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The Whittrick Play of *No Nothing*:
Alan Spence, Edwin Morgan,
and Indra's Net

ABSTRACT

The article will attempt a reading of Alan Spence's play *No Nothing* (2015). Special attention will be given to the issue of literal and metaphorical space(s), a peculiar, liminal setting of the play, and the ways it determines the flyting between the two characters, two iconic Glaswegians: Edwin Morgan and Jimmy Reid. It seems that in this theatrical space history, politics and poetry inter-are. We may notice how two completely different masters of speech (a poet and a trade union leader) exchange their views on life, how they reflect upon the meaning of their achievements, and how they find a space of convergence in their affirmation of life. As their flyting is "about life, the Universe and everything—from Glasgow to Infinity and beyond," the article will also address the space of dialogue between Spence's and Morgan's poetry. The metaphor of Indra's net will serve as a useful tool in exploring spatial dimensions of the play and the issue of interconnectedness.

Keywords: Alan Spence, Edwin Morgan, dialogicality, trickster play, Indra's net.

*Beautiful is thy wristlet, decked with stars and cunningly wrought
with myriad-coloured jewels.*
(Tagore 73)

*To know the spirit of a place is to realize that you are a part of a part
and that the whole is made up of parts, each of which is whole.
You start with the part you are whole in.*
(Snyder 38)

A SUNBURST OF HOPE AND POSSIBILITY

190

Set in a kind of afterlife, in a space of betwixt and between, the 2015 play *No Nothing* by Alan Spence is a homage to two great Glaswegians: the first Makar of modern times, Edwin Morgan, and trade unionist (leader of the “work-in” on the Clyde Shipyards) and parliamentarian Jimmy Reid. Morgan and Reid died within a couple of days of each other, and as Joyce McMillan notices, “it seemed like an odd synchronicity, the passing of two key figures in a great generation who had worked all their lives—through art and politics—to create a new Scotland for the 21st century, passionate, confident, outward-looking, and eloquent” (“On *No Nothing* at Oran Mor, Glasgow”). In her review of *No Nothing*, she says that Spence “seeks to capture that oddness” in his play, set in “some post-death limbo where Reid and Morgan meet and talk” (“On *No Nothing* at Oran Mor, Glasgow”). In an interview published on YouTube on 20 April 2015 (the day of the first staging of the play at Oran Mor, Glasgow), Spence himself admits that even though Morgan and Reid did not necessarily meet in real life, they are having a conversation “in the worlds between” (“No Nothing”).

The blurb on the cover introduces the play as “a flying about life, the Universe and everything—from Glasgow to Infinity and beyond (with meditations on post-referendum Scotland” (*No Nothing*), which immediately places us in the context of Morgan’s immanent poetics, and the way Spence sums up his master’s importance in the article “Edwin Morgan: A Sunburst of Possibility Amid the Grey” published on 22 August 2010, a few days after Morgan’s death: “In grey postwar Glasgow, his work was a sunburst of hope and possibility. He wrote about the world we inhabited, but placed it in a global, even a universal, context—*From Glasgow to Saturn*.”

In a presentation he gave at a *Scottish Left Review* event at the Edinburgh Festival in 2002, Morgan himself addresses the issue of the link between the poetic and the political. He speaks of the 1960s, the 1979 referendum, and its failure to deliver a Scottish assembly; then he moves on to discuss his *Sonnets from Scotland*:

There has always been argument about whether cultural change should precede, accompany, or follow political change. In this case, the outburst of good writing in the 1980s (which spilled over into the 1990s) clearly presaged the 1997 referendum with its overwhelming endorsement of a Scottish Parliament. Looking back now, I can see how my own book *Sonnets from Scotland* (1984), which began as a sort of defiant non-acceptance of the failed referendum, fits into an evolving pattern of Scottish culture as wide-ranging, risk-taking, internationally aware. Although it was in a sense a history of Scotland, an alternative history, I gave it a science-fiction setting, with mysterious visitors to the earth commenting on events and experiences in an oblique way, as in the poem called "The Coin":

We brushed the dirt off, held it to the light.
The obverse showed us *Scotland*, and the head
of a red deer; the antler-glint had fled
but the fine cut could still be felt. All right:
we turned it over, read easily *One Pound*,
but then the shock of Latin, like a gloss,
Respublica Scotorum, sent across
such ages as we guessed but never found
at the worn edge where once the date had been
and where as many fingers had gripped hard
as hopes their silent race had lost or gained.
The marshy scurf crept up to our machine,
sucked at our boots. Yet nothing seemed ill-starred.
And least of all the realm the coin contained. ("Scottish Fiction")

Morgan juxtaposes his sonnet with a poem by Tom Leonard which in his view touches upon the same issue. Quotes from Morgan's *Sonnets* will reappear throughout *No Nothing*, and it is no surprise that Leonard's poem also features in the play:

Scotland has become an independent socialist republic.
At last.
Eh?
You pinch yourself.
Jesus Christ. You've slept in again! (Morgan; Spence, *No Nothing* 15)

The number of quotes from and allusions to *Sonnets from Scotland* in *No Nothing* might point to surprising, and quite disturbing, parallels between 1979 and 2014, and the disappointment mixed with frustration following the referendum of 2014 (it would be difficult to imagine the shock on the part of Morgan and Reid if they had learned about the Scottish people's choice). Still, 51 sonnets in Morgan's collection also show what

could be done, “depicting the country from a number of perspectives including the prehistoric, the Neolithic, the biblical, the Enlightenment, the Victorian and the futuristic” (McGuire and Nicholson 101). Morgan’s futuristic vision is something that Spence decides to explore dialogically, touching firstly upon Makar’s fascination with Mayakovsky, socialism (reflected in his poem on Glasgow titled “Clydegrad”), and his playful poems such as “Outward Bound” in which Scotland is literally moving into new spaces (Bell 117). Passages from *Sonnets from Scotland* are often juxtaposed with those from *The Second Life* (1968), especially “The Flowers of Scotland,” “Caledonian Antisizygy,” which stress the idea of Scotland as a “place divided against itself” (Spence, *No Nothing* 17), and “The Second Life,” in which, as MacGuire and Nicholson notice, Morgan “invites us to consider the past as not always something to be embraced and held close, but also as a skin to be shed”; they add that the poem “calls the city and its inhabitants forward, out of the darkness and into the light of the here and now” (117):

The caked layers of grime
 Grow warm, like homely coats.
 But yet they will be dislodged
 And men will still be warm.
 The old coats are discarded.
 The old ice is loosed.
 The old seeds are awake.

Slip out of darkness, it is time. (Morgan, *Collected Poems* 181)

Spence seems to follow his poetic master, and in his play he stresses the need to go beyond limitations, to challenge the status quo; he affirms the power of “hope and possibility” in the world we inhabit, and the importance of (cross-cultural) dialogue, of vision, adventure, invention, action and discovery, but also points to solidarity and oneness; it is also worth noticing how the concept of interbeing informs his writing. In my article I will try to discuss these issues, but I will also point to an intriguing multilevel dialogue that *No Nothing* initiates with Morgan’s *The Whittrick: A Poem in Eight Dialogues* (1961, first published as a whole in 1973); it could be argued that the space of dialogue and the potential to pose metaphysical questions (obviously without providing answers) is the feature that the two texts have in common. My reading of the play will emphasize the dialogical nature of the relationship between the two texts.

“AND THEY BLETHER AND BANTER, FLYTE AND PHILOSOPHISE,”
OR *THE WHITTRICK*

The Whittrick: A Poem in Eight Dialogues was one of Morgan's earliest books of poetry; it was a trickster poem, both in the sense of containing trickster figure, and as an example of trickster discourse. Morgan recalls that in his childhood he would often hear the Scottish phrase: “as quick as a whittrick,” where whittrick is understood as a weasel moving so quickly you don't know whether you've seen it or not (McGonigal 16). In a letter to Erica Marx, Morgan explains what that sequence signifies to him:

The Whittrick in general stands for truth or reality, but seen especially under its fleeting or revolutionary aspect, which is in any case how it impresses itself in most people's mind (say when they fall in love or have something happen to them which they cannot forget), and also how it tends to appear in the arts, each work of art being like a “flash” of something passing. (Glasgow University Special Collections Acc 4574/Box 26)

The Whittrick and its eight dialogues includes strange encounters from the history of culture, literature and history (in the order of appearance): MacDiarmid and Joyce, Bosch and Faust, King Shahriyar and Queen Shahrazad, Emily and Charlotte Brontë, Marilyn Monroe and Galina Ulanova, Lady Seaforth and The Brahan Seer (Conneach Odhar), Zen master Hakuin and the playwright Chikamatsu, Dr Grey Walter (the author of the 1953 *The Living Brain*) and Jean Cocteau. In Robert Crawford's view, *The Whittrick* celebrates “an elusive, mercurial essence imagined in Scots as the ‘whittrick’ or the weasel—the spirit of creativity” (13). For him, each of the poem's dialogues can be seen as a temporal and geographical translation of the preceding dialogue (13). But one might equally see the subsequent dialogues as peculiar examples of palimpsests where the spaces of other texts (of culture) merge, and where their original meanings/structures become de-/re-constructed (Kocot 129).

Spence's *No Nothing* seems to be a “flyting” homage to Morgan and Reid. Just like in *The Whittrick*, the two characters engage in a lively conversation about the meaning of life, space and time, the real and imagined past, present and future(s). At some point, they even make a brief reference to *The Whittrick*—Eddie says that in the poem the characters “blether and banter, flyte and philosophise” (Spence, *No Nothing* 51), and this is precisely what happens in *No Nothing*. Let us recall this scene. When Jimmy asks about the actions of the trickster, Eddie responds by seeking connection between Morgan's poem and the here-and-now of the play:

JIMMY And where does the Whittrick come in? Fit about the futrick?
 EDDIE It flits in and out of the dialogues. It's truth, or reality, call it what you will. But glimpsed, in flashes—there a moment, not there. Vivid and instant, then gone, a bright flash of vitality and unexpectedness, . . . revolutionary.
 JIMMY A flash, then gone.
 EDDIE And that's us, done. (Spence, *No Nothing* 51)

In *The Whittrick*, the trickster manifests itself on three levels: as a character endowed with fluid identity, as a narrative structure (trickster-relation, trickster-timespace), and as an incessant movement/process (or processuality, both on the level of plot and narration). Those three areas of the trickster's actualization create "trickster aesthetics," which manifest themselves by merging the fictional worlds and exploring their boundaries, by intertextuality and intratextuality, by dialogicality, multiperspectivity, and fluidity of meaning (Kocot 129). In *No Nothing*, we might speak of a trickster dialogical narrative structure (trickster-relation, trickster-timespace), and an incessant process and/or processuality, both on the level of plot and rhizomatic narration. As in Morgan's sequence, the lack of linear links between subsequent threads of narration is substituted here with an arrangement based on associative thinking. In my reading of Spence's drama, special attention will be given to the issue of literal and metaphorical space(s), a peculiar, liminal setting of the play, and the ways it determines the "whittrick" (rhizomatic in nature) flyting between the two characters; however, the space of dialogue between the poetic and political, and between Spence's and Morgan's poetry will also be addressed. The metaphor of Indra's net, introduced in the latter part of the article, will serve as an alternative but useful tool in exploring philosophical dimensions of the play and the issue of interconnectedness and interbeing.

THE PLAY. NOWHERE. NOW HERE

The title of the play, *No Nothing*, seems to be the first of many riddles. The game of finding the answer to the question of what "nothing" might relate to begins on page one and, interestingly enough, it actually continues beyond the last page of the play, accompanied by the music of The Beatles' "Here, There and Everywhere." For Kevin McMonagle (who played Eddie in the staging of the play at Oran Mor), the title relates to the setting of the play: "The play is called *No Nothing* for a reason, and that's the conceit," he notes. "It's about the idea when we leave this life there is nothing . . . or is there?" (Beacom). In his view, the characters didn't have a particularly strong belief in the afterlife, but "that makes for an even more interesting

discussion about why they are there" (Beacom). If we think about the setting of the play, the question of whether it is a literal space/place, or a metaphorical space/place will depend on the individual. Cockburn sees it as a "timeless limbo, a way-station en route to an afterlife," Beacom writes that the characters meet "on the other side," McMillan uses the phrase "post-death limbo" ("On *No Nothing* at Oran Mor, Glasgow"). Perhaps all options are possible, depending on the reader? In my view, we are entering a peculiar, liminal space, the space of in-between, or as Victor Turner would put it, the space of "betwixt and between," the abode of the trickster. The figure of trickster seems quite an obvious reference: while the characters of Spence's drama engage in (let us return to the cover again) "a flyting about life, the Universe and everything—from Glasgow to Infinity and beyond," we are moving in a trickster-like manner between and through the cultural and historical narratives. All these threads are interwoven with numerous intertextual literary references to Morgan's but also Spence's poems. The "no nothing" then might be interpreted as a game with one of the keywords in Morgan's poetry.

Just like in *The Whittrick*, the language of the two masters of speech in *No Nothing* is idiosyncratic, embedded as it were in their own frameworks of historical and/or literary narration. In the interview, Spence juxtaposes Morgan, who "used poetry like a magician, like a shaman," with Reid, the great orator who used language to move people. These two very distinct ways to stir and move people, the two different uses of language come together in the form of a flyting which foregrounds and celebrates the idea of tricksterism, playful transgression of limits and limitations of language. Spence initiates the game of writing-through in that he re-writes Morgan's poems and Reid's speeches.

One might argue that it is not accidental that the drama begins with a playful variation on one of the most known of Morgan's and Reid's quotes:

EDDIE Nothing . . . Nothing is not . . . Nothing is not giving . . . Nothing
is not giving messages.
JIMMY Not a damn thing.
EDDIE Nothing.
JIMMY No hooliganism. No vandalism. No bevvyng. (*Startled,*
remembering). I said that!
EDDIE You did. Memorably.
JIMMY Where the hell are we?
EDDIE Not hell, I don't think. Not yet. (Spence, *No Nothing* 1)

Even though Reid's admonition from his famous Upper Clyde Shipbuilders work-in speech "There will be no hooliganism. There will be

no vandalism. There will be no bevvying . . . because the world is watching us,” and Morgan’s poetic credo “Nothing is not giving messages” are from two apparently opposite realms of speech, it could be argued that, quite surprisingly, they both point to the issue of mindful being in the world, of being responsive to the surrounding reality of the here-and-now. Let us have a look at the original quote from Morgan which comes from the interview with Robert Crawford. It is worth noting here that the motif of receiving messages introduced in the first scene will resurface, in various forms, throughout the play.

196

Who knows what an apple thinks! We don’t really know—it doesn’t give signs of thinking, but because we don’t get signs of what an animal or a plant or a fruit is really thinking, I don’t think we are entitled to just switch off and say it’s not feeling or thinking. I like the idea particularly that we’re surrounded by messages that we perhaps ought to be trying to interpret. I remember in “The Starling in George Square” I brought in the bit about “Someday we’ll decipher that sweet frenzied whistling,” which in a sense I suppose I believed actually—although it seems just a fantastic idea.

Messages from the past and future also?

I think probably also. Yes, yes, yes. The writer or the poet being in *receipt*, if you like, of messages, just like people listening for stars’ messages, astronomers listening for that. I think the writer too does that kind of thing. He does his best. He tries to decode, if you like, the messages that he thinks he gets from everything that surrounds him. Nothing is not giving messages, I think. (Morgan, *Nothing Not Giving Messages* 131)

In his “Morgan’s Words,” partly devoted to “Message Clear,” W. N. Herbert emphasizes that Morgan’s work as a whole “exhibits a concern to find those messages in things which have been overlooked because of the status of those things” (73); Herbert wants to see Morgan’s poetic insight as something Scottish, but also “something of the kabbalist” (73). The issue of messages and various ways of receiving them is certainly one of the themes explored in *No Nothing*. Near the end of the play, Reid and Morgan discuss one of the most well-known of Morgan’s concrete poems, “Message Clear.” Despite its title (which can read as “message received,” “message checked”), the poem is not that easy to grasp, and quite interestingly, it provokes various, apparently divergent readings. In Spence’s play, Morgan speaks of his emergent poem, and describes his experiment as “[p]laying with form. But more than that. Unscrambling. Breaking the code. The code being language”:

EDDIE Took the line *I am the resurrection and the life* . . . Saw what other words and phrases were in there, hidden. Like, *I am here* . . . *I act* . . . *I run* . . . And they flow down the page and come together in the original line, the starting point.

JIMMY Rearrange the following into a well-known phrase or saying . . .

EDDIE It's easy to be reductive.

JIMMY It just all sounds a bit technical, you know. Clinical. Analytical. And just, ever so slightly up itself.

EDDIE I know all that. But when I wrote it, it felt *given* . . . I was on the bus, on the way home from Robroyston Hospital where my father was dying. . . . And the words just came. I saw them, emerging, flowing together into that one line, that mantra. I am the resurrection and the life. (Spence, *No Nothing* 47).

Even if a given text, be it a concrete or science-fiction poem, seems a bit technical, or analytical, we must never forget that at the core of Morgan's writing there is a vibrant radiance that speaks directly to the heart, but the message is clear only when our hearts are ready to welcome the beams. In my view, part of the game of reading *No Nothing* is about being in *receipt*, being able to take a lateral perspective of looking at the dialogues between Eddie and Jimmy, being responsive to the spaces of convergence between the messages of two seemingly distant figures. In his review, Paul F. Cockburn seems to point to the same issue, his focus being on the transformative, creative power of words; for him, it is clear that Spence "firmly believes that both men considered ideas—and 'the right words' used to express them—as very important." "Of course," he adds

Spence can't resist playing with the idea that Reid might slightly resent having to be a man of the people on the front line of social and class struggle while Morgan sat safe and comfortable in his poetic ivory tower, but it soon becomes clear that both men understand the need for the other in terms of imagining—and subsequently creating—a different, better future. (Cockburn)

At some point, Reid suggests that "some things are no laughing matter. But mostly, humour's a hell of a weapon," and after a little bit of a flyting between the two he tells a joke about a landlord and a poacher, to which Morgan responds: "You missed your calling. Could have made a career doing stand up" (Spence, *No Nothing* 11). The underlying sarcasm of their exchanges often turns into a playful affirmation of the other.

EDDIE Worked the crowd.

JIMMY Bit of the old rhetoric goes a long way.

EDDIE For the right cause. Can be a force for the good.

- JIMMY Make folk stop and think. (*He stops and thinks, looks at his hands, turns to E.*) I don't think I was ever glib. (*momentarily unsure*) Was I?
- EDDIE Manipulative maybe. Persuasive.
- JIMMY Like a poet?
- EDDIE (*laughs*) Like a poet!
- JIMMY My Rat Race speech was a beauty.
- EDDIE It was.
- JIMMY (*quotes himself, from memory, addressing audience*) A rat race is for rats. We're not rats. We're humans. Reject the insidious pressures that would blunt your critical faculties to all that is happening around you, that would caution silence in the face of injustice lest you jeopardise your chances of self-advancement. This is how it starts, and before you know where you are, you're a fully paid-up member of the rat-pack. (*Pauses, looks round*) The price is too high. It entails the loss of your dignity and human spirit. "What doth it profit a man if he gain the whole world and suffer the loss of his soul?"
- EDDIE You were right up in your pulpit there, quoting scripture.
- JIMMY They were the right words. The best words.
- EDDIE It was good. And heartfelt.
- JIMMY It was printed verbatim in the *New York Times*.
- EDDIE I can understand why.
- JIMMY They called it the great speech since the Gettysburg Address.
- EDDIE (*quotes*) Government of the people, by the people, for the people.
- JIMMY Now there's something to work for, eh? (*Spence, No Nothing 12–13*)

This is one of the passages where Spence suggests that Reid was not only a brilliant trade unionist and orator, but also, in a way, a poet, a preacher, and a man of wisdom; someone who believed that dignity and human spirit were more important than succumbing to the rules of the rat race. And similarly to Lincoln's *Gettysburg Address*, delivered on the site of one of the bloodiest battles of the Civil War, Reid's speech, delivered upon his election as Rector of Glasgow University, marked an important moment in the fight for the students' minds. Addressing the students of Glasgow University, Reid says:

Government by the people for the people becomes meaningless unless it includes major economic decision-making by the people for the people. This is not simply an economic matter. In essence it is an ethical and moral question, for whoever takes the important economic decisions in society *ipso facto* determines the social priorities of that society. (Reid 8)

Spence also stresses that aspect in his talk at the Scottish Parliament which I will discuss in the latter part of the article.

But let us come back to the beginning and see how the two negotiate a better future, and how they define their here-and-now.

JIMMY So here we are.

EDDIE Indeed.

JIMMY Eh. . . where exactly?

EDDIE There is no other life and this is it.

JIMMY This is it. (Spence, *No Nothing* 2)

The repeated phrase “this is it” might remind us of one of Spence’s *Glasgow Zen* poems, particularly the one entitled “*On the suchness of things*”

AYE, THIS IS IT

THIS IS THE THING (Spence, *Glasgow Zen* 1)

This could be seen as the first suggestion that we might be entering an intertextual space. And if we take a look at the two poems which precede it, then it becomes clear that my suggestion is not that far-fetched:

On the oneness of self and universe

IT’S AW WAN

TAE ME (Spence, *Glasgow Zen* 1)

*On the ultimate identity of
matter and spirit, form and void*

WHIT’S THE MATTER?

NU’THIN! (Spence, *Glasgow Zen* 2)

It is worth pointing out here that that the theme of *Glasgow Zen*: Voidness, Emptiness, nonduality, is given in English titles whereas the minimalistic, and at times dialogical, message of the poems is rendered in Glasgow speech. As Liz Niven aptly notices, the poems capture “the philosophical bent of much Glaswegian banter, the concise brevity of Glasgow speech, and the incisive wit often found in a passing street conversation” (134). The poems seem very light and simple, but their humour and their message result from the subtle and sophisticated connection of Glaswegian everyday speech and the philosophy of Zen, the philosophy of Emptiness (Skt. *Śūnyatā*) which refers specifically to the idea dependent origination, to the absence of inherent existence. The motif of “no nothing” might then also be understood as a game with the notion of Emptiness, or Void in the Buddhist sense. It should be noted here that in Zen philosophy attaining a realization of emptiness of inherent existence is key to liberation from suffering.

No Nothing seems a long variation on the theme of suchness of things and nothingness; the characters move swiftly from one motif to the other, through a kind of rhizome of associations. The motif of reaching a different level of existence in this strange nowhere land is linked with what Spence calls Morgan's credo: "The not quite nothing I praise it and I write it" from the poem "Fires"; in Spence's drama, it turns into "The not quite nothing. I sing it and I praise it":

EDDIE No ceremony.
 JIMMY What did you expect?
 EDDIE Nothing.
 JIMMY Like you said.
 EDDIE Either that or a ferryman, a porter at the gates.
 JIMMY Nope.
 EDDIE An angel with a sword of fire, barring our way.
 JIMMY Zilch. Nada. I just snuffed it and woke up here.
 EDDIE Came to yourself.
 JIMMY Myself, aye.
 EDDIE Me too.
 JIMMY Straight from the oven.
 EDDIE A roar . . . smoke . . . light . . . almost nothing.
 JIMMY (*Uncontrollable*) I must have blanked that bit.
 EDDIE (*Remembering, quoting himself*) The not quite nothing. I sing it
 and I praise it. (Spence, *No Nothing* 3)

As the characters try to make sense of where and when they are, another instance of peculiar intertextuality takes place.

EDDIE And here we are.
 JIMMY Here we are.
 EDDIE Some kind of way station. Halfway house.
 JIMMY Halfway to where?
 EDDIE Good question.
 JIMMY (*looks round and at audience*) I mean. We're not really in the
 70s, are we?
 EDDIE We're not really anywhere. No time no place.
 JIMMY Nowhere.
 EDDIE *Nowhere* can be read *Now Here*.
 JIMMY Is that one of your concrete poetry efforts?
 EDDIE Could be. (Spence, *No Nothing* 6)

Quite obviously, even though it "could be," that concrete poem is not written by Morgan. It is entitled "Touching the Void" (46) and it comes from Spence's *Glasgow Zen*. This time the reference to Zen Buddhism is very clear:

NOWHERE
NOW
HERE

For me, the poem is one of the key elements in the message of the whole play. While keeping with Morgan's concrete poetics, with all its visual clarity and apparent semantic simplicity, Spence brilliantly captures the importance of the here and now in the "nowhere" Eddie and Jimmy inhabit. It looks as if "now" and "here" were metaphorically "present," or better still inherent, in the emptiness of "nowhere," just like all the utterances were metaphorically and literally "hidden" in Jesus' "I am the resurrection and the life" in Morgan's "Message Clear." The importance of mindful being in the here-and-now is further emphasized (even italicized) in the fragment which follows:

JIMMY That's weird. I'm getting a kind of déjà vu.
EDDIE That's what it's like, being here.
JIMMY *Here*. That's the thing. You said we're outside time?
EDDIE I think so, yes.
JIMMY But when did we get our jotters?
EDDIE Sorry?
JIMMY When did we check out? Kick the bucket? Pass away?
EDDIE 2010.
JIMMY And it feels like we've been here about five minutes.
EDDIE That seems to be how it works. Time out there moves faster.
JIMMY So we've been here a wee while.
EDDIE A good few years.
JIMMY Feels like nothing.
EDDIE No time at all.
JIMMY And we can look back, like this. Rewind.
EDDIE And fast forward. Up to a point.
JIMMY The point being?
EDDIE Now, I suppose. Whatever *now* is out there.
JIMMY So no time travel into the future?
EDDIE Unless we want to imagine it. (Spence, *No Nothing* 33)

Interestingly, the relativity of time is juxtaposed here with the significance of the "now" understood as a potentiality to be realized, as a space for action. This motif is further explored in the scene where Eddie and Jimmy discuss the Japanese film tellingly titled *Afterlife*. The film characters are to choose a moment to cherish, and then they make a film of that moment, and that is where they live, "in that film, in that moment" (Spence, *No Nothing* 44). The story in the film makes them remember their moment to cherish. Jimmy is revisiting his glory days as one of the leaders in the Upper Clyde Shipbuilders dispute, "the rousing rhetoric of his famous speeches rolling

forth with pride and passion” (Brennan). He remembers selected sentences from his famous Upper Clyde Shipbuilders work-in speech (“There will be no bevvyng. . .”), and also the already quoted “rat-race speech” which he gave as Rector of the University of Glasgow and which was printed in full in the *New York Times* and described as “the greatest speech since President Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address”; but he eventually chooses the scene when he meets his future wife and asks her for a dance. Eddie affirms the choice of the moment and begins to search for “the moments when the light got in” (Spence, *No Nothing* 45). He then recalls a number of these, and as we read closely, we recognize the fragments of one of the most well-known and most cherished of Morgan’s love poems (“From a City Balcony,” “One Cigarette,” “When You Go,” “Strawberries”), where the emphasis is (gently) placed on the celebration of fleeting moments.

EDDIE The cigarette in the non-smoker’s tray.

That day in Glen Fruinn we jumped into the sun.

Or the darkening room, the new rain . . . turning, half asleep, to say
I love you.

Or yes, the sultry afternoon, the taste of strawberries. The blue
plates laid outside on the step. Summer lightning on the Kilpatrick
Hills. Let the storm wash the plates. (Spence, *No Nothing* 46)

The importance of love and living for the other will be further emphasized at the end of the play in the form of ‘The Beatles’ “Here, There and Everywhere” (which was also played at Morgan’s funeral). But one may wonder why Spence chooses these and not some other (for instance, socially engaged) poems. The answer may be found in Spence’s article on Morgan. Once again, we may note the importance of a complex relationship between the given moment, specific time and place, and the timeless, universal meaning it carries for the reader.

His love poems in particular ring in the heart as well as the mind—perfect little lyrics that resonate. This is all the more amazing since he revealed at the age of 70 that he was gay. It hadn’t been too hard to work out! But in a country where homosexuality was not decriminalised until 1980, he had to be circumspect. In fact, perhaps it was the fact that the poems were coded that gave them their extra charge and intensity. They are in the moment, the specific place and time, and yet they are transcendent, timeless, universal.

We may notice how Jimmy, slightly puzzled by Eddie’s emotional response, subtly asks him about his ultimate goal in life, and this in turn will lead us again to the realm of “nothing”:

JIMMY So when you get right down to it, it really is . . . really was . . . all about love?

EDDIE Nothing else.

JIMMY Nothing.

EDDIE Each one believing that love never dies.

Watching their eyes and hoping I'm always there . . .

JIMMY (*nods*) Aye.

EDDIE And the moment is eternal. (Spence, *No Nothing* 46)

Almost at the end of the play, we find a peculiar incantation of negations. The more negations Eddie and Jimmy create, the more positive, affirmative and celebratory messages they eventually discover. We move from the absolute No of “nay,” “never,” “the no of all nothing” to solidarity, oneness and Yes to life. Interestingly enough, these incantatory exchanges might make us wonder about the issue of interconnectedness and inter-being:

203

JIMMY No nay never. Never no more.

EDDIE The no of all nothing.

JIMMY No day no night.

EDDIE No past no present no future.

JIMMY No nothing.

EDDIE No nothing.

JIMMY No Reid.

EDDIE No Morgan.

JIMMY Amounting to what?

EDDIE Not a hill of beans.

JIMMY And yet.

EDDIE Notwithstanding.

JIMMY Nevertheless.

EDDIE We did what we could.

JIMMY We did what we did.

EDDIE Over and out.

JIMMY Over and out.

(*They look at each other. E. turns to the audience*)

EDDIE They do not move. That's the stage direction at the end of Godot.

JIMMY Again? Not my favourite play.

EDDIE There's a great line where Vladimir says, One of the thieves was saved. Then there's a wee pause, and he says, It's a reasonable percentage.

JIMMY But there's two of us.

EDDIE In it together, right?

JIMMY Right. Solidarity.

EDDIE Oneness.

JIMMY Yes.

EDDIE Yes.

E&J (*together*) Yes! (Spence, *No Nothing* 54–55)

INDRA'S NET?

Ever since my first reading of the play I have been fascinated by its title and the recurring theme of nothing, nothingness and emptiness, as well as the issue of the interconnectedness of things, the game of dynamic shifts of meaning, and switching from one narrative to the other. In my view, those familiar with Spence's writing might see the play as a processual meditation on the metaphor of Indra's net. In Buddhist philosophy, so important in Spence's writing and life, Indra's net is a metaphor for the interconnectedness of all reality. It could be argued that the net may serve as a tool for exploring the spatial and thematic dimensions of the play, and the issue of interconnectedness and inter-being, understood as the space of dialogue between Spence's and Morgan's poetry, as well as that between Morgan's poetry and precise moments of Scottish history. Indeed, history, politics and poetry inter-are in this liminal, theatrical space. We may notice how two completely different masters of speech (a trade union leader and a poet) meet and how they exchange views, how they see each other's achievements, how they reflect upon the meaning of their actions, and how they find a space of convergence in their affirmation of life, in saying "Yes!" to life. Significantly, all of this is manifested in the form of a constant, never-ending, dialogical creation and exchange of meaning:

EDDIE You saved the shipyards, you and the workforce.

JIMMY For a while.

EDDIE It was quite something.

JIMMY Shook things up. (*remembering*). They reckoned a quarter of Scotland's workforce downed tools to support us. 80,000 folk marched through Glasgow. It was glorious.

EDDIE I remember seeing it on the news.

JIMMY Made an impact, all over the world. Here, John Lennon and Yoko Ono sent us a bunch of red roses and a cheque for five thousand quid.

EDDIE Nice gesture.

JIMMY It was. It helped a lot. Especially the five grand!

EDDIE So not all hippies were a waste of space.

JIMMY Not at all. They'd been talking to Tariq Ali. They'd become quite politicised.

EDDIE Power to the people, right on.

JIMMY They did their bit. Advanced the struggle.

EDDIE For me the struggle was personal. And the personal *was* the political.

JIMMY It's always both.

EDDIE There was that hope, the stepping into the light. But being gay . . . it was dangerous. There was the threat of real violence. Or imprisonment. I could have lost my job. And then what? (Spence, *No Nothing* 21–22)

By association, the issue of homosexuality, with references to Morgan's famous "Glasgow Green," leads them to the theme of love, Ginsberg, and work (or creation) understood/practiced as a way to overcome despair:

JIMMY Lovestruck.

EDDIE Yes! And more. It was just knowing, being reassured, being told it was all right. (*laughs*) You know Ginsberg came to Glasgow in the 70s.

JIMMY Must have missed that.

EDDIE The old Third Eye Centre in Blythswood Square. The room's full of resolutely hetero male Scottish writers. And there's Ginsberg in his blue dungarees, and he plays a wee harmonium and sings. (*sings, tuneless*) Everybody's just a little . . . bit . . . homosexual, whether they like it or not . . . Everybody's just a little bit . . . homosexual, even though they almost forgot.

JIMMY Definitely missed that.

EDDIE But for me it was still unspoken. (*quotes*) So much is unspoken in the life of a man.

JIMMY The love that dare not speak its name.

EDDIE It had to be coded, encrypted. But to some folk it was clear enough. Some of the younger poets got it. So the words were out there, doing their work.

JIMMY Work.

EDDIE Ginsberg read another poem at that reading, an elegy for Jack Kerouac. (*recites*) So while I'm here I'll do the work. And what's the work? To ease the pain of living. Everything else, drunken dumbshow.

JIMMY A bit thin as a manifesto. But a good place to start.

EDDIE A credo. (Spence, *No Nothing* 22–23)

Various kinds of dialogism are visible in Spence's imagery building, in the structure of the play, and also in the philosophy that it inexplicitly makes references to. According to Bakhtin, the fundamental a priori of the dialogical approach is

that nothing *is* in itself. Existence is *sobytie sobytiya*, the event of co-being; it is a vast web of interconnections each and all of which are linked as participants in an event whose totality is so immense that no single one of us can ever know it. (qtd. in Holquist 40)

In his *Resonances of Emptiness: A Buddhist Inspiration for a Contemporary Psychotherapy* Gay Watson notes that Bakhtin's description might be that of a Buddhist notion of dependent origination. The idea of the relationship and interconnectedness, and the Buddhist doctrines of

dependent origination and emptiness, is most fully expressed in the school of Hua-yen Buddhism, with its concept-image of the net of Indra.

In his illuminating book entitled *Hua-yen Buddhism: The Jewel Net of Indra*, Francis H. Cook provides the following description, calling it the favourite Hua-yen method of exemplifying the manner in which things exist:

Far away in the heavenly abode of the great god Indra, there is a wonderful net which has been hung by some cunning artificer in such a manner that it stretches out infinitely in all directions. In accordance with the extravagant tastes of deities, the artificer has hung a single glittering jewel in each “eye” of the net, and since the net itself is infinite in dimension, the jewels are infinite in number. There hang the jewels, glittering like stars of the first magnitude, a wonderful sight to behold. If we now arbitrarily select one of these jewels for inspection and look closely at it, we will discover that in its polished surface there are reflected all the other jewels in the net, infinite in number. Not only that, but each of the jewels reflected in this one jewel is also reflecting all the other jewels, so that there is an infinite reflecting process occurring. The Hua-yen school has been fond of this image, because it symbolizes a cosmos in which there is an infinitely repeated interrelationship among all the members of the cosmos. This relationship is said to be one of simultaneous *mutual identity* and *mutual intercausality*. (2)

Robin Robertson makes an observation that the message of this image for us as individuals is that “each of us, through our own process of growth and transformation, affects everyone and everything” (7). I would like to follow his argument and quote one more passage from Cook’s *Hua-yen Buddhism*. In my view, it briefly sums up the life message of both Edwin Morgan and Jimmy Reid, and it certainly *reflects* the uplifting power of Spence’s writing: we are here and now for the other, we inter-are, we are one:

Someone once made the observation that one’s skin is not necessarily a boundary marking off the self from the not-self but rather that which brings one into contact with each other. Like Faraday’s electric charge which must be conceived as being everywhere, I am in some sense boundless, my being encompassing the farthest limits of the universe, touching and moving every atom in existence. The same is true of everything else. The interfusion, the sharing of destiny, is as infinite in scope as the reflections in the jewels of Indra’s net. When in a rare moment I manage painfully to rise above a petty individualism by knowing my true nature, I perceive that I dwell in the wondrous net of Indra, in this incredible network of interdependence. It is not just that “we are all in it” together. We all *are* it, rising and falling as one living body. (Cook 122)

WE LIVE IN HOPE

Commenting on the significance of the numerous quotes and quasi-quotes that we find in the play, McMillan notes that “the texture of the writing becomes increasingly powerful, as Spence hones and develops the two characters, and uses the two men’s own words to flesh out the meaning of their lives” (“On *No Nothing* at Oran Mor, Glasgow”). One could add that it is not only about the meaning of “their lives,” but the impact of their words (Morgan’s writing and Reid’s speeches) on the lives of those who gathered around them; in this sense, *No Nothing* might be seen as an affirmation of the transformative power of language, and the power of hope (as in the already quoted passage from Ginsberg’s “The Fall of America”). At the end of the play, we see how Morgan’s and Reid’s seemingly divergent narratives gradually converge and become one grand narrative of hope.

In his *Rectorial Address*, Reid re-affirms what he hopes to be the spirit of his address, namely the “affirmation of faith in humanity.” He says “[a]ll that is good in man’s heritage involves recognition of our common humanity, an unashamed acknowledgement that man is good by nature” (11), and he refers to Robert Burns’s poem “Why Should We Idly Waste Our Prime. . .” which in his view expresses this affirmation:

The golden age, we’ll then revive, each man shall be a brother,
In harmony we all shall live and till the earth together,
In virtue trained, enlightened youth shall move each fellow creature,
And time shall surely prove the truth that man is good by nature. (qtd
in Reid 12)

Reid concludes his speech by saying: “[i]t’s my belief that all the factors to make a practical reality of such a world are maturing now. I would like to think that our generation took mankind some way along the road towards this goal. It’s a goal worth fighting for” (12).

The significance of the message of hope is emphasized in the preface to the play which is a reprint of McMillan’s article dated 21 August 2010, published a few days after Reid’s and Morgan’s death:

And if there is one thing these two men had in common—apart from a Glasgow upbringing, a love of learning and a deep sense of belonging to the ordinary people of Scotland—it is their humour, their kindness, and their deep and optimistic belief that humankind, at heart, tends towards good rather than evil.

Like many of the finest men and women of their generation—Morgan was born in 1920, and Reid in 1932—they tended to express that belief

and hope through a kind of socialism that is out of fashion today; you will travel a long way, now, before you will find an MP, an MSP or a trade union leader who talks in public about a universal “right to work,” as Jimmy Reid did in his legendary rectorial address, given at Glasgow University in 1972.

The message of hope in the play was also stressed by Spence himself in his “Time for Reflection” talk at the Scottish Parliament on 25 October 2016. In it, he addresses one of the final scenes of *No Nothing*, where the two characters emphasize the power of hope in their philosophies of being for the other, in their desire to affirm hope and its power to change the status quo: “We did what we could,” “We did what we did,” “You live in hope,” “We lived in hope” (Spence 48). But more importantly, Spence goes on to link the importance of hope in the play in the context of the work of the present government: “If this building and your work here are about anything, they are about hope, a sense of possibility . . . a belief that we can work towards a better world” (Spence, “Time for Reflection”). And this is where he introduces the figure of his teacher, Sri Chinmoy, a poet, a philosopher, a musician, and most of all a world-renowned Peace Visionary, and the way he praised the qualities he saw manifest in Scotland: invention, action, discovery. We can obviously link these qualities with Morgan and Reid, as they seem to epitomize all three of them. And quite naturally we can link the qualities with the positive message of hope in the play. In her article “Legacy of our Lost Titans is their Belief in Human Worth,” McMillan suggests that if we do want to honour the legacy of Reid and Morgan, we should “no longer accept, vote for or nod our passive assent to, policy that is based on a negative and reductive view of human beings, and of their vision, capacity and power.” She also adds that as

we move towards a resource crisis beyond anything humankind has known before, we should understand that nothing will get us round this tightest of corners except our optimism and courage, our richness of imagination, and our love for other people. . . . And that means that we should consign to the dustbin of politics all those petty, mean-minded mantras that invite us to hate, to blame, to fear and to punish those worse off than ourselves. We should re-dedicate ourselves instead to the ideals of equality, fraternity and love embraced by Jimmy Reid and Edwin Morgan in their heyday. And we should do it not because we are starry-eyed fools; but because we have before us the powerful example of two great men who lived by those values, and who, in giving so much of themselves to others, also gave themselves lives that were rich beyond measure, in everything that matters.

McMillan's argument may become even stronger when juxtaposed with the quote which serves as a conclusion to Spence's talk at the Scottish Parliament. Spence refers here to Sri Chinmoy's teaching on the power of hope, and the way it inspires us to create new things, but most of all to deepen one's awareness:

Every day must come to you as a promise, a new aspiration, a new energy. . . . Hope is our inner effort; it inspires us to see something new, to feel something new, to do something new and, finally, to become something new. Let us not underestimate the power of hope. No matter how fleeting its life, it offers to us the most convincing and fulfilling power. (Chinmoy 57–58)

We could obviously add to this two quotes that Spence uses in his play: Morgan's call from "The Second Life": "Slip out of darkness, it is time" (*Collected Poems* 181; Spence, *No Nothing* 17), and a passage from a song by one of Scotland's leading singer-songwriters, the author of folk and social protest songs, Dick Gaughan:

Keep looking at the light.
Keep your eyes on the road ahead.
Keep working for the change that has to come.
Keep looking at the light. (Spence, *No Nothing* 23)

Both quotations affirm the need to change the world we live in, and the courage we must feel in order to make that change possible; they also point to the fact that there is no time to lose. Our here and now, hence our future, depends on our ability to enter into the light, but also our mindful, firm decision to stay there.

Spence finishes his talk with a sentence which best sums up the message of *No Nothing*, the credo of trade unionist Jimmy Reid, the motto of the first Makar of modern times, Edwin Morgan, and all those who follow their vision, including, of course, Alan Spence himself: "We live in hope."

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