

Notes on “Message Clear” by Edwin Morgan

To a certain extent, the explication of a poem is a game in which the reader pits personal intelligence against that of the poet.

The words, the images, the allusions and the structure of a poem all must have meant something to the poet in the act of creation... thus interpretation must rest to a certain extent upon the reader being able to recognise and respond to what the poet has done.

In this poem, the first and most obvious thing is that Morgan has created a series of lines based upon the Biblical reference to Jesus saying, “I am the resurrection and the life...” (John 11:25)

When the poem is set in a fixed width font like Courier, it is obvious that the letters that form the lines grow upward from the full quotation at the bottom. A closer examination shows that the letters in a given line can be grouped to form words. Once these words are formed, the poem can be read.

Reading of the words is no guarantee of understanding what has been said, so here is where the real work begins.

What follows is not necessarily what Edwin Morgan had in his mind when he created the poem, we will never know that, but it is an attempt to guess what he might have drawn upon.

This poem was first published in “The Times Literary Supplement” of 13 January 1966.

On the 20th, the TLS published the following letter:

‘May I congratulate Edwin Morgan on typing “I am the resurrection and the life” – after fifty-four unsuccessful attempts?

‘As a one-time two-finger man myself, I feel that we should all join in giving hm a big hand.’

Surely, “Message Clear” is far more than this.....

am	i
i am	if
	he

One question that occurs time after time in the Gospels is that of whether Jesus was the Son of God.

**“Then said they all, Art thou then the Son of God? And he said unto them, Ye say that I am.”
(Luke 22:70)**

The first two lines of the poem recall and restate this ambiguity through the use of the word “if”.

he r	o
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Hero [F. héros, L. heros, Gr. .]

1. (Myth.) An illustrious man, supposed to be exalted, after death, to a place among the gods; a demigod, as Hercules.
2. A man of distinguished valor or enterprise in danger, or fortitude in suffering; a prominent or central personage in any remarkable action or event; hence, a great or illustrious person.
3. The principal personage in a poem, story, and the like, or the person who has the principal share in the transactions related; as Achilles in the Iliad or Ulysses in the Odyssey.

“A hero is (this is my definition, not Webster's): an individual of elevated moral stature and superior ability who pursues his goals indefatigably in the face of powerful antagonist(s). Because of his unbreached devotion to the good, no matter the opposition, a hero attains spiritual grandeur, even if he fails to achieve practical victory. Notice then the four components of heroism: moral greatness, ability or prowess, action in the face of opposition, and triumph in at least a spiritual, if not a physical, form.”

THE PHILOSOPHICAL FOUNDATIONS OF HEROISM by Dr. Andrew Bernstein

	h	ur	t	
	the	re		and
	he		re	and
	he	re		
a			n	d
	the	r		e

Once the point is made that He was hurt, why repeat it four times?

The traditional view of the crucifixion shows Jesus nailed to the cross through his hands and feet, therefore 2 hands + 2 feet = 4 heres and theres.

Wrong! Look at the paintings of the crucifixion as they usually represent that both feet were penetrated with a single nail.

The final “there” may be explained by John 19:34. “But one of the soldiers with a spear pierced his side, and forthwith came there out blood and water.”

	i	am	r			ife
				i	n	
			s	ion	and	
i				d		i e

rife

1. Prevailing; prevalent; abounding.
2. Having power; active; nimble.

Sion (also Zion)

1. a. The historic land of Israel as a symbol of the Jewish people.
b. The Jewish people; Israel.
2. A place or religious community regarded as sacredly devoted to God.
3. An idealised, harmonious community; utopia.
4. noise; tumult

Romans 9:33 “As it is written, Behold, I lay in Sion a stumblingstone and rock of offence: and whosoever believeth on him shall not be ashamed.”

	am	e	res	ect
	am	e	res	ection

On 3 February 1966, A letter to the “Times Literary Supplement” contained an attempt by a reader to put the letters of the poem together to form words that could be easily read.

She interpreted the above as being “Am ere sect, am ere section.”

A week later a letter from Edwin Morgan pointed out that he had intended it to be read as “A mere sect” and “A mere section”. No other correction was made.

“Am ere sect, am ere section.” would indicate that Jesus existed before the religious sects and before the major splits the worship of God. This is a valid observation, but obviously not what Edwin Morgan intended.

“A mere sect” and “A mere section” indicates how minor Jesus and his followers were when compared to, say, the Roman Empire. They were a mere handful compared to all of mankind.

i am r a

Ra:

Ra was the Egyptian sun god and creator god. The early Egyptians believed that he created the world, and the rising sun was, for them, the symbol of creation. The daily cycle, as the sun rose, then set only to rise again the next morning, symbolised renewal and so Ra was seen as the paramount force of creation and master of life.

i am the erect one e

Ode of Solomon 8:4 Rise up, and stand erect, ye who sometime were brought low: 5 Tell forth ye who were in silence, that your mouth hath been opened. 6 Ye, therefore, that were despised be henceforth lifted up, because your righteousness hath been exalted. 7 For the right hand of the Lord is with you: and He is your helper:

On 19 November 2002, we asked Edwin Morgan if he had this passage in mind when he wrote the poem. If not, what should we see in the phrase "i am the erect one"?

Here is what Edwin Morgan wrote in answer:

I don't think I had the specific passage from Ode of Solomon 8.4 in mind when I was writing the poem, though it is obviously relevant in the background. I was thinking of 'erect' as following on from 'stand' and 'run' and the idea that although he may eventually be lying flat in the grave he is or will be always the erect one (including 'the upright/right/righteous one').

Another letter to the TLS of 13 January 1966 (abridged)

'The poem "Message Clear" ... is curiously moving. I ask myself (with due reservations about the usefulness of the question) if this is really a poem. As a whole it has no linguistic reverberation, merely a visual presence. It could not be perpetuated vocally, or in the memory, It seems to be a piece of graphic art with visual rhythms evolving into a caption – a diagram exploding into a familiar quotation from the Bible. Certainly it irritated me at first (all that trouble with the print to render an already familiar quotation) but the central statement is given a context. The corruption, or rather erosion, of words in the body of the poem gives it a new vitality, when it finally emerges. We feel how patiently, even passionately, the poet (arranger? cryptographer?) has felt his way toward this.'