
“In poetry, what is learned is of the blood”: An Interview with Award-Winning Poet A.F. Moritz

Posted on [April 11, 2016](#) by [Anita Bedell](#)

Interview by James W. Wood

[Albert F. Moritz](#) (A.F. Moritz) is the author of 20 books of poetry. He has received the Award in Literature of the American Academy of Arts and Letters, the ReLit Award (for *Night Street Repairs*, which in 2010 was named one of 39 “books of the decade” by the Toronto *Globe & Mail*), the Ingram Merrill Fellowship, and the Guggenheim Foundation Fellowship. In 2009 he was the recipient of the Griffin Prize for his collection *The Sentinel*. A Canadian citizen, Moritz was born in Ohio and moved to Canada in 1974.

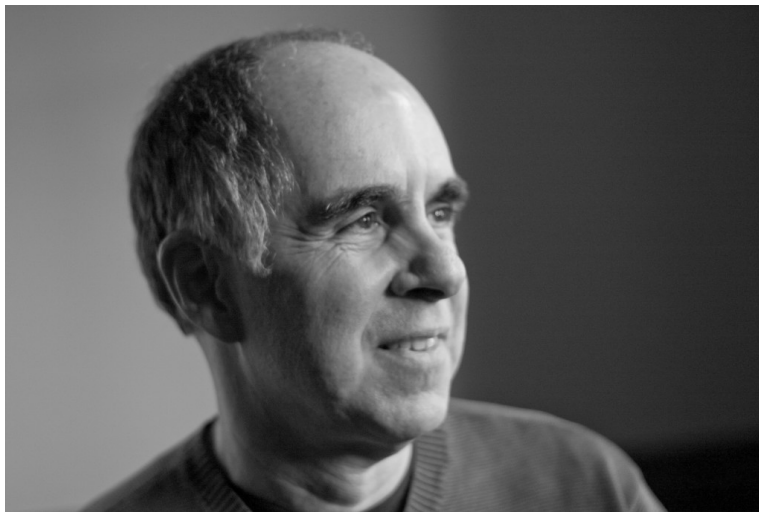


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What inspired the writing of your most recent collection, *Sequence* ([House of Anansi, 2015](#))?

All poems have to have an occasion, of course: a happening that condenses a background power and awareness into a specific moment of form. The main inspiration is within the person constantly: a dynamic steady state of connection to creativity, life.

I’m a proponent of the tradition of inspiration, like Octavio Paz and like Breton and the surrealists. To say I’m a “proponent” is, I suppose, a concession to civilized discourse, in which you’re supposed to admit your position may be arguable. It would be more honest of me to say I’m certain from direct experience that poetry is a mode of expression (which is to say a mode of existence) of the ongoingness, energy, essence of life and non-life. It’s not an ability with language. It’s a seizure of the substance and surface of language by language’s depth, which is simultaneously the depth of everything: “The everlasting Universe of things / Flows through the mind,” as Shelley puts it.

We don't always feel inspired, in the usual sense of the word. We often feel tired, defeated, blocked...feel as if life is dreary, narrow, and the like. When I look at *Sequence* now, it seems clear to me that not only is its inspiration "inspiration" in the larger sense I've mentioned, but its subject is the relation of the two inspirations. The weariness, the sense of age and impossibility, at the beginning and elsewhere, incorporates and expresses, implicitly, nearly silently, the persistence of creativity even within this state. On the first page, the tired, aging traveller's legs are like "damp logs that flicker with pains." In this image I read that the body now impedes the fire, and yet it persistently burns, it flickers.

One aspect of my experience is that poetry seems to inspire itself, one poem seems to inspire the next, until you realize that, in one sense, the poems are places in a current, in another sense they're flowers rising from the same rhizome, in another sense they're stages of one another like new growth in spring on a tree. The other side of this coin is that you're aware that you're working on problems, like a philosopher and like a carpenter. Any poem just finished, just written, suddenly implies questions and objections that it hasn't covered, suddenly brings you to a new horizon from which you see territories not previously glimpsed. This is creativity: it does *not* come from us, this we know with inward certainty, and yet it couldn't be accomplished without us. It's a simple spontaneous happening that requires planning, skill and work.

So if inspiration and creation are continuous for you as a writer, what specifically occasioned this work?

I had to have a serious heart operation toward the end of my work on it. This was for a congenital condition that had been detected fourteen years earlier. After recuperating for about a month, I was back to perfecting the book, which turned out to be a final significant stage of composition, because I saw a lot of changes to make, in arrangement, and to a certain extent in contents—changes that also provoked and required some new writing, beyond just the types of rephrasing or slight additions or omissions that shifts of position for texts often require in them.

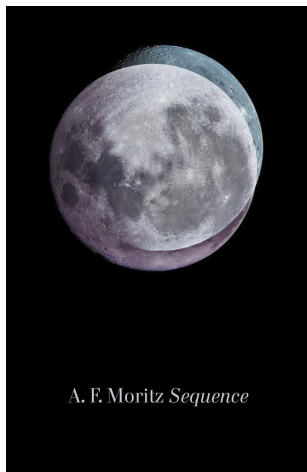
After *The New Measures* was published in 2012, I saw my operation, which I knew was in the offing, as my next object or encounter. Writing *Sequence* was more or less coextensive with this realization, first of all, then with the visits to the doctors, the concentrated writing in the run-up to the operation, the new work after it: a sort of waking up on the other side of the complete nothingness of the anaesthetic and the cutting. You might die, you're as good as dead, you're not dead.

Sequence is unusual among my books in that it came together in, more or less, the two years before the publisher's deadline, December 2015. With the exception of *Conflicting Desire*, which similarly was composed during the two or three years immediately leading up to its publication, all of my books are made up of poems that were first drafted no more recently than eight years prior to the book publication date. The poems develop over that period.

How do you see the new book's relationship with your wider body of writing?

In terms of its development out of my poetry, *Sequence* was provoked by *The New Measures* and by the thirteen-part sequence that concludes it, "Open House". That poem addresses the fearfulness of transformation through openness: how can one accept all things, open to all things, and remain oneself...remain *anything*

oneself? It ended on a note of embracing a future of making the self into a “house all doors.” The poem led me to a sharpened sense of the fearful aspects of existence that must, if this is true, be let in. It’s not so simple to say we can survive them, can survive the process of admitting them, or can look with equanimity on the notion that we *will* admit them whether we want to or not. Hence, *Sequence*. It was the next part of an unwinding skein that was a joy and enthusiasm of discovery, but also a frightened, reluctant but “determined” (in both senses) next step, and a critical examination of a crux in life, attitude, behaviour.



There are a lot of relationships between *Sequence* and other moments and aspects of my poetry. Let me stick to a few. Journeys are everywhere in my work, and they mostly seem to be journeys back home, or in other instances journeys that try to get back home but as in one of those bad dreams just keep getting farther and farther away and into more and more frightening impasses. *Sequence* seems to me a comprehensive doing of this theme or obsession.

Related to this is the fact that in the book the central figure moves, advances in time, ages as it were, from age to childhood. Childhood defines home and is home—something else you find throughout my work, for instance in *Mahoning*.

In the notes to *Sequence*, you reference writers as diverse as Tennyson and Walt Whitman as influences and precedents in the tradition of the long poem. To what extent are you consciously aware of these influences as you compose – or are they part of the general ambit, what Forster envisaged as generations of writers in the same room in his mind, as you write?

Sequence is a long poem in sequence form and that itself is influence and allusion. I’ve always loved the sequence, from Whitman and Tennyson to Seferis and Bonnefoy, and you find it in my poetry from the start. There are sequential poems in *Black Orchid* (1981) and in *The Visitation* (1983). In the latter book, the sequence “You Whoever You Are” (the title’s a keynote phrase of Whitman’s) is especially important to me. *A Houseboat on the Styx* (1999) is a book-length sequential poem. So is *Mahoning* (1996), though it’s disguised as a collection and the disguise was so successful that no one, apparently, sees it as a unified book. Within *Mahoning* there are several shorter but still extensive sequences that are plainly such: made of numbered parts.

When it comes to influence and allusion, I think it’s generally better to write out of what’s entered your soma than to quote things sought out or noted for the purpose. Pound said that ‘culture begins when you have forgotten from which book.’ Specific allusions of course can be important and effective, but in fact the most powerful sort of allusion is the resonance or echo of past poetry in one’s lines, palpable but impossible to isolate.

A final point. This view of influence goes to the heart of my poetry. One of its bases is that there’s no separation between the visceral and the intellectual. There can be, of course. We can make an arid, arrogant intellectuality and we’ve done so. We can make a stupid vitalism, a crude parody of burning with a gemlike flame, and we’ve certainly done so. But the conflict between the visceral and the intellectual is not necessary, is not there in

essence, is not there in the healthy and whole human being. The mind is of the body, the body is of the mind. In poetry, what is learned is of the blood and is experience. And physical and emotional reality is acquired, learned, improved...is of the mind. The cultural past is the poem's body as much as the personal past is. There is no membrane between the two. That they are separated for discussion should not be mistaken for the reality.

How do you write? Do you have a set time for writing each day, as Auden did, or do you keep notebooks? Are there any conditions that are important to you (room, time, place) for writing?

I don't have any routine that's persisted lifelong or over years. I constantly develop routines that last weeks or months and come to their end, in a new method, or even a quiet period, a buffer between one method and the next.

But there's one thing that's a constant: I follow a rhythm. First, sketching or drafting, in which poetry is "open to the air"—it occurs as I go through nature and the city. Second, intense work at my desk, many hours a day, every day of the week, for weeks or months: hours jammed into the days even when I have to be very busy with work for pay. This is the stage of seeing what you have, of gathering things together, improving, elaborating, deleting, adding. The book as the unit of composition, a new stage of creativity, not just because revision is creative, but because new poetry becomes suggested, needed, sung. These two phases aren't always entirely separate. I'll still be writing quick drafts and fragments, sometimes, while I'm in the "book" stage. For of course life as well as my loves and habits compel me to keep going around even when I'm largely at the desk.

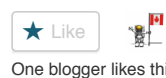
That part, the drafting and sketching, is precious to me. I read in biographies, when I was 19 or 20, that Whitman composed this way: that affirmed for me of what I was doing and how I thought about it: the practice of composing as part of living. Part of being where you are. Then maybe thirty years later, I read Karl Rahner's "theology of going around", and that was another affirmation. These greats had discovered the same thing... before me, it's true, but unbeknownst to me when I was developing it. Maybe the greatest, simplest, deepest capture of this is by the greatest thinker and poet, Breton: "soluble fish".

Born in Scotland and educated there and in Canada, James W. Wood is the author of four chapbooks of poetry and the full-length collection *The Anvil's Prayer* (2013). His long poem about the migration of generations of Scots to Canada, *The Emigrant's Farewell*, will be published in June 2016 by the UK-based [High Window Press](#).

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