

Saturday 23rd May 2009, 2pm

Russell Jones interviewing Edwin Morgan at Clarence Court Residential Home, Glasgow

What was it that drew you to science fiction poetry? Why did you want to write it?

I'm not sure actually. I think it may be that it comes out of an interest in narrative, unusual narrative, in exploration. When I was younger I read a lot of material that you think is perhaps on the way to being science fiction but it isn't true science fiction – Jack London, for example and H. G. Wells, people of that same late nineteenth century/early twentieth century – and I found that was very interesting and stimulating, too. And the idea of exploration, I think, applies both to poetry and to the actual physical exploration of the world and the universe and I think that's where, that's one way into it, one defence if you like, is that it sharpens, also widens, your awareness of kinds of life, kinds of place quite different from your own. But some are actually there, some are possible, some are perhaps impossible except in terms of art. I found that whole area of exploring what has not been [tested] at all before very interesting.

Yes, I think so too, and actually I was wondering about realism in science fiction. Do we need to have reality in science fiction poetry for the reader, to help them to understand what's going on and how to read it?

Yes, reality – that is a difficult one.

<both laugh> *Yes*

I think there must be some connection, though it may be very very far-fetched or unusual. But I think that a science fiction poem which doesn't really work is usually one which has no connection that you can see in any reality at all and it wouldn't help it if it did. I think my own poems are trying to extend what we think of as being a reality and perhaps each time you manage to write a successful science fiction poem yourself, helping to extend the area of reality and saying to people, 'are you quite sure this is not real? Perhaps it is' and things which are very much an area of controversy and discussion come into science fiction poetry a good deal, so that, although I'm very... knowledgeable up to a point in science, I'm not an expert in any means... I like very much the area of doubt and controversy in science. How far is it possible to say that new species keep appearing in the world in order to remind us that nothing is static, and that a sense of change is very important. I think that a lot of the poetry I've written has tried to emphasise that, and to say that – well, if you were to discover, perhaps, some fossil or some human remains which are different from what we have in life today, it may alter our idea of what life is. And I think that if we have an open mind in that and although we may say that – as I used to say when I was young – 'Neanderthal man was a kind of crude, savage export from the main line of development'. And nowadays it's much less common to say that and people are discovering relics of – perhaps not some wholly human life and other things but life

that is very, very like human life. I think that the Star Trek series drew on that idea quite a lot. It's life, Jim, but not as we know it!

<both laugh> *Yes, exactly!*

It's a very attractive idea and very, very possible. Quite possible when you think that animals have senses that pick up things that we don't pick up and there's quite a large area of experience, too, and you wonder if you'll ever be able to understand what it's like to be a fly or a shark. And if an animal can manage to experience things that are important to it, perhaps just to survive, then we may be able to look at that and think about it because we have to be able to survive ourselves, though we're not sure what the best way is of doing that.

Yeah, that's a very interesting idea about different senses that animals or extraterrestrials, for example, might have. And for example, the shark, which you mentioned, has the electromagnetic sense... is that right?

Mmm, yes.

And that's a really interesting idea to think about and one certainly which I think is important to science fiction poetry – to alienate...

Yes.

...its reader, but also introduce them to something new.

Yes, and you have to be convincing to your reader if you can.

Yes.

Hopefully your reader will not be too hidebound into thinking that they cannot imagine creatures that are different from ours, can't imagine how – for example, a very obvious example is how bird migration takes place. How do small birds travel thousands of miles to that direct spot, as it were – it is very remarkable when you think about it. We do not know the answer to that yet. But I think it's very useful for science to work on these things, to see if you can learn from these senses, and also to write about them and make them interesting to an audience.

Well I suppose science tries to find facts, doesn't it? But in a way we need a story, or something like that to understand, fully, science. For example, Einstein would perhaps turn some of his theories into stories or narratives to help us understand what they meant, and that seems quite an important part of science and science fiction to me. I don't know if you agree...?

Mm, yeh, yes.

Yeah. Well, also, thinking about that kind of thing, I thought about alienation in science fiction poetry, and to present an alien world we must speak in an alien tongue in a way. Do you think that this relates to your work in any way? I'm thinking of

pieces such as 'First Men on Mercury' which seems to me to point towards the idea of introducing alien tongues as a way to learn from each other.

Yes, I think so, probably. It's actually very far-fetched indeed because Mercury is much too hot for any kind of tongue we'd recognise...

<both laugh>

But I just did that to get away from the ubiquitous Mars background. But yes, I think it is essentially true that, so far as we know, no-one has tried to communicate with us from other places, which is strange in a way. It may mean our senses are not receptive to the things being sent out to us. They might have wavelengths which we don't get, we don't catch. And if so, that would take a lot of time for that to be understood. But, er, I think it's partly just what part of writing poetry does, it's got to interest people somehow and it's very often the interest of working out 'why is it spoken like that?' or 'why is it written like that?', 'do we learn anything about ourselves by that?' And is there anything really alien or are we meant to exert ourselves to make it less alien, to become really important communicators? If so, we haven't done very well so far! But it's possible that communication is important both for the sciences and for the arts and I like the idea of extending what people say about communication, communication in very different ways. Bees! Bees dancing! The way that bees dance is a way they communicate to each other, it's not sound, it's motion and we... we don't do that to any great extent. We can understand what they're doing and so I think that we ought to fill in the whole picture if we can and see what different kinds of communications are possible and what are perhaps, well, perhaps impossible. Who knows. But I don't like the word impossible, I'd like to say that things are perhaps very remote or difficult or are in early stages rather than saying that they're impossible.

Yeah, I suppose maybe one day, with the right technology and understanding we can achieve more in that way, perhaps. In what you're saying with communication, also the poet communicates through form; the form of the poem, for example your concrete poetry. And you play a lot with conventions of form and you break some of those conventions. Do you think that there's any particular place for this experimentation in science fiction poetry?

I think so. I think so, yes. And the experiment is just an experiment. It may be successful, it may not. It may not lead to anything very much at all. Or rather it may be a kind of key to open a huge door. We don't know. I think it may be important not to close the gate on things that are not understood yet but could possibly be understood. And one is maybe enlightened by science and scientific experiment, but it can also be done through language and through extending what we think that language can do. Any one language cannot do everything. We can learn from other languages and perhaps extend the possibilities of English, in our case, and I think this idea has caught on quite well. I think a lot of the people who are interested in science fiction are really interested in what it can do with words, with language, it's one of the ways of making it both new and interesting and acceptable.

Yes. I think so. Science fiction actually sometimes has a bad reputation, I think, for not being as 'deep' or perhaps as 'interesting' for some people as other kinds of

literature. And thinking about your readers, do you think that you have a different kind of reader for science fiction poems as opposed to the rest of your poems?

No <laughs> Well, perhaps there are people who are so obsessed by science fiction that it's all they read. I've come across people like that. If you've been to any of these science fiction conventions, er, you come across wild-eyed nutters <both laugh> who think of nothing else. That's not perhaps the real thing but a kind of a fringe element. [inaudible] and it's one way of extending it, to maybe say to people 'well you might not think my poetry is really poetry, that science fiction poetry is something separate and not so good'. I don't know about that. I've thought about it myself quite a lot. I think there probably has to be... not a hierarchy, but a range, a scale of kinds of poetry and, in certain places and at certain times, people want to read poems which are very scientific and relying very much on really very scientific vocabulary which in fact is hard to understand and you think, 'what are we trying to understand?'. And there are other poets which are, they are, moving towards what you say about fantasy and I think there's very good poetry too. It's the difference between science fiction without the science, if you like. And I think if you think of poetry in terms of readers and enjoyment, fantasy has a good place. Fantasy goes into the area of myth, mythology, and who knows if the great myths of history have much truth to them? People argue about King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table and perhaps we'll discover something someday that shows that these people did exist, and perhaps even they left records which we can decipher some day. So I think that fantasy is not something that's totally out in the cold. I think it's something you can make use of and perhaps sharpen and extend in various ways and if you think of it, any of the older poetry like the poetry of Milton, or Spencer, or Dante, Virgil, these are all, in a sense, fantasy poems. Though it depends on what your belief is: Dante wouldn't thank you for being called a fantasy writer <laughs> but to most people *The Divine Comedy* is a kind of fantasy, a very wonderful fantasy. You can say the same with *Paradise Lost*, if you know the Christian background of our civilisation, you take it as a poem about things that happened, although it's all in the imagination, and it depends whether you want to downgrade these poems. I don't think you can downgrade *Paradise Lost* or *The Divine Comedy*, it's all good. Whatever it is, it's all there and very strong. You probably have to say that fantasy has latched on to science fiction in many ways and you don't have to be ashamed to be found reading a fantasy novel... if it's well done, if it's well written.

I suppose there's a great sense of reading for enjoyment and not just trying to put things in a box. We can read fantasy or science fiction just because we enjoy reading it and maybe we don't need to take anything very deep or meaningful away from it.

Mmm, mm...

I'm not sure if...

Yes, yes. Well, it's an area which has many entrances, many exits, and it's very hard to pin it down closely and tightly. And I suppose Lewis Carroll, Edward Lear, were writing fantastic poetry and fantastic prose, which is well done and you like it, you accept it, you take it. There's not very much science in it. Dodgson – or Lewis Carroll – was a very well read man and interested in science, and a lot of the things in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* are based on scientific ideas and speculation about time

and about, erm, just what we are meant to be doing in this world. And I think it's very very hard to pigeonhole things as we'd like to. That's probably one of the reasons why books like *Alice* or Edward Lear's poems have lasted as well as they have. That's been a long time now and they're still being read so there must be something there that's quite real. We talk about reality – there's not much reality about *Alice*, but enough to say 'let's read more of this, let's get some more'. And it only becomes ridiculous if, well... I find Tolkien a bit ridiculous, other people don't. Do you like Tolkien?

Erm, parts of it, yes.

<both laugh>

Not much science there!

No, I think I do enjoy it in a sense that I enjoy the story and that kind of thing, perhaps not the writing necessarily. It's interesting that you mention things like Alice in Wonderland, and how well accepted they've been and still are. It makes me think perhaps of your Star Gate collection, which was your first collection of science fiction poems. I'm not sure... how well received was that? Were you aware of how well received it was and did it surprise you or...?

Hmm, hmm, yes, well, you have to take these things as they come to you and also gather what other people think about it and see if anything gels and comes together in the end. Tolkien certainly seems to be widely read and enjoyed so I'm possibly wrong about that but, er, a kind of Tolkien-story which has a little bit more reality in it would be all right I think.

<both laugh>

Yes, that's true. Actually, thinking about Star Gate again, this was your first collection of all science fiction poetry, and you'd said 'this is science fiction poetry'. Why did you decide to release a collection of science fiction poems? You hadn't before, so what had changed?

Yes. I don't know. I think people have wanted to get away from the rather stereotypical poetry of the white-coated scientists in the laboratory. It's become a kind of cliché, that's what a scientist is: 'if you don't have a white coat, you're not a scientist'. And you're probably pouring something from one vessel into another. But that doesn't take you very far and nowadays it's actually the cyber age which we're living in now, it's time to extend that into other writing, so that... It's very difficult to think of reality as being simply a one-way process, as a simple... target [to any man]. In fact, an advanced scientific novel today would be quite hard to read because the ideas themselves are difficult to understand.

Yes.

And that would be putting a clamp on your feet. If you want to publish your book and get people to read it, it must somehow be on their wavelength and, er, if you're to get, er, going back as far as Einstein's thoughts, if Einstein had written fiction – I don't

think he did, did he? I don't think so – it would have been very difficult to understand. The ideas of Einstein were so important that people ought to see them somehow. Watered down, no doubt, made simple. But something there has been going on now for quite a while but it is gradually being brought into writing, into creative writing. So I think we've got to think of that as a possibility. Whether a scientist – a person who's actually a scientist – would write a better novel than an ordinary novelist with a basis of science, I don't know. But I think that if you take the scientific interest too far then it goes out of the real wavelength altogether and readers can't do very much with it. And that's true of probably some very good science fiction but it's very hard to get into.

Yes, so there's a sense of balance, and maybe that the poet should speak in a language that you can understand to some degree at least...

Yes.

Okay, thank you. (I'll just have a look here...) So 'Bawr Stretter' – I don't know if I pronounced that right! – 'Bawr Stretter' from 'The First Men on Mercury' recently appeared on a Scottish Poetry Library badge and on a booklet and on their wall. And your science fiction poetry therefore must hold intrigue and importance for both academics and readers out there; people who are interested in poetry. Why do you think it is that your science fiction poetry is so popular, and is it an important part of you as a poet?

Yes. I think as it becomes more important in your life itself, you will think different things... and with the book series and so on... How far can that be brought into very good writing, very good literature? It is happening and I think people enjoy 'First Men on Mercury', particularly, partly because it does tell an actual story, a kind of story, and the narrative is quite strong. You may not believe it but it's there and I think that's, well, obviously true, because a novel may be very down-to-earth for readers, like Dickens or Jane Austen, and it doesn't have to do anything else, that's it. But I think there's also a place for work that stands out from that and perhaps puts its characters into very very unusual or difficult or almost impossible situations, and people like to see that, they enjoy that. Because there are some good, or some quite good, science fiction films <laughs> some pretty awful ones at that!

<both laugh>

There can be a good film in that way. It's possibly coming to a wider audience just in films rather than in books. I'm not sure about this [finishing off] the book, but if people are going to stop reading books then they have to get their science fiction in another way and I suppose they're going to get it visually, from seeing a film. And that can be very powerful, like in Tarkovsky's *Solaris*. Have you seen it?

Well... Yes I've seen it... Though only the one with George Clooney...

It's a good story and you want to know what is going to happen next. And it's also got a lot of scientific interest, actually. And you want to know just what would happen if... if certain things did happen, what else would follow on from that? So it appeals on different levels: it's exciting, it's beautiful in parts, it's frightening in parts, and it

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

Yes, quite like your poem about the apple and the idea that nothing is not giving messages, maybe we just don't understand the apple's message.

Yes.

Which kind of links back to the idea that if aliens are trying to communicate, that we just don't have the way of understanding...

Of course the idea of aliens and what they do, what life they lead, can be frightening. And this is why some people don't want to get into it too much, because they think that it's probably rather bad for you to allow your fantasies to become too black and, er, like to think of good aliens rather than bad aliens, because it could be either! And it's as well to keep your mind open in that respect: good aliens might be both very clever and very moral, ethically moral beings which we would learn from. Perhaps we are very primitive compared to some beings elsewhere; we just don't know yet. Whereas they could be out to destroy us, and of course in writing if you want the story to be exciting then you'll have conflict, you'll have wars, you'll have, er... various kinds of terror. Sometimes you say 'no don't do that' but people will always do that; it's something to write about. There's plenty of violence in the great writing of the past. So you can't rule it out, but in science fiction you've just got to find some way of making it exciting and at the same time – it might be very dangerous, you've got to say it's dangerous. But that's just one way of doing it, and after all it is just a story, it's not biography or autobiography.

Well most science fiction films about aliens seem to be about invasions, usually, don't they? Although, Star Trek, for example, the humans tend to get on well with the other alien races and they learn from each other and their morals and... as a way of surviving. And surviving is something which, to me, seems very important to your science fiction poetry.

It would be very important to understand if anybody is sending us messages, we want it [to be] possible to understand what they're saying. Perhaps they're sending us warnings about this and that and we don't know what that warning is but it might be very important indeed. And we ought to keep thinking about this.

I think so. In your poem, 'Scan Day', you talk about the experience of Computerised Tomography – a CT scan – and I was wondering, when this was happening, did you feel like you were in a science fiction story, going through those kinds of machines and those kinds of things?

I'm sorry I didn't, can you...?

Sure. In your poem 'Scan Day', you talk about some of the medical procedures of being scanned. I wondered if those scans made you feel as though you were part of a science fiction?

Hmm, hmmm. Yes. I don't know, I don't really know the answer to that.

Well that's fine, we can just move on! As you know, I have begun writing science fiction poems myself and I wondered if you had any advice for me or other people who were writing science fiction poetry?

Well, any advice you get has got to be something good! Fits in with you yourself and your own life. It's got to be something that really gets you going – vibrates in your mind in some kind of way, vibrates in your heart in some kind of way. It's no use saying, 'oh, there are fewer poems about exploring other worlds and more poems about exploring the interior world of the mind'. That's possibly true, that's if you can do it. But it's got to be something which interests you, you've got to feel that you want to write this. If there's something you've perhaps read about in the papers or in a book or seen it in a film and you think to yourself 'this is you, this is very very interesting. I must think about this and perhaps extend it in some kind of way and write about it' – and not be inhibited by anyone saying to you 'this is impossible, it won't happen'. Maybe it will happen, perhaps it will. And so this kind of openness is very good, I think, very useful. There are bound to be some things that you don't understand and some things that you understand but are not particularly interested in. The things you want to write about are things that you can both understand up to a point and can write about. You don't want to cut off your connections with all the existing historical novels or early science fiction. Keep it in your mind, in the background, but find something that really interests you, frankly, whatever it might be. It might be time, it might be evolution. And keep hammering away at that until you get a good form for it. And it is a matter of form as well as ideas. What I said before about language is very important: language and form. There are some writers who publish books, science fiction books, which are not really very good, not really very well written. It gets an audience, publishing cheap paperbacks that are quite melodramatically interesting but are not really very good. They won't last very long. But you want to read quite a lot and only keep the things that interest you particularly, things that chip in with what you do yourself, what you're thinking or experiencing. And you'll find something I'm sure that really does excite you and you may want to emulate some other writers who interest you particularly, science fiction particularly, in science fiction. I don't know, it might be Ursula Le Guin or Ray Bradbury. There are different types of novelists, different types of poet, too. I think it's quite good to read quite a lot – not necessarily to copy or put yourself to school to some other writer, but just to know what you're doing and to say 'I like that, I can do something with that'. And later on it'll fit into a gradually understood background.

That sounds like very good advice and I'm trying at the moment to read all of the... like War of the Worlds and go back to even Frankenstein and those kind of things to see if anything interests me, so that sounds like a great idea.

Yes

Okay well I think that's it for the questioning, so thank you very very much.

Not at all. I hope it's made some sense. <laughs>