

The Midnight Letterbox: Selected Correspondence 1950–2010
by Edwin Morgan (Eds. James McGonigal and John Coyle)

Manchester: Carcanet Press, 2015.
(ISBN 978-1-78410-079-7), 534pp.

Molly Vogel (University of Glasgow)

The correspondence of Edwin Morgan is as eclectic as his poetry. Editors James McGonigal and John Coyle have thoughtfully selected letters demonstrating this from Morgan's vast stock. Neither editor had to look far for fodder; McGonigal studied under Morgan in the 1970s and is his biographer and executor, while Coyle is Senior Lecturer in English Literature at the University of Glasgow, an institution with long ties to Morgan. The Edwin Morgan Papers held at Glasgow are a staggering collection: nearly 1500 manuscripts of poems, letters, postcards, scribbles, and ephemera. The letters alone are enough to keep an academic busy for a lifetime and the introduction tells us as much. The result is a book of some weight, which gives a comprehensive representation of Morgan's colorful and lengthy writing career. We learn from the introduction that Morgan would post midnight letters for early morning collection, hence the title. Morgan has the uncanny ability of writing as if he only wrote for you. That is, it is easy to imagine a private world between writer and recipient, where the quotidian is a passing reassurance. The impression that remains for the reader is one shared by those who knew him.

His letters reached postboxes of the literary elite; Ted Hughes, T. S. Eliot, W. S. Graham, Laura (Riding) Jackson, and Allen Ginsberg make an appearance, among others. He encouraged up-and-coming poets such as Richard Price and Tom Leonard, letter-writing to a younger generation of poets for close to thirty years. By 2003, Morgan was still championing Leonard's 'right inuff', a poem published in 1980, for inclusion in a Scottish Poetry Library anthology. Morgan lists it as third amongst his 'top eleven poems' written between 1978 and 2002 (p. 506). Perhaps even more endearing are Morgan's attentive responses to the non-elite — teachers, researchers, book dealers, even a monk and a paediatrician. Fittingly, each letter is prefaced by the name and occupation of its recipient, prompting its own word-association game ('Can one

roam among the letters of the alphabet?’ (p. 177)). It is easy to imagine how these letters might have gone back and forth *ad infinitum*. This might be why Morgan writes in such varied forms, from postcards to verse epistles to concrete poetry.

One gets the impression he often got ahead of himself. Some letters, particularly to Haroldo de Campos, appear feverishly written: underscored phrases, capitals and hyphens, columns and indenting. How Morgan managed such stylistic variations on a typewriter is impressive, yet the lack of direction and specificity in some of these letters regarding his poetry is alarming. As such, we get less of a ‘concrete’ sense of the poet and as a result, the poems, even collections, seem far more pliable.

Another conclusion that might be drawn is that Morgan had too many directions in which he wanted to go. As a result, some of these poetic directions are often overlooked by Morgan and pointed out by what must be a jot of red ink from someone else. Are poet and editor talking about the same thing? Here, Morgan admits a misunderstanding to de Campos; one wonders what else is being miscommunicated between the two:

6 November 1965

Dear Haroldo de Campos

Thank you very much for your letter, and I am glad you have given detailed points of criticism [...] I entirely agree with you it is important to have accuracy wherever humanly possible!

ALEA I: I must apologize for missing the MUNDO LIVRE meaning; this was stupid of me. I would suggest a new aleatory column, based on FREE WORLD [...]

For the ADMIRÁVEL/ADMERDÁVEL opposition, could we have (I offer 3 suggestions, one which might suit) either THE UNSURPASSABLE... THE UNSHITPASTABLE, or THE EXEMPLABLE... THE EXCREMENTABLE

(pp. 149–50)

What is lost in translation is interesting, and ultimately draws us to the heart of Morgan’s poetry: how we communicate. Translation becomes a focus of his work, including versions of *Cyrano de*

Bergerac, Phaedra and Beowulf. Correspondence between Morgan and 1959 Nobel laureate, Salvatore Quasimodo, reveals an ultimately failed attempt to bring the latter's translations to Britain. Yet what is lacking in results (failed commercial success and failed job applications) Morgan makes up for in tenacity. One cannot help but admire his perseverance. Although we do not get to read any replies, it is clear that Morgan took care over these letters and that many were poems in themselves.

The letters are illuminating, more a testament to Morgan's beneficent and enthusiastic personality than to his poetics. As the introduction observes, 'He retained for the record much that a weaker personality might have concealed' (p. 1) — though why Morgan burned all of his letters when he left for the army in 1940 remains a mystery.

What the reader is then left with is just enough breathing room for Morgan. This 'Selected Correspondence' economizes space by omitting greetings, yet leaving Morgan's, one of many indications of his creativity as well as his warmth; he often signs off as 'Eddie', or 'Yeddie' when responding to Ian Hamilton Finlay, and sometimes his monogram-like signature takes the shape of six calligraphic strokes in the form of his initials.

Although the end result is 'a selection of a selection of a selection' (p. 3), one gets a sense of Morgan's pervading desire to connect with the human spirit. We see it in his fascination with technology (see his series of 'computer poems'), his delight in the scientific, his love for music and film. There was never a more fitting title for an Edwin Morgan collection than 'From Glasgow to Saturn'. Yet what the letters reveal, and what makes Morgan an interesting epistolarian, is that he is sometimes at odds with himself. For a man fascinated by (mis)communications, he rarely used digital technology for correspondence. He used carbon paper, later photocopying and faxing his handwritten or typed letters. Amusingly, Morgan's poems regularly seem more technophilic than these habits suggest of the man himself.

The Midnight Letterbox's decade-by-decade approach highlights clear correlations between periods of time and Morgan's poetic progressions. Furthermore, a correspondent stands out in every decade: the fifties find Morgan discussing how to read a poem with W. S. Graham; the sixties see him questioning the dogmas of Modernism with Ian Hamilton Finlay; while in the seventies he is tiptoeing around the world of publishing with Michael Schmidt.

The final letters render a clear message from Morgan:

Poetry [...] should remind people that if they want to achieve something in the world, and to really be taken seriously, then they need to show the world what they stand for. (p. 516)

For those who take Morgan's poetry seriously, *The Midnight Letterbox* will prove an indispensable resource. The letters, which span the majority of Morgan's life, provide a portrait of a man committed to poetry, and to the students, collaborations, and friendships that came with it. They serve as a reminder that standing with and for poetry is at the centre of Morgan's achievements.