a matter of the law. The law was changed in England in 1967. It wasn't changed in Scotland until 1980. We were still in a kind of inhibited state all through that time. People in England often forget that. They think of 1967 as the great year of liberation when it was possible for adult males to have sex in private. In Scotland it was 13 years later. So it was in the 80s I began to think of being more open about it, but because of my age and background finding it a bit hard to do that, until

the Whyte interview. One interview about all that was in fact published as a double spread in *The Glasgow Herald* as it was then. That was the kind of thing that I suppose I was apprehensive about. I was a kind of public figure coming out in this kind of way. But I was wrong to be apprehensive. I suppose you can understand that, someone of your generation.

GC: Well, I'm 38, and I don't think, in the love poems of the 1960s, for instance, it matters whether the person being addressed is a man or a woman.

EM: I know this must be true, because the poems are done in schools, and teachers can talk about them and kids can enjoy them without any problem.

GC: Yet did those love poems take a certain power from the fact that you had to conceal the sex of the person being addressed?

EM: I felt I had to write them, and I did disguise the sex of the other person. Very often I would use 'you' instead of 'he' or 'she' just to get over this difficulty. I think the pressure of not being open made me write the poems as well as I possibly could.

GC: I remember in the early 1980s discovering love poems such as 'From A City Balcony' and thinking, that's a wonderful poem. The only thing that struck me as strange about it was the line 'Your breast and thighs were blazing like the gorse.' I always wondered why the 'breast' was singular.

EM: Would using 'breast' be an indication to you now that it must be a gay poem?

GC: Generally, yes.

EM: Once when it was printed it was done into a plural because the editor thought it must be a mistake.

GC: Did he not send you a proof?

EM: A proof? A poof? (Laughter). A proof or a poof? (Laughter.) That was the late Alex Scott, who was a very heterosexual person and didn't think it could possibly be a gay poem.

GC: Since you did the Christopher Whyte interview has your coming out had any effect at all on your writing?

EM: I think so. Though I wrote erotic gay poetry before that, the difference now is that I would have no qualms, as I had then, about publishing it, and just taking a chance, with the new climate of opinion, that people may be interested, in fact, in a general book, seeing one or two gay poems inserted. But I'm not a gay *poet*: I don't like ghettoising.

GC: I admire the fact that your poems speak to a wide audience.

EM: I think you must write for everybody really, even if you're writing a poem on an unconventional subject, you still do it in such a way that people who don't share your feelings will be able to get into it and perhaps enjoy it. Other poems, perhaps because of the subject matter, you're not sure what audience you're doing it for, you're still hoping it's a general poem, like one called 'A Memorial' in *Hold Hands Among the Atoms*, a poem about cottaging. Cottaging is a special thing, most people don't do it or don't even think about it, unless it gets into the papers in some scandal, but it's something that happens among gay people and goes on, and therefore it involves human feelings and human reactions, and therefore I wrote a poem about it.

GC: What is cottaging?

EM: Public sex in toilets. The poem is about the interesting paradox that, after the relative liberalising of the laws about gay sex, more and more public toilets were closed, so that it would have been more difficult for many people, young people perhaps especially, to meet people that they could have a relationship with, just because now it was possible to have gay clubs, gay discos, gay magazines, and so it was felt that there was no need for people to go creeping around toilets. There's a down side to that, too: supposing you don't like pubs, or clubs, don't like drinking, or supposing you're not good-looking, you're maybe ugly, what do you do, how do you meet people, friends, in

that kind of situation, as you can in public places? The poem's just about that.

GC: It comes back to the formalising of extreme experience in art.

EM: I felt in this case it works. You shouldn't ever say this, but if you can stomach the subject I think it's a good poem.

GC: In a lot of your poems extreme states are portrayed, there's a sort of balladic bleakness — in poems like 'Death in Duke Street', or the one about the old woman pissing outside Glasgow Central, or a harrowing poem written after the death of Rock Hudson, called 'The Gurney', which you've told me is a trolley in American hospitals, like a stretcher on wheels, either for very sick or dead persons.

EM: It's important, if you can, to write about things like that. Many poems are about much more ordinary things, but the more extreme things are very well worth writing about. In 'Death in Duke Street', this man had a heart-attack and just fell down in the street, and a small crowd collected; it was just the painful interest of the fact that although everyone was involved up to a point in various degrees of painful sympathy, they were also aware of each other; in the whole human amalgam of any crowd that gathers, you were aware of what the crowd was looking at, but also aware of the crowd aware of itself. This is especially true of Glasgow, I think, it's a very Glasgow thing to watch people, and it was painful, but intensely interesting. I was myself a part of this crowd, and I was watching them watching the poor man in the street, so it was a very deep human interest, even though it was a man on the point of death.

GC: It's a stunning poem. I'd never seen something like that being got into poetry before. Edwin Muir once argued that the difference between the English and the Scottish ballads is that the English ones might have been put together by a crowd of sentimental drunk men at the end of an evening, whereas the Scots ballads are altogether bleaker and more cynical, and they tell simply what happens. I know in the past you've referred to a certain 'spooky' inheritance from certain poets like Dunbar and so on, and I wonder if you found the Scots ballads an influence.

EM: Maybe so. The big ballads are wonderful, yet often very cruel. I don't know if a poet would go around actually looking for subjects like that, but they happen. The one about the woman outside Central Station pissing actually happened and I just happened to be going past. It was the reaction of other passers-by to this incident which caught my eye.

GC: Frost said, "It's not what you do to the facts that's important, it's what the facts do to you."

EM: That is good. It's often a test of whether you're going to write a poem or not, if something like that sticks in your mind.

GC: Could we talk a little about the science fiction aspect of your poetry? When you write science fiction poems, what value do you attribute to those as compared to your more realist poetry?

EM: The value probably is connected with the value of imagination. It's also part of what a poet does to keep the imagination fresh. Science fiction is maybe just a modern extension of something that has always been there in, for example, Milton and Shelley. Now that science fiction has linked up with what's actually happening in science, especially with space exploration, it seems to me a way of writing a modern poetry which is about things which interest people today, and yet it's going back to the ancient wells of poetry and stretching the imagination. There's also an interest in keeping up with what's happening in science. I'm not any kind of expert, but I do try to link poems to things in astronomy or biology which are real. Probably I began writing science fiction poetry in the strict sense of the term after space exploration began. After there's a moon landing and plans are made for expeditions to other parts of the solar system, it becomes a part of the human story, it's more real, and gives an added impact to writing about such things. Many of my science fiction poems are about things which

haven't yet happened, but which could happen, I'm putting real people into extraordinary situations and seeing what happens, especially in a poem like 'In Sobieski's Shield' (a distant constellation), in which people are sent to a distant part of the Universe after a catastrophe on Earth just to survive. Again it's the idea of extreme, but maybe not impossible experience. If that sort of travel was ever made possible, I'm just trying to imagine what it would be like. I suppose 'In Sobieski's Shield' is a kind of heroic poem, a positive poem which shows people being aware of the most frightening changes in their life experience, but somehow determined to carry forward. "Let's go" the poem says at the end.

GC: Various critics have criticised those possibly-ludic aspects of your work. Michael Schmidt has written, "Morgan has an enviable facility, with all the dangers of facility." Douglas Dunn when writing about your *Sonnets from Scotland*, which range through time, quoted from one of them set in a post-apocalyptic Scotland, in which Edinburgh's Princes Street is full of weeds, and wrote, "Science Fiction is addicted to this kind of thing." How do you respond to the criticism that such poetry hasn't been lived through, therefore in a way it's to be taken less seriously?

EM: Poetry like that is something I can accept. Once you're writing a poem about something and if the poem is going well, that is the experience, you're giving yourself that experience, and though many poems are personal, poetry is also projection of yourself into other existences. The only thing that matters in the end is the intensity by which you do it. Obviously others must judge whether it's successful or not but I believe in the usefulness of the exercise.

GC: What is the usefulness?

EM: The usefulness is that it's part of the poet being a whole human being, and wanting to write about as much as he possibly can, or even about other existences, organic or inorganic. Anything that he can project himself into and write about. But you've got to feel you want to do it. There'd be no point in just taking up a subject like that as an exercise. In *Sonnets from Scotland*, just thinking about the enormous changes that have taken place in Scotland over many centuries, climatically, for example, extends your idea of what can happen to any place, any country. The fact that there were once sharks living at Bearsden! — I have a poem about that, too. I suppose it's meant to make people think and wonder; it expands the mind in an interesting way.

GC: Talking about expanding the mind, what differences are there between English and Scottish poetry?

EM: They're not easy to describe, but I feel them, like most of my contemporaries. It's something to do with the language situation. In England, you write in English and that's it. In Scotland, you have not only English but various kinds of Scots, and Gaelic, so it's a very language-based situation and means that to some extent Scottish poets tend to be language-orientated more than English poets. My own work has various linguistic aspects; it comes with the territory. Also, it's very interesting that at all periods Scottish poets have much more interest in comedy in poetry and believe that comedy can be used seriously, and for any subject; if you think of the earlier poets like Dunbar, Lindsay, even Henryson, then Burns, Fergusson, MacDiarmid, in every case there's a very marked comic element; it may be fantastic, it may be satirical, but nevertheless they all seem to feel that you don't need to be solemn to be serious, and that's something that anyone can dip into and feel a kinship with; it's still going on among the younger poets, such as Bill Herbert. I think it worries the English, they find this quite hard to get into because they don't do it to anything like the same extent.

GC: It's interesting because one of the English models for younger poets, Larkin, tends to give a rather one-dimensional view of what a poem is. I felt when I was first beginning that you had to be sitting in a hospital, within an inch of your life, writing this deeply-gloomy poetry, and if you couldn't do that, that was it. Then you come

across Scottish poets who have this reluctance, to revert to Robert Frost's saying, to accept what the facts do to you: it's a rebellion against everything being settled.

EM: I think you're onto something there, and it can happen in the same poem; it's often the mixture of the straight and the comic which seems to cause category problems to critics outside Scotland.

GC: It's this notion that a rebellious attitude, even in a hopeless situation, has something in it to commend it, irrespective of how practical it may be.

EM: I think that's true. There could be a worrying side to that in the sense that you can't make up your bloody mind about anything. Who are you or what are you doing? *Oh we don't know. Tell you tomorrow.* (Laughter). We'll have to watch when we get our independence, get a parliament of our own, we'll have to watch we don't become too solemn. The poets should refuse to sit on the parliament, don't you think. (Laughter).

GC: I wonder if Scotland's writing situation would improve if it was independent?

EM: Everyone hopes it would be a good thing; it would be a changed situation and faced with a changed situation you'd have to react to it in some kind of way. Whether it would make you a better writer I'm not sure. Your responsibility as a writer is first of all to your art or your craft; to be as good a writer as you can. I think if you're tempted to engage more in the idea of being responsible for your country or your parliament, there are risks involved in that; any small country must if it becomes independent be strongly tempted to involve creative persons in the governing process, but I think this is something that has to be resisted; you may find some niche somewhere that would suit you, but on the whole you have to retain your independent status and watch what's going on and make comment on it, possibly William Dunbar-like comment; Dunbar is an interesting case because he had an undefined position at the court of James IV; no one quite knows what it was! — but he was there, he got a pension, but I don't think he took it very seriously.

GC: He did when he didn't get the pension, or got less of it than he felt he deserved.

EM: Yes, he felt perfectly free to criticise the king and the court as things came up.

GC: There's his 'Address to the King': "Shir, ye have mony servitouris..."

EM: Yes, yes, and they're a towsy lot! But that type of thing goes with the brief I have that the writer also has some sort of civic responsibility, which may be different from a governmental responsibility, to look at your society and make sharp comment upon it, if need be; but once you get into the situation of being somehow more central than that, and feeling you're speaking for the society rather than looking at it and making comment on it, that's where the risk comes in. The poet should be responsible for various things, responsible for the place he lives in, up to a point, but if you regard yourself as being a spokesman in some solemn sense, I don't think that's good. I think the poet's function should be to be not too disinvolved or remote from what's happening, unless that's what he feels, the poet may be a very private person indeed, and that's okay, there are some good poets who are like that, but another danger is getting too centrally involved. Even a great poet like Virgil came up against it; I think he genuinely believed in the greatness and the mission of Rome, but he wrote about it in such a way in *The Aeneid* that he put some readers off, who felt he'd become too much of an insider at the court of Augustus; probably that's unfair to him, because he was a very private person, an unhappy person in many ways, and perhaps he yielded rather too much to the temptation to make himself more central than he ought to have been. But he's the poet of Rome and of Rome's greatness, which puts some people off, who say he should have been writing more about the awful things that Rome was capable of doing as well; he's a good case to bear in mind. Perhaps Dante is a better model, because he was very critical of his society, and would even name names writing as a person who almost wants to create an Italian language, and Italian culture. But

it's a central and recurring problem, just how much you make yourself an insider, an establishment person, and I think there's always a great danger for the poet who, because of his fame, is tempted to do this.

GC: Are you working on something at the minute?

EM: I've been very interested in the last year in poetry and music. You know that I did a collaboration with the jazz saxophonist Tommy Smith last year, *Beasts of Scotland*. I did another with him more recently, called *Planet Wave*. He got a commission from the Cheltenham Jazz Festival to do a new work, and again I wrote a sequence of ten poems. It's a more ambitious kind of thing than *Beasts of Scotland*. It's a kind of history of the world from the time of the Big Bang to the time of Copernicus. If you can imagine that in ten poems, sir. (Laughter). Now I've just written another group of ten poems, commissioned by Frances Clarke, as part of a collaboration with a classical guitarist, Carlos Bonell, five of them about the modern composer, William Walton, and five of them about Turlough O'Carolan, an eighteenth century Irish composer and a blind harper; his music now is often played on the guitar. The Walton Poems are based on his *Five Bagatelles for Guitar*. So the sequence is trying to relate to the music, and at the same time is about the lives of the two which were very different, one being that of a poor blind harper who eked out an existence by padding round the country and playing his harp in the big houses, and Walton's, who was born also in not very affluent circumstances, lower middle-class probably, in Oldham in the north of England, but being swept up in the modern movement, getting in touch with the Sitwells, and writing *Façade* and becoming a modern composer: but always having an awareness of his roots and still being able to swear in good Lancashire if he wanted to: just being an ambiguous character to the end of his life. The mix of tragedy and comedy is very interesting from a human point of view in both the men's lives. Some of Walton's life was very sad. In one way he was successful, he was knighted, but he had great unhappiness. He was a lady's man, and taken up by a lot of society ladies. In one case he really fell in love with a woman called Lady Wimborne, and they were living in Italy, and she helped him a lot with his composing and they got on well together. She had plenty of money and could look after him in a material sense, but it was sad, for very soon she was going to die of cancer, and the sudden awareness of the transience of happiness and the creative life really hit him, and he felt guilty about it, because she suffered tremendously and didn't get very good medical treatment before she died. He recovered in a sense from the tragedy but he felt very bad about this moment in his life. O'Carolan had a very hard life in a way trudging on his horse through all kinds of weathers, yet on the other hand he had contacts with the upper parts of society, he went to Dublin, and the Italian composers of the time went to Dublin, which was a great cultural centre in the 18th century, and Corelli and Vivaldi, he knew their music; his own music, although it comes out of a folk tradition has got touches of the Italian baroque, and he was a friend of Jonathan Swift's in Dublin, they had great drinking sessions — imagine that! — so all this went into the poems.

GC: Is poetry finally love in a sense?

EM: Yes, I think it is. I think it has to be. It's often about love, of course, but it is a kind of love, too, it's a real love in the sense that it doesn't give you up, or you hope it doesn't give you up; you've got to love what you're doing, you're going out to something which you hope will return your embrace: it doesn't always do so, but you hope it will.

NB: We shall print a selection from Edwin Morgan's sequence about Turlough O'Carolan and William Walton in issue 6.