

THE ELEGIAC STRAIN IN
ROBERT MORGAN'S POETRY



B H I S H A M B H E R W A N I

Robert Morgan's substantial poetic oeuvre is pervaded by an appreciation for his forefathers, as in the concluding lines of "Mound Builders," with which he closes his fourteenth poetry volume, *Terroir*:

. . . all of us rely, and must,
on our traditions and the deep
ancestral memories and ways
to bear us up and get us through
the deadly and uncertain days,
sustaining breath and sight and hope
on residue and legacy
of those beloved who came before
and watch us from the glittering stars.

The poem – in which the speaker considers how Georgia's Creek Indians "deposited their dead, their kin, / in ceremonial heaps" – is an apt metaphor for Morgan's work, populated as it is from his earliest volumes to his most recent ones by "ancestral memories" of great-grandparents, grandparents, parents, aunts and uncles, and others who inhabited, literally and in spirit, the

rural Appalachian landscape of his childhood. “The dirt is our ancestors,” he concludes in an earlier “Mound Builders,” from *Red Owl*, his third volume, which precedes *Terroir* by forty years.

Morgan is keenly tuned to his legacy: his speakers are profoundly sympathetic to family and tradition, to filial continuity. “Family Bible,” from *Topsoil Road*, his twelfth volume, in which he recalls the “leather of the book,” “soft / and black as that of Grandma’s purse,” notes the passages, through generations, of life’s customary rituals:

The marriages recorded, births
and deaths set down in pencil and
in many inks and hands, with names
and middle names and different dates
and spellings scrawled in berry juice
that looks like ancient blood. And blood
is what the book’s about, the blood
of sacrifice, the blood of Lamb,
two testaments of blood, and blood
of families set in names to show
the course and merging branches, roots
of fluid in your veins this moment.

The poem repeats *blood* six times in five lines (and twice again in its penultimate line), stressing the web of family associations and traditions, “the course and merging branches, roots / of fluid” in Morgan’s veins. In “Books in the Attic,” from *At the Edge of the Orchard Country*, Morgan’s eighth volume, the poet and his father visit on a Sunday afternoon the decrepit loft of “the Morgan house,” where “Dozens had been born and died” and “All of Daddy’s / renovations before the war / for his bride were peeling, moldy”; there,

sprawled the books of the family
smelling of must and old tobacco,
silverfish and pages tinged by time,
the fat histories Great-grandpa
got in Augusta when he wagoned
hams and produce down the Winding Stairs.

The ancestral continuity of “Books in the Attic,” which includes Morgan and, by reference, his father and great-grandfather, is

reinforced, five volumes and twenty years later, in *October Crossing's* "The Years Ahead," which begins, "When my grandpa took his produce / down the Winding Stairs to Greenville / to peddle door-to-door, he left / the day before and camped somewhere / near Travelers Rest just north of town." The two poems embrace four generations, two on the same road, a grandpa retracing literally a great-grandpa's footsteps, and Morgan in turn retracing theirs through his poems.

The reference to the great-grandfather in "Books in the Attic" is followed a few years later by a reference to him in "The Road to Elmira," from *Sigodlin*, Morgan's ninth volume. The great-grandfather recalled, Frank Pace, was an important presence in Morgan's life. He served in the Confederate Army and was incarcerated at Elmira Prison in 1864–65. He never returned to Elmira – a short drive, ironically, from where Morgan, Kappa Alpha Professor of English at Cornell University, has made his home since 1971 – but lived as a farmer on the family land, telling stories to the poet's father about history and the Civil War.

His own work's "pages tinged by time," Morgan's predecessors are rendered vivid through their outmoded and esoteric codes and customs. Rooted in place and tradition in a world of preachers and natural healers, they resist modernization, living simultaneously with and in awe of the natural and the supernatural, fathoming and interpreting their existences through biblical allegory and superstition: the grandfather on his journey in "The Road Ahead" "watched above / the trees the comet fling its ghost, / portending either ruin or / a century of wonder." The premonition mirrors that in *Orchard Country's* "Halley's Comet," where Morgan's father, haunted by the recollection, remembers the comet – which appears once every seventy-six years or so – being pointed out to him by Morgan's grandmother: "He often tried / to recall what she said it portended: flood? / famine? war?" He thinks, "if he saw its milky breath again he'd be eighty-one,"

and the century old and time's conclusion
 near, for all preachers agreed the century would see
 the end of this dimension.

In *Sigodlin's* "Writing Spider," "When Uncle Wass had found the spider's / W woven between the limbs / of a dead chestnut . . . / . . . he said he knew / there would be war." Morgan goes on to note that

. . . Grandpa, his brother, told
 how the writing spider's runes could spell
 a message to the world, or warn
 of the individual reader's own
 end with an initial.

And in a crescendo as far as elicitations of the extraordinary go, in *Orchard Country's* "The Gift of Tongues," the "father looking at // the altar as though electrocuted" speaks in tongues, conjuring the past beyond bloodline: "It was a voice I'd never heard / but knew as from other centuries."

It was the voice of awful fire
 "What's he saying?" Ronald hissed
 and jabbed my arm. "Probably Hebrew."
 The preacher called out another
 hymn, and the glissade came again,
 high syllables not from my father's
 lips but elsewhere, the fire of
 higher language, sentences of light.

Unsurprisingly, given his lifelong proximity to nature – especially to mountains (the Blue Ridge and, beyond, the Appalachian range at large, extending to upstate New York) and their rivers and trees and creatures (the birds, bees, crickets, rattlesnakes, and spiders that inhabit his poems, often ominously) – Morgan imbues the elements with the ability to speak ("the voice of awful fire"), write, and even sing. His intimacy with perennial decay and renewal seems to underlie his urge to revive in poems what is in other ways irretrievable (his childhood, its people, the past in general).

Morgan's *ars poetica* is *Sigodlin's* ingeniously pithy, concrete "Mountain Graveyard," a tombstone epitaph visually by virtue of its shape:

stone	notes
slate	tales
sacred	cedars
asleep	please
hated	death

Nature both observes (in the context of “notes” as a verb) and sings (in musical “notes”) above the buried dead, the song building on stories (“tales”), from sources perhaps religious or ancestral (both “sacred”), made possible by enduring life above (“cedars”), resilient despite its uneasy (“hated”) and unalterable relationship with death, grounded below. The “notes,” “tales,” and “sacred” imply human engagement, human interpretations of the words’ counterparts (“slate,” “stone,” and “cedars”). The “stone notes / slate tales” identify nature’s vocal as well as textual (the pun on *slate*) potential, its lyric as well as narrative aspects. The “notes,” aligned closest in the poem’s configuration to “the glittering stars,” the ultimate residence of the dead past the graveyard in “Mound Builders,” suggest a psalm (“sacred”) or a requiem that amplifies human grief, individual and universal.

The transformations in the anagrams in each line of “Mountain Graveyard” are as much metaphorical as rhetorical. The general tone of reticence in the poem is countered by the intemperance of the all-too-human “please” and “hated,” through which it invites in the reader. A fugue as it traverses its tiers from the delight of music to the dread of “hated death,” the poem juxtaposes a word conjuring presence human (“notes,” “tales,” “sacred,” “please,” and “hated”) with one conjuring presence extra-human. Of the latter, the inanimate “stone” and “slate,” outliving death, are durable earthly recorders and testimonies of the “notes” and “tales.”

The third, middle, line is pivotal: here, the two fugal strains cross, implying in counterpoint a complementary, inevitable, and necessary relationship between nature and humans, present and past, life and death, song and silence.

“Mountain Graveyard” has a biographical subtext. Simultaneously Christian and pagan, it emblemizes Morgan’s straddling in his childhood stringent religious orthodoxy and nonjudgmental natural grandeur. The passivity that permeates the poem – even though it is a meditation on a subject no less severe than death – contrasts with the anxiety inherent in the conclusion of “The Gift of Tongues”: “My hands hurt / when pulled from the pew’s varnish / they’d gripped and sweated so.” “Later,” however,

standing under the high and plain-
 sung pines on the mountain I clenched

my jaws like pliers, holding in
and savoring the gift of silence.

“When young,” Morgan said to Suzanne Booker (in a conversation in *Good Measure*, a compilation of essays and interviews edited by the poet), “I remember being extremely frightened of [my father] and others speaking in tongues, shouting. . . . I remember the great relief when the service was over, and we could go back into the sunlight and the sweet breeze among the pines. There seemed a wonderful poise in nature as it merely went about its business, with no interest or designs on us.” What Morgan, while alluding to the religious orthodoxy of his childhood, has noted about William Cullen Bryant in his essay “Bryant’s Solitary Glimpse of Paradise” (in *Good Measure*) is embodied in “Mountain Graveyard”: “After the terror and exclusions of Calvinism, what an assurance to see the infinite cycles of decay and growth, incorporating human compost in fertile progression. Most great poems touch somehow the figure of resurrection, but ‘Thanatopsis’ succeeds . . . in evoking communion through death and collective loss.”

Devoid of people and pronouns, “Mountain Graveyard” is a meta-elegy. While his poetry, in different ways in different periods, is normally restrained, allowing nature in its largesse to overshadow the self in offering voice and metaphor, when the singular, subjective first-person speaker does surface in Morgan’s work – as it does in the elegies and in poems of childhood (such as the many in *Orchard Country*) – it can disarm the reader with its voice of delicate, human intimacy. For example, in “Cowbedding,” in which the speaker recalls his grandmother raking leaves in the fall, “I want to go back” is repeated (“I want to go back there and help / hold the sack open while she / feeds the burlap sack of gold / and stuffs in more” and “I want to go / back and stand on the frost” on the swept patches), irrationally in the face of overwhelming memory of love and loss, by adult transformed into child and straining to reach into his past. In contrast, it is unsettlingly the adult who speaks, with a tone of resignation, in *Sigodlin’s* “Heaven,” in which Morgan recalls his grandmother and two uncles:

And I won't assume,
 as much as I've known it certain all along,
 that I'll never see Grandma again, nor
 Uncle Vol with his fabulations,
 nor see Uncle Robert plain with no scar
 from earth and the bomber explosions.

The late Uncle Vol's "fabulations" represent concretely the abstract "tales" of "Mountain Graveyard" – as do the invocations of Uncle Robert. In fact, nowhere in Morgan's work is the bonding of his life with those of his predecessors more deliberately and definitively forged than through his relationship with his namesake uncle, an engineer-gunner in the Second World War whose aircraft caught fire on takeoff and crashed in England. In Morgan's earliest memories, recounted in the preface, "The Cubist of Memory," to his selection in William Heyen's anthology *The Generation of 2000: Contemporary American Poets*, "over all the paraphernalia and talk" of the war "was the spoken and unspoken presence of my Uncle Robert who had been killed in a B-17 in 1943, the year before I was born. He cast a shadow almost as large as the Biblical figures' over my play and daydreams. The pigeons in the barnloft had been his, the collection of arrowheads in the attic, the toolboxes and paintset; even my name had been his. . . . He had been an athlete, a martyr, an artist, and I had no choice but to rebel, then follow."

An occasion similar to the one recounted in "Cowbedding" ("While we raked leaves / for the cowstall Grandma told me how / you came up here on summer afternoons") opens *Orchard Country's* long, touching elegy "Uncle Robert," an ode with an epigraph that is an epitaph with his air force credentials. Subsumed by his ancestry through a mysterious mode of initiation, Morgan is secured a place in his family's legacy:

It was hinted I was "marked" somehow,
 not only by your name, but in some way
 unexplained was actually you.

The uncle's life foreshadows Morgan's life as an artist – as a poet, a short story writer, and a novelist – the bequest being handed down, item by item, in spirit:

Your paintings watched me
 from the bathroom wall and mantel
 and your poem clipped from the paper
 yellowed among the rationbooks. I inherited
 your Testament with its boards of carved cedar,
 and the box of arrowheads you picked
 from the dust of bottomlands on Sunday afternoons.

It ends – the presence of the mother highlighting the closeness of
 the family and the continuity of ancestral narratives –

Mama liked to take out
 of the cloth a clay statue of a naked man
 face down in the dirt which you once
 modeled and called “The Dying Warrior”
 I marveled at the cunning work of leg
 and tiny arm and spilling hair, and touched
 your fingerprints still clear on the base.

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While resurrecting and honoring his past, Morgan's elegies also exemplify and embody over five decades his poetic impulses and interests in terms of subject and prosody. Their consideration therefore provides an illuminating perspective for the examination of his poetry in general and leads to a deeper appreciation of and insight into it. For example, the subject of “The Gift of Tongues” is revisited, in a lighter vein, in two poems from *October Crossing*, “Holy Cussing” and “The Holy Laugh.” In the former, with a particularly spectacular twist,

Sometimes a man who spoke
 in tongues and leapt for joy would break into
 an avalanche of cursing that would stun
 with brilliance and duration.

In the latter,

In services they say she would
 not only speak in tongues and dance
 the holy dance and shout the shout
 but sometimes laugh the holy laugh.

The exorcism through dance, witnessed in the swearing man and the laughing woman, is enacted in “Care,” from *Topsoil Road*. The dance, however, is a metaphor for the father’s breath as Morgan invokes him blowing over his children’s hot breakfast.

... He would pant
 the steam away and huff until
 we laughed at his choo-chooing chant
 to drive away the haunt, expel
 the fire ghosts that stung our tongues.

Then he’d bring back the dishes “exorcised by his lungs’ / performance of burning frenzies.”

When animating the elements, Morgan not only permits them to speak, write, and sing, but also empowers air – the omnipresent medium of transport for the spirit world in his poems, for “the fire ghosts” to be “exorcised” by the “burning frenzies” – with supernatural qualities. Several poems – such as “Radio,” “Church Dust,” “Natural Radio,” and “Time’s Music,” the first from *Orchard Country*; the others from *The Strange Attractor*, Morgan’s thirteenth volume – build on this conceit. In “Radio” the speaker recalls his grandfather tuning the instrument, “where the languages of the air / are trapped and spoken.” Arguably an elegy, the poem is tinged with the wistfulness of “Cowbedding” (“I want to go back there”) through its use of the first person:

I want to reach in there
 and find the jars that sing,
 and watch through a gap in the back
 the vials glowing in the muck of wires,
 a throbbing in the metal
 where the languages of the air
 are trapped and spoken.

The poem, which identifies the radio with a cathedral, its “gothic windows stretched with cloth,” showcases Morgan’s resourcefulness with metaphor; with “the muck of wires” it underscores the ubiquity of nature even in a product of modern technology.

The “gothic windows” and “the languages of the air,” along with the dance of exorcism, are implicit in “Church Dust,” where

the debris from the floor launches into "a shiver dance / that shows the air is troubled in / the stillest house, the quietest room." The dance is reenacted when the settled dust is again stirred to "swirl away like words / from long-forgotten sermons, hymns." The poem ends with "time," entirely abstract and intangible, personified, "coolly" – unperturbed by timeless mortal struggle and grief – "counting dust."

"Radio" is also complemented by "Natural Radio." By turning on a metaphorical "radio," or tuning your senses, in the wilderness, the speaker declares, you

. . . Hear the signals from
 electric currents in the earth,
 magnetic wells and fountains, storms
 of northern lights and southern lights.
 You catch the whistle of a bolt,
 shriek of lightning, chatter of
 auroras. Birds are calling to
 each other from the nests of atoms.

Even distant "Emissions from the surface of / the sun come in as trills. But," he advises, "listen / to the hum of older spaces / a hush of the beginning worlds / . . . that / speaks of time and matter's first motet." "Natural Radio" is about "the languages of the air" of "Radio," but outside its title it shares little with the contraption, or with the latter poem. The two poems differ in important ways. In the unpeopled "Natural Radio," addressed to "you," the first-person speaker is absent; and while Morgan evokes the natural world in "Natural Radio," he does so conspicuously with the dialect of science – earth's "electric currents," "magnetic wells and fountains," "nests of atoms," the sun's "emissions," "spaces," "time," "matter" – even as he summons celestial creation ("time and matter's first motet"). Not only do terrestrial and cosmic elements "shriek" and "chatter," "time," together with "matter," is (as in "Church Dust") personified, and communicates through music ("motet"), while solar emissions become trills and atoms talk. Be it biblical or the Big Bang, creation's (and time's) "hush" lingers.

Something similar is evident in "Time's Music," where "grass-hoppers / and crickets effervesce" "ticking away the summer." Each like a tuned "natural radio,"

Insects in an August field seem
 to register the background noise
 of space and amplify the twitch
 of partners in atoms.

The creatures sweep across fields, “whispering of / frost and stars overhead and chatter / of memory in every bit / of matter, of half-life in / the thick and flick of creation.” The poem, spoken in neither first nor second person (and without an imperative, to “listen,” for instance), is yet another step removed from the personal.

The titles “Church Dust,” “Natural Radio,” “Time’s Music,” and *Strange Attractor* (and diction such as “half-life” and “amplify”) indicate that for Morgan the natural, the supernatural, and the scientific are complementary, residing cozily together on his palette, all reasonable candidates for metaphorical manifestation, one not necessarily dominating the other. While *Strange Attractor* is motivated by the relationship between the cosmic and the scientific, scientific idiom is present throughout his work. In “II,” from *Topsoil Road*, the volume that precedes *Strange Attractor*, Morgan puns on “transcendental” (the relation between “line and circle” “cannot be written out / in full, . . . but / is exact and constant, is / eternal and everyday”); in “Music of the Spheres,” also from *Topsoil Road*, atoms are ingeniously rendered as representative of the cosmos (each region of an atomic spectrum “voicing its wavelength with / choirs in the tiny stadiums / of harmony of the deeper / galaxies, ancient octaves”); and in the opening poem, “Big Talk,” of his latest (sixteenth) volume, *Dark Energy*, following *Strange Attractor* by a decade, the geologists’ explanation of ancient mountainous echoes is interpreted by Morgan on his own terms, “as part / of the tectonic conversation / among the continents as old / as planet earth or starry birth, / the gossip of creation’s work.”

However, for all its pervasiveness, science, unlike the natural, the supernatural, and the religious, does not make even a cameo appearance in Morgan’s elegiac poems. (“Radio,” though it invokes a product of modern technology, has imagery rooted in nature and religion, not physics and electrical engineering.) In an oeuvre characterized more often than not, volume after volume, by a

pattern of accretion and consolidation of his interests and his thinking – with the natural and the supernatural insinuating the spiritual, and the scientific insinuating the natural and the supernatural – the absence of science in a particular strand of Morgan's poetry stands out.

This may reflect the dominance in the poet's memory of his earliest childhood experiences, permeated with religion and superstition (as in "Halley's Comet"), over his adult education, which included the study of engineering and mathematics as an undergraduate at North Carolina State University. But it may, in light of Morgan's long and prolific career, also reveal a more disquieting conflict – that of the virgin and the dynamo – perhaps to date unresolved in his mind.

"Natural Radio" ("the nests of atoms") and "Time's Music" (grasshoppers and crickets effervescing, amplifying "the twitch / of partners in atoms"; the "memory in every bit / of matter") are Lucretian, with science subjugating religion, replacing it as the source of Morgan's customary idiom and metaphors. In fact, the most cursory survey of Morgan's poetry reveals more poems that, like *De rerum natura*, are unpeopled than peopled. While sidestepping the elegiac poems, this Lucretian instinct straddles his work from his earliest volumes to *Dark Energy*, a title that contrasts with that of the preceding volume, *Terroir*; as the earlier *Strange Attractor* contrasts with the preceding *Topsoil Road*. Notably, in "Binary," in the latest volume, two yellow butterflies pursuing in flight their "ritual / of courtship, mating minuet" are "flowers that spin like particles / at love and matter's deepest core"; and the air plant of "Dark Energy" in the same volume is an "Ascetic epicurean."

The absence of science in Morgan's "personal" poems may also reveal something about his childhood kin. Despite their intense denominational and provincial skirmishes – which Morgan's *Trunk & Thicket* explores – they were welded by religion and history, the latter including conflicts with Native Americans, the Civil War, two world wars, and the Cold War. History and religion were often intertwined through the shared fear of the spread of communism and nuclear holocaust as manifestations of the impending Apocalypse. In *Topsoil Road*'s "Heat Lightning" Morgan recalls being unnerved at the age of four by any sudden noise,

“gunshot or backfire / or clap of thunder”: “And all the talk of nuclear war / did not soothe me.” In *Sigodlin’s* “Uranium,” Morgan’s grandfather and his friend take a Geiger counter around the fields and woods to measure radiation emitted by rocks, something seemingly amusing (“Each time they found / a specimen they put the mike / to its gritty form and listened”); but the young speaker “knew the Russians might blow us / up any day . . . and what / they looked for bombs were made of.” Morgan recounts how later

the old men talked of wealth and sure
Armageddon and the Bible’s
plans for our annihilation.

The entanglement between history and religion is brought to light in John Lang’s essay “Robert Morgan: ‘Mountains Speak in Tongues’” (in *Six Poets from the Mountain South*), when he draws attention to the poet’s “distant cousin who rose during worship one Sunday to declare ‘that in a vision it had been revealed to him [that Morgan’s] Uncle Robert’s death in Europe had been sent as punishment for family sins.’”

Even though radio, TV, and automobile did not threaten plow, spirit level, and wagon, for Morgan’s people science would naturally have been symbolic of an alien, and maybe hostile, realm – at odds with their lives of religious orthodoxy and rusticity, understood through the prophecies of the Bible, the arc of Halley’s Comet, and the genius of the “Thrush Doctor” (*Topsoil Road*). For Morgan to introduce science in poems that evoke his childhood and its denizens would perhaps be instinctively unnatural, imposing a dialect foreign to the premise, a violation of memory.

The sanctity of Morgan’s childhood – including the soil of its terrain and the beliefs of its people (even as he was at times terrified by the beliefs, and rebelled against them) – is preserved in ways more than just by his omission of science in certain poems that resurrect his past. Several of Morgan’s poems, such as *October Crossing’s* “Clogging” and *Dark Energy’s* “Carpet Tacking,” are about purposeful, communal activities that enforce kinship and foster bonding. And though such poems seem to contrast with the several that invoke fiercely independent and competitive pioneers (such as John James Audubon and Thomas Wolfe), explorers, and frontiersmen – of which his forefathers were a kind – in reality

they are both two sides of the same coin: the affinity of the individualists to their land, be it Appalachia (which it usually is) or America at large, is unassailable. Morgan's subsistence-seeking great-grandfather of "The Road to Elmira" and grandfather of "The Years Ahead" naturally or premeditatedly retrace their steps home, as, eagerly, does his amusement-seeking father in *Dark Energy's* "Escape Route":

When Daddy drove his pickup truck
south from the hills, across the Piedmont,
to Greenville, South Carolina, he
took care to park on the north side
of town, the truck already aimed
toward home.

The father, who "thrilled to crowds / and stores at first, to spectacle, / electric buses, higher buildings," and so on, was eventually "elated to / retrieve his truck still pointed at / the distant range, and freedom from / congested, smelly streets," and drive back "toward higher, cleaner air, / the intimate familiar." "I know," Morgan has observed (in *Good Measure's* "Conversation with William Harmon"), "in my own family, my uncles moved away and then returned, except the one who was killed in World War II. My dad tried to leave the mountains several times to be a trapper in Canada, to go to Minnesota and raise wheat, but he always came back. It's very hard to escape that repulsion and attraction."

The same innate sensibility and sensitivity that respect and guard the past – enmeshed in religion, meshed by history – and regard the encroachment of anything outside it (such as science) as something extraordinary, also render that past tenuous, susceptible to impingement. A number of Morgan's poems allude to the dislocation of Native Americans, and may reveal an underlying wariness, indeed an anxiety, of the precariousness of any way of life (including his ancestors' way), of "the deadly and uncertain days" ("Mound Builders"), which we resist by "our traditions and the deep / ancestral memories and ways," on which "all of us rely / and must." Similarly, poems that reflect on the disappearance and extinction of species, such as *Orchard Country's* "Passenger Pigeons," point to a similar concern with a way of life's endangerment. More broadly and chillingly, in *Dark Energy's*

“Big Bone Lick,” where explorers discovered colossal Pleistocene skeletons, “Eden once gave way and shrank / to just a regular promised land / to fit our deadly, human scale.”

Morgan’s awareness of this vulnerability, compounded by his affinity with the past, may explain his evocation and delineation in meticulous detail of curios, mementoes, and relics in his poems: the Geiger counter, the radio, the books in the attic, the family Bible, Uncle Robert’s paraphernalia. In *Sigodlin’s* “Grandma’s Bureau,” he conjures “the great black comb fine as / the sieve of a whale’s mouth”; “the coffin-wardrobe”; the “steel brush” that “held a few gray strands among its / thousand stingers”; “the tortoiseshell mirror”; the hatpins (“there was a / mystery to such thin strength”), “Some . . . long as witches’ wands / with fat pearl heads”; and even the dust on the furniture.

This protective instinct may influence Morgan’s response in some poems to modernization and urbanization, which in our times of both epidemic exploitation of natural resources and environmental awareness and activism have unprecedented significance. A number of such poems define the first section of *Dark Energy*. “Ancient Talk” recounts Thomas Wolfe considering a sequoia; it ends bemoaning his premature demise and speculating

His gift to us, I think is the
suggestion that we find our own
communion with the noble trees
and rocks and diamond peaks, and pause
to see and listen to the whisper
of our now fragile hemisphere.

In *Dark Energy’s* “Jaguar” we’re reminded that “such speed and power and prowess” as that of the tiger “once / patrolled these forests, mated, drank / from creeks and branches, screamed afar” in the Carolinas, “where fastest killer’s now the car.” His consciousness tuned not only to the power of nature, but also to its fragility, Morgan, if ever political in his poetry, is so as an ecologist, a reluctant conservationist. What Robert Frost brazenly addresses in “The Line-Gang,” Morgan does so delicately, but assertively, in poems such as *Topsoil Road’s* “Atomic Age,” which concerns the depletion of Green River topsoil, the “greasy / savings of centuries of leaf rot, forest mold / nursed by summit fogs

and isolation, / sold to decorate the cities of the plain" and "fissioned to the suburbs."



In Morgan's first volume, *Zirconia Poems*, the title of which refers to the North Carolina region in which he grew up, a sequence, "Dream," contains a haunting two-stanza lyric, "Distances," where, recalling a solitary home in a "short valley," the "Mind wanders down the long slope of trees" "Clear through the distance of memory"

into the cabin where my great grandmother, a bride,
sits by the fire smoking her clay pipe
and watching through the door the gap in the mountains
where her man may come at any moment
with gun on shoulder and quail singing
and steps so rhythmic
they leave tracks in the mind.

The same word, *mind*, opens and closes the poem, preceded in neither case by a noun or a pronoun. The possessive "my great grandmother" suggests it is the speaker's mind that navigates "down the long slope of trees / . . . / into a short valley / with only a cabin and a juniper / and one horse nibbling the dried grass / around an Indian grave" to a real or imagined past. The subject of the second *mind*, however, is more abstruse, open to the possibility of its referring to the speaker, the great-grandmother, or "her man," or some combination of these, making the poem enigmatic. Such instances of inscrutability are not uncharacteristic of Morgan's early poems.

Morgan has acknowledged Ezra Pound's *Cathay* as a formative influence, and, like the poems in that volume, Morgan's engender a place complete with its natural surroundings and its people and their culture. Deeper associations are also evident. For example, the theme (a wife anticipating her husband's arrival) and mood (of wistfulness) of "Distances" parallels that of Pound's famous Rihaku (or Li Bai, or Li Po) translation, "The River Merchant's Wife: A Letter," a modernist archetype; and the opening line of "Distances" echoes Pound's "Mind like a floating white cloud"

from “Taking Leave of a Friend,” another *Cathay* poem after Rihaku.

But despite these occasional associations, Morgan’s early poems appear to embrace more of Pound’s imagist doctrine than emulate the transparency and end-stopped lines of *Cathay*, as in “Great-Grandmother,” from his second volume, *The Voice in the Cross-hairs*:

Her skin like the gray paper of a hornet’s nest
is frightening to touch.
As though you might receive a shock
this close to the strange meat of death.

The intimacy so effectively apprehended in Morgan’s later poems – with his kin conjured, often by name, as flesh, blood, and spirit – in the earlier poems “is frightening to touch. / As though you might receive a shock.” This tentativeness toward terrifying intimacy (the use of “you” rather than “I”) is exemplified in *Zirconia Poems*’ ostensibly dismissive “Elegy,” with an unidentified third-person actor:

Guess I’ll light a rag out of here, he said
and blindness rose in his open eyes.

Tilted chessmen, tombstones graze on a hill,
drag shadows at the setting moon.
Eighty years go down
like a ship.

An unattributed quote is followed in “Elegy” by a corroborating observation, which is followed by a consequent image, which is followed by a summary conclusion, the four parts logically related. “I wanted poems terse and precise, yet as encompassing as mathematical proofs,” wrote Morgan in “The Cubist of Memory.” In an earlier essay, from 1980, “Some Sentences on the Line” (in *Good Measure*), he remarked, “I like poems in fragments, things with rough and sharp edges that sometimes cut unexpectedly, that cannot be handled too easily and always with safety. One piece of broken quartz can shave an ax handle, same as an expensive plane. Lines are the gathered bits of the original shattered diamond.”

Morgan’s early poems, wittingly delivered obliquely, are often

definitional. Channeled by the juxtaposition of images – fragmentary and splintered by brusque enjambments and varying line lengths – they consider and develop various aspects of something, aspects that cumulatively circumscribe the full thing, shaping in the process a thought, an idea, a mood, as if the poet had taken on the role of a “cubist of memory.” In “Copper,” from *Red Owl*,

The meat of the sun is still pink inside.
 But the skin's deceptive,
 growing mossy barnacles
 on bullets.
 Drinks electricity.

Squeeze the juice out.
 The lights are still on inside.
 Molecules beating like pistons.
 Hypnotic presence.
 All metal is evil.

In pithy sentences and fragments, Morgan niftily steers the poem in his treatment of the metal from its physical description (“pink,” “barnacles”) to its uses (to make bullets, to conduct electricity) to its metaphorical potential (the “evil” of money, its most basic unit, the penny, made of copper), while animating the element (“The meat . . . still pink inside,” “the skin . . . / growing,” the drinking).

The juxtaposition may also be an outcome of the early influence of Whitman. “It was the contrast between ‘soul’ and that one ‘spear of grass’” in the opening lines of “Song of Myself” (“I loafe and invite my soul, / I lean and loafe at my ease observing a spear of summer grass”) “that really struck me,” Morgan noted in an interview (“The Rush of Language,” in *Good Measure*). He recalled his encounter with the poem as an adolescent in his elder sister’s college anthology. “It was the juxtaposition that first started me thinking about poetry.”

Morgan’s early influences, interests, and experiments cast a well-defined shadow across his volumes through *Red Owl* (published in 1972), a shadow that spills into later volumes, including the 1987 *Orchard Country*, with poems such as “Brownian Motion” and “Lightning Bug,” and the 1990 *Sigodlin*. The experiments were influenced by modernism not only in poetry but also

in music and visual art: his senior year in college in 1964, “I felt that I too could write poetry,” Morgan explained to Booker, “by being true to the world of experience beyond the ego, and true to the plainest, most honest voice. I heard a lucid, modern measure I wanted to learn to use, lean as Webern, subtle as Bartok, crisp as Pound’s *Cathay*.”

Morgan’s approach must have impelled him to actively explore the possibility of metaphor (the tombstones “tilted chessmen” that “graze on a hill”; the “meat” of malleable copper, its “barnacles,” its “Molecules beating like pistons,” its animal qualities), the active use of which continued to permeate his later work. Consider, almost two decades after “Copper,” *Sigodlin*’s definitional “Spirit Level,” where “Shifty-eyed as an auctioneer, the bubble / hides quick” and “The nervous little fish / of emptiness backs, then rushes forward / in the vein of elixir” until it is “Put to sleep by accuracy.” In fact, along with his plain, honest early voice and his early subjects, Morgan’s rhetorical strategies too have endured – and matured – over decades. Even *Cathay* appears to inform Morgan’s later work, which resonates with the “valleys full of voices and pine-winds” of Pound’s “Exile’s Letter” (Rihaku again).

While the rough-hewn quality of the earlier poems is replaced by regular prosody as Morgan’s poems start to settle into formally defined grids of verse that are metrically and syllabically sensitive, his lyric poetry abandons neither the prismatic nor the metaphorical qualities of the early work. However, no longer “fragments, things with rough and sharp edges,” they are subsumed by the newer approaches. *Terroir*’s title poem, for example, begins plainly enough, with a straightforward definition of the distinctiveness of a vineyard’s environment,

The quality that seems unique,
as thriving from a special spot
of soil, air flow and light specific,
and also frost and winter sleep,
conditions of particular year.

But this distinctiveness is then associated with

what Hopkins chose to call inscape,
or individuation.

Then, semi-punning on the poeticized “terroir,” which “sounds / so close to terror you’d confuse / the two,” he infuses wine with deadly, supernatural potency,

. . . as if the finest and
 the rarest blend would come with just
 a hint of fear or pain, the sting
 and shiver of revulsion with
 the savor of the earth and sun.

The metaphors are less conspicuous and more complex in this later poem than in the preceding examples, absorbed organically into the lyric; though charging the poem with dimensions of meaning, they appear not premeditated but offhanded. The lines, too, are marked by consistency: almost all of them eight syllables in length, each with four stresses, they are loose tetrameters that, more often than not, are iambic.

While Morgan has experimented with many forms – *Orchard Country’s* “Chant Royal”; the pantoums of *Sigodlin’s* “Audubon’s Flute” and *Topsoil Road’s* “Hearth”; the latter volume’s sonnet “Care”; the villanelle “Subduction” from *Green River*; his tenth volume; *Strange Attractor’s* “Triolet” – his mode has converged to the unrhymed tetrameter line: just about every poem in *Dark Energy* is composed in this meter, as are most in *Terroir*; the line sustains even his longer narrative poems, such as the elegiac “The Years Ahead.” He has further calibrated the four feet in poems such as “Clogging” and *Strange Attractor’s* “Legends,” both composed in trochaic tetrameters.

Morgan has addressed in the title essay “Good Measure” his transitional explorations with syllabics in the context of “Grandma’s Bureau”: “The versification is the simplest I know, an eight-syllable line with no regular meter, no counting of stresses. It is almost-free verse broken into an arbitrary length, based vaguely on four-beat common meter: a kind of humble blank verse.” But the evolution to lines *with* regular meter, that is, the convergence to relatively short (typically seven to nine syllables to accommodate four beats) metrically charged lines, engenders poems celebratory and ecstatic, such as “Terroir” or, for that matter, the earlier “Holy Cussing,” “The Holy Laugh,” “Care,” “Natural Radio,” and “Time’s Music.”

The ecstasy is well complemented, if not heightened, in his lyric poems by the intensely metaphor- and simile-imbued, mature trademark Morgan lines, orchestrated by wordplay from clever, attentive diction (as in the implication of “mote,” appropriately complicating and enriching the context, in “motet” in “Natural Radio”), often through the use of subtle puns (the spirited “effervesce,” for example, both scientific and emotive, in “Time’s Music”), that infuses poems with riddle-like qualities – all transported by the routine, accelerating enjambment (particularly effectively in lines ending in verbs, such as “chant,” “expel,” “dance,” and “shout”) of already speedy, rhythmic lines and by the resonances of rhymes and slant rhymes (“pant,” “chant,” and “haunt”; “stung” and “tongues”; “chatter” and “matter”; “thick” and “flick”), alliterations (“choo-chooing chant”), consonances (“chatter” and “auroras”; “matter” and “motet”), assonances (“tongues” and “stun”), and repetition (“dance / the holy dance and shout the shout / but sometimes laugh the holy laugh”). Even poems with sobering themes, such as “Church Dust,” embody these rhetorical flourishes (as in the two iambic lines, “The salts and silts of human hope / and human sweat and human mourning,” not to mention “forgotten sermons”; “floor,” “altar,” and “shiver”; and “shiver” and “shows”), which make them immensely readable, delightful, and memorable.

Morgan’s tendency to describe and define often encompasses process (“Cleaning Off the Cemetery” in *Orchard Country*; “Moving the Bees” in *Sigodlin*; “Sharpening a Saw” and honey harvesting, the latter by way of the georgic “Honey,” in *Topsoil Road*; “Clogging” and “Singing to Make Butter Come” in *October Crossing*) and method (*Orchard Country*’s “Harrow,” *Sigodlin*’s “Hayfield”) through poems that focus not only on doing something or making something but also on changing something into something else with a memory of its origins. In “Terroir,” wine betrays its terrestrial roots. *Topsoil Road*’s “The Grain of Sound” begins with the speaker explaining a banjo maker’s practice of hitting the barks of trees to find the best wood for the instrument (“A hickory makes the brightest sound; / the poplar has a mellow ease”), which is then defined (“A banjo has a shining shiver. / . . . the face / of banjo is a drum of hide / of cow, or cat, or even skunk”); then, in an incantatory, hypnotic, monosyllabically rich sentence that integrates performance and provenance,

The hide will magnify the note,
 the sad of honest pain, the chill
 blood song, lament, confession, haunt,
 as tree will sing again from root
 and vein and sap and twig in wind.

Similarly, in "History's Madrigal," also from *Topsoil Road*, fiddle and dulcimer makers seek out old wood for their instruments because (in a sentence nineteen lines in length) "the older wood has sweeter, more / mellow sounds, makes truer and deeper / music," "as if the walnut or / cherry, cedar or maple, as / it aged, stored up the knowledge of / passing seasons, the cold and thaw, / whine of storm, bird call and love / moan, news of wars and mourning, in / its fibers, in the sparkling grain," to be evoked "decades and generations" later.

The transformations from trees to musical instrument parallel the one in "Atomic Age," where, however ecologically destructive the depletion of the soil, it is reshaped as structures of modern cities and suburbs. "Old stone to new building," wrote T. S. Eliot, an influence on Morgan, "old timber to new fires" ("Burnt Norton"). All matter, organic and inorganic, tends in Morgan's poems to corroborate the laws, from physics, of conservation of mass and energy. In *Orchard Country's* "Nail Bag," as another illustration, the poet observes how after a patch of land had been exploited to its potential, "the soil / bleached and threadbare," the farmers, before moving on, burned down the barn for its nails; then, after clearing the next patch of lush land, used the nails ("blacksmithed chromosomes / that link distant generations") to "summon / wilderness into new structure."

Morgan's impulse to resuscitate his near and dear ones and assemble them in his volumes can be seen as a manifestation of the same dynamic that informs poems of process and method and transformation. In "Singing to Make Butter Come," once the milk has been appropriately coaxed, "soon the bits appear," like the departed returning in flesh from the spirit world, "like flakes out of the depths and more / rise like the dead at resurrection, join / their lips and soaring bodies in the light / to form . . . / a sweet and firm and perfect gathering."

Following *Red Owl*, the volume after which Morgan's composi-

tion significantly changed, “I found I was able to incorporate narratives and history, folktales and science, monologue and traditional forms into my writing,” he said to Booker. “I could write poems longer than a page, and integrate more levels of language and experience.” Longer, narrative poems underlie *Trunk & Thicket* and *Groundwork*, the volumes that follow *Land Diving*, which follows *Red Owl*. In subsequent volumes, such poems are often elegiac. “The Years Ahead” has fifty-five lines; “Chant Royale” has sixty lines; “The Road from Elmira” has eighty lines; and “Uncle Robert” has ninety lines.

Morgan’s newfound expansiveness starts to embrace the expansiveness of the nation and its people. Influenced by pioneering explorers and chroniclers of the continent – “Among my favorite writers are Bartram, Wilson, Audubon, Michaux, Lewis and Clark” (“The Cubist of Memory”) – Morgan’s kindred extend beyond his blood relatives as his poems start to honor those who share his Welsh and his Appalachian, southern, and American inheritances. In *Green River’s* “We Are the Dream of Jefferson,” “The great Welshman, where he lies in / his blue ridge dreams our continuing.” Around his grave in the vicinity of the Blue Ridge Mountains of the Appalachian range – where, prefiguring Whitman (“I am large, I contain multitudes”), the founding father “creates through / the text of his thought . . . / the multiple and possible” – “the pasture hills roll / on to highway and crowded mall, / city and refinery, slum and / harbor, to the Rockies, to space.” Morgan invokes Thomas Wolfe in “Legends,” “Ancient Talk,” and *Orchard Country’s* “Looking Homeward,” in the first of these, mirroring “Jefferson,” through the novelist’s grave (“From the ghostly page of stone script / spills a thread of foxfire language” across America).

Morgan’s catapulting references to his Welsh roots can be seen as an extension of his summoning of his immediate family. In his first volume, in a sequence, “Zirconia,” following “Dream,” the poet observes in the somewhat cryptic lyric “Awakening” that “As far back as Wales / my family farmed the red clay hills of fear.” Conversely, in Scotland, far from home but close to his ancestral roots, he notes in *Sigodlin’s* “Hawthornden Castle” “the line of distant blue hills / sad as the Carolina mountains.”

In *Terroir’s* “Go Gentle,” an elegy that recalls his father dying

("No greater horror could / be thought than witnessing a loved / one angry and in fear scream out / and hopelessly resist, deny / the step into a mystery"), Morgan evokes Dylan Thomas (by first name even) to challenge the legitimacy of poetry:

That Dylan's powerful poem thrills
those far from any scene of death
can't be denied, and proves as truth
Plato's contention that verse lies,
and mostly feeds our vanities.

"Go Gentle," like "Cowbedding," has a first-person speaker, who, to great effect, speaks plainly. The poem begins

Was only when I watched my dad
approach his end I understood
how little Dylan Thomas knew
of death and dying . . .

Terroir in fact opens with a first-person elegy, the prefatory "In Memory of William Matthews," dedicated to Morgan's poet friend and colleague:

. . . Your death keeps on
astounding me with jolts of sadness,
as I think I'll never hear your voice
again . . .

The poem's pattern and tone resemble those of "The River Merchant's Wife"; it ends, like Pound's poem, suggesting the possibility, and in anticipation, of another encounter: "Send / no flower, bub, but maybe some / good claret might not be unwelcome."

Besides Jefferson, Wolfe, Thomas, and Matthews, Morgan's extended family, elegized or recalled in his poems, includes Horace Kephart (*Orchard Country's* "Horace Kephart"), Audubon, Sidney Lanier, and Elisha Mitchell ("Audubon's Flute," "Sidney Lanier Dies at Tryon 1881," and "The Body of Elisha Mitchell," respectively, from *Sigodlin*), and Attakullakulla (*Topsoil Road's* "Attakullakulla Goes to London"). Their treatment, like the elegies for members of his immediate family, was enabled by the same influences.

Referring probably to the early and mid-1970s (*Land Diving* was published in 1976), Morgan recounts to Booker that “it was just sheer good luck that a number of things came together for me around that time, from my reading of Smart’s ‘Jubilate Agno,’ and discovering the rich textures of Geoffrey Hill’s poetry, and beginning to fumble around with my own memories and childhood, with stories my grandfather and father had told, and a new coming to terms with the rhetoric of the New Testament.” These influences have followed Morgan into the present, not only in the use of “narratives and history,” but also with regard to form and rhetoric. “On first reading any of Hill’s poems,” wrote Morgan in “The Reign of King Stork,” a 1976 essay on the poet’s early work (in the journal *Parnassus*), “one is struck by his fresh and functional use of forms, and by the almost incredibly dense connotative textures.”

Morgan’s poetry about his family, immediate and extended, could be argued to be operating under the auspices of part V of Hill’s “Genesis” (by way of Christopher Smart’s riffing on the Bible):

By blood we live, the hot, the cold,
To ravage and redeem the world:
There is no bloodless myth will hold.

Morgan’s “Family Bible” rhetorically mirrors Hill’s lyric (in which *blood* is used four times in five consecutive lines), though, in the larger scheme of things, the “no bloodless” connotes as much the blood-forged family – the likes of Great-grandfather Pace and Uncle Robert, whom the poet, in the process of recalling, mythologizes – as it does the spilled blood of the continental settlement of the New World: “the fifth day,” Hill concludes part IV of his “Genesis,” “I turned again / To flesh and blood and the blood’s pain.”

Despite his admiration of the early Hill’s formal dexterity and dense allusion, beyond its intersection with “Genesis,” Morgan’s work proceeds in a direction orthogonal to Hill’s. Morgan directs his poems toward elucidating rather than obfuscating idiom.

The poems in *Dark Energy*, loosely organized by Morgan’s pre-occupations, reflect the durability of his interests and his thematic consistency. In the first section they invoke an Arcadian past as

they look toward an ecologically endangered future; the second section comprises personal poems, many of them elegies, recalling Morgan's childhood and family; the final, fourth section is laced with poems informed by science.

The subtext of the third section is vanity ("beneath the stars' indifference," as in "Chance"). In "Clockwork," "The seconds count off yet another year / Advancing toward infinity, which we / will never see but still can contemplate, / inside the clockwork of creation / in steady progress toward oblivion."

Neither devoid of joy ("Be Drunk") nor stripped of the promise of another sunrise or another year, the images of isolation render this section, and, in turn, the volume, tragic, a document testifying, despite earth's enduring beauty, to an unfortunate milestone in our "steady progress toward oblivion." "All wait the grime" in "New Year," "the wound, the signature of time."

Embedded in this section is a self-elegy, the ironically titled "Living Tree." It follows somewhat the theorem pattern of Morgan's early approach. Its long concluding sentence, preceded by three short ones, states, "I like to think / that when I'm gone the chemicals / and yes the spirit that was me / might be . . . / . . . raised with sap through capillaries / into an upright, fragrant trunk, . . ."

. . . to
 the sunlight for a century
 or more, in wood repelling rot
 and standing tall with monuments
 and statues.

Morgan's poetry continues the important "living" tradition rooted in Hesiod and Theocritus, inherited by way of Virgil; the Romantics Blake, John Clare, Shelley, and Wordsworth; and Frost. "Living Tree," a pastoral as much as an elegy, and as much an elegy as a paean to earth's regenerative potential – "to decay and growth, incorporating human compost in fertile progression" – embodies Morgan's peculiar conceits: the natural, the scientific ("capillaries"), and the metaphysical coexist in the lines ("the chemicals / and yes the spirit . . . / might be searched out by subtle roots"). But there is also something novel in this reticent poet's making himself the instrument of his poem: the single-minded artist who

early on resisted the “I” now entertains it in the most personal of contexts.

“Living Tree” (“that’s pointing toward infinity” in the poem’s conclusion) communicates the poet’s wish not to be forgotten, to be indefinitely (“for a century / or more”), even eternally, recollected. Horace’s first ode concludes (associating, like Morgan’s “Mound Builders,” the afterlife with celestial stars), in David Ferry’s translation,

The cool sequestered grove in which I play
For nymphs and satyrs dancing to my music

Is where I am set apart from other men –

.

But if you say I am truly among the poets,

Then my exalted head will knock against the stars.

In his characteristically unassuming manner, admitting nature as his ambassador, Morgan’s lines resound with the same profound ambition as the classical poet’s.