

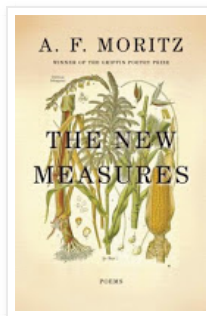
# The Urge

## Reviewing New Canadian Poetry



SUNDAY, 16 SEPTEMBER 2012

### Achieving the Unparaphrasable: A Review of A.F. Moritz's *The New Measures*



*The New Measures*  
A.F. Moritz  
(Anansi, 2012)

*Poetry is an enactment of hope which is already the thing hoped for. Such is great poetry, prophetic poetry, the poetry of a Wordsworth or a Milosz. Poetic prophecy brings a possible future into a restrictive present, discovering and restoring vivacity in the midst of deathliness.*

— A.F. Moritz, from “What Man Has Made of Man,” an essay published in the November 2009 issue of *Poetry*

The epithet “the last Romantic” has been widely applied: to Yeats, to Stevens, even to Philip Larkin, serving to broadly signify poets’ longings to return to or achieve anew a state of relative purity (whether paradisaal Eden or utopian New Jerusalem), their hopes that the individual poetic mind might access and communicate truths to help midwife this societal rebirth, and their reluctant, resentful awareness that modernity scoffs in the face of such pretensions. There will likely never be a “last Romantic,” however, because at least some small contingent of poets—and these days, at least in the English-speaking world, it seems increasingly minute—will forever be dreaming of reenchantment, revolution, the great reconciliation that seems to quiver at the distant verge of possibility, leading them to wonder aloud how their humbled art might help sing it into being. The early Yeats perfectly exemplifies this vision of poet as societal renovator. Taking seriously Shelley’s claim in his *Defence of Poetry* that “The most unfailing herald, companion, and follower of the awakening of a great people to work a beneficial change in opinion or institution, is Poetry,” Yeats’s early prose writings abound in visions of an Irish people alerted to their underlying unity through a shared repository of poetic images and symbols—and his poetry continually embodies this ambition. A poem like the perennial anthology piece “[The Lake Isle of Innisfree](#),” for instance (“I will arise and go now, and go to Innisfree”), resounds much more forcefully in this cultural-nationalist context, with Innisfree symbolizing both the speaker’s individual desire to escape the urban world to a solitary pastoral idyll—Yeats wrote the poem during a period of homesickness while living in London in 1890—and the communal desire of the Irish people to reinhabit their pre-British identity. Like much of Yeats’s early work, this poem thus aspires to effect what Marxist theorists term “the education of desire”: without propagandizing, it urges readers—through its imagery, its melodiousness, its structural harmonies—to desire along with the speaker, to co-inhabit the tragedy of his (and indeed the Irish people’s) fruitless paradisaal hope.

To a certain extent, all poetry operates this way, as Auden acknowledges when he claims (apropos of Yeats in fact) that “Poetic talent ... is the power to make personal excitement socially available.” The difference with the strain of Romanticism that I’m identifying, however—and the subsequent poetry that reverberates most strongly with its revolutionary energies—is that by making the poet’s excitements available, it hopes to effect an appreciable *change* on the reader, and further, the world: not just aesthetically, but (for lack of a better word) morally. It is within this late-Romantic context that we can most beneficially read A.F. Moritz’s poetry, particularly the three recent collections I have come to think of as his ‘Anansi trilogy’: *Night Street Repairs* (2004), the Griffin Prize-winning *The Sentinel* (2008), and now his latest, *The New Measures*—books which continue his trajectory (beginning, I think, with 1994’s *Mahoning*) of de-emphasizing the strong surrealist and symbolist orientation of his earlier work in favour of a more penetrable, immediate, even urgent aesthetic. (\*) Although displaying a thoroughly postmodern

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self-consciousness as to poetry's perceived futility, Moritz's recent work resounds with social hope, evincing everywhere the residual wish that poets might in some respect prove "unacknowledged legislators" after all. Take the first verse paragraph of "The Hand," from this latest collection:

I sing in the absence of disaster.  
And the absence is a stockade without a fence,  
safe little enclosure of boundless danger  
to the animal that runs  
everywhere, mountains, meadows, woods and waters,  
the fiery upper air, and pauses to wander,  
bowing the neck to the flowering grasses  
that strain up to his teeth and  
to the mouth of stars: shadow—a gate, and a trail  
vanishing in and in.

That first line is brilliant: besides the assonance of "absence" and "disaster" (assonance, along with alliteration, serve as the passage's main means of sonic coherence), there's the way it subtly evokes the oratorical blank-verse tradition both metrically and through its diction (with "sing" echoing the Miltonic invocation), and the way the multivalent preposition "in" sets up the paradoxes of open confinement that follow ("stockade without a fence," "safe little enclosure of boundless danger"). Finally, notice how "the absence of disaster" both highlights the potential obsolescence of the poet-as-prophet—i.e., if there's no disaster to prophesy, what is his role?—while also hinting at the imminent presence of such disaster, as if any moment the apocalypse will arrive to validate his ominous intonements. As the passage continues, our sense of who or what is being held captive by disaster's absence is deliberately toyed with: the definite but unspecific "the animal" and "the neck" become "his hand," serving to communicate the sense that all the animal kingdom finds itself in this vast captivity while also finally humanizing the captive creature, merging him with the poet himself—a reading supported by the "gate" and "trail," which evoke a Dantean 'life's journey' or 'life's road' (*cammin di nostra vita*, from the first line of the *Inferno*). The images of "fiery upper air" and "flowering grasses / that strain up to his teeth and / to the mouth of stars" are vintage Moritz, the sorts of images that can serve as litmus tests for the likelihood of one's appreciating his work. Contemporary ears so relentlessly attuned to irony might hear such lines as highfalutin, full of empty portent (as if echoing Milton or Shelley is, like, so passé) rather than hearing in them an authentic desire—in my view one of the repeatedly achieved ambitions of Moritz's work—to reinfuse the world with wonder on (yes, I'll say it) a cosmic scale.

But Moritz isn't just some neo-Romantic throwback, shutting his eyes to the world at hand to indulge in outmoded apocalyptic fantasies. Not only is his subject matter increasingly in step with central cultural concerns, his mosaic dialogue with the Western canon extends to his contemporaries as well. Here's the rest of "The Hand":

The absence is a frame not frame  
for a picture that likes to expand to the four  
corners, quarters, oceans, and winds. Even the light  
on the face of the picture  
and the unpainted weave at its back  
are part of an open frame  
for the desire of color to run  
to earth's center and up past space.

Tomorrow—its coming—its closing—its hand.  
But disaster is not yet here. Untouched  
for the moment I sing in the absence.  
The perimeter doesn't exist. The sun shines

on endless eastern waters, shines overhead,  
shines on western waters, darkness comes,  
its low globes shine, and then the shining sun  
on the eastern waters. Nothing escapes.

The second verse paragraph begins by furthering the central paradoxes of the first ("a frame not frame"), introducing a new metaphor of the world as a painting that strains at its lack of frame—which is the absence of disaster. Of course there's a great deal enigmatic in this passage, some might say needlessly, but such a critique would neglect the skillful modulation of syntax here (and indeed throughout Moritz's work). While the first verse paragraph used a run-on sentence to convey the boundlessness it discussed,

here a similarly protracted syntax both extends that strategy and works to depict a mind teetering at the lip of the ineffable. Rendered without line breaks, the central sentence of verse paragraph two reads as follows: “Even the light on the face of the picture and the unpainted weave at its back are part of an open frame for the desire of color to run to earth’s center and up past space.” Whoa. If you aren’t excited by the ambition it takes to even attempt to express whatever this means, I’m sorry for you—and you’re definitely not Moritz’s ideal reader. This isn’t just the kind of sentence that gets prose writers lauded as ‘master stylists’; there are also real ideas here, inextricable though they may be from the poet’s attempt to wrest them from the imaginative ether into the actual. Let me give this a try: so the paradoxical “open frame” of disaster’s absence includes both “the light on the face of the picture” (i.e., the visible world) and “the unpainted weave at its back” (i.e., the molecular and genetic structures that underpin visible phenomena, with “weave” evoking the double helix of DNA). In other words, the absence of disaster is an unframing frame that includes everything within it, which is all “part of an open frame for the desire of color to run to earth’s center and up past space.” Taking “color” as a metaphor (or more properly, metonymy) for the verdant living world, what is being asserted here is that this verdancy desires to spread indefinitely, but that the absence of disaster sets an invisible frame around it in the mind of the speaker, to whom (as I have discussed) disaster’s absence implies its imminence. Put rather too simply, the speaker’s sense of looming disaster prevents him from fully revelling in the unboundedness of the world’s “desire.”

After the syntactic urgency of this revelation, the last two almost-formalized quatrains play variations on this theme that display Moritz’s formal dexterity: from the way the Dickinsonian “Tomorrow—its coming—its closing—its hand” provides a welcome rhythmic respite from the run-on syntax of the previous verse paragraphs while effectively conveying a climactic sense of impending; to the way each line of the final quatrain is divided by a caesura into a western and eastern half, thus mirroring the cyclicity of its subject matter. The closing figure of an ever-arriving tomorrow from which “Nothing escapes” resonates as both hopeful (the sun’s cycle will continue) and, oddly, ominous (we will continue to be relentlessly encycled by the sun). “The Hand” is thus a paean to our age of global warming and the sense of ethical paralysis it can engender: only through a renewed sense of wonder in the world can we avert environmental catastrophe, but the possibility of such catastrophe is precisely what dilutes our wonder. (Like the way that, past a certain age, it can become hard to continue relationships we know we can’t commit to.)

And yet, despite the pains I’ve taken to unpack what “The Hand” is up to, my reading ultimately rings as reductive—as, to a certain extent, any paraphrase of a poem must. With Moritz’s work, however, such reductiveness is compounded because he wants not just to communicate deep insight, but often, to convey with immediacy the mind’s wrestling to communicate what lies just beyond its hold, its dizzying sifting-through of figurations that flit upon without landing on what precisely it wants to mean. The relentlessness of Moritz’s pursuit (and, I would argue, achievement) of the unparaphrasable allies him with one of his even more acclaimed contemporaries:

They are preparing to begin again:  
Problems, new pennant up the flagpole,  
In a predicated romance.

About the time the sun begins to cut laterally across  
The western hemisphere with its shadows, its carnival echoes,  
The fugitive lands crowd under separate names.  
It is the blankness that follows gaiety, and Everyman must depart  
Out there into stranded night, for his destiny  
Is to return unfruitful out of the lightness  
That passing time evokes. It was only  
Cloud-castles, adept to seize the past  
And possess it, through hurting. And the way is clear  
Now for linear acting into that time  
In whose corrosive mass he first discovered how to breathe.

This is the opening two-thirds of “The Task,” the first poem in John Ashbery’s remarkable fourth collection, *The Double Dream of Spring* (1970). Notice the similar means by which he and Moritz manage their ostensibly free verse: the opening line evoking blank verse, the use of alliteration (preparing/problems/pennant/predicated) and assonance (flagpole, romance, laterally, shadows, blankness, Everyman, passing, castles, acting, mass) to subtly unify it, and most crucially, the ambition, intellect, and linguistic skill to attempt to formulate, at whatever length necessary, the never-before communicated (“It is the blankness that follows gaiety, and Everyman must depart out there into the

stranded night, for his destiny is to return unfruitful out of the lightness that passing time evokes.”). I’ll spare you my close reading of that one—of course many are possible—but suffice it to say that both Moritz and Ashbery repeatedly highlight one of poetry’s great lessons: that a thought uttered in two different ways is not the same thought at all. And despite their significant differences in tone and focus, both Moritz and Ashbery recognize (and here I’d include someone like Geoffrey Hill as well) that one of poetry’s noblest capacities is to expand our sense of what it’s possible to say and, thereby, to think.

In “The Hand” as throughout his work, Moritz is an apocalyptic poet in the richest sense of the term, with *apocalypse* resonating in its colloquial sense of a grand destructive event, but more crucially, in its root sense of uncovering or revelation. And if we wish to follow his speakers’ peeling back of their perceptual onion-skin, we must do some peeling of our own. Perhaps surprisingly, too, this process—though no less likely to leave one’s eyes blurry—has become more rewarding with each successive Moritz collection, as his characteristic mood comes to seem more and more in step with the zeitgeist. (Or at least a crucial aspect of it: my two favourite films of 2011 were *Take Shelter* and *Martha Marcy May Marlene*, so take from that what you will.) Whether because the poet himself has taken pains to more directly address central cultural concerns, or because his aesthetic very early on embodied undercurrents that have gradually bubbled to the culture’s surface, *The New Measures* (his 16th(!) collection) finds Moritz at the height of his relevance. Which brings me to the essence of my retort to those who might persist in accusing his work of obscurantism: read more carefully. It’s become fashionable in certain circles to pretend we’ve moved on from the potent mix of difficulty and seriousness that work like Moritz’s embodies, and to regard poetry that doesn’t ‘entertain’ us in a fairly immediate way as musty and/or indulgent. This attitude has helped lead to the current burgeoning of work dripping with showy metropolitanism and pop-cultural references, desperate to claim its relevance in negotiating our late-capitalist funhouse, but too often mistaking capitulation for critique. Moritz, on the other hand, simply doesn’t seem interested in the coveted proverbial ‘audience that doesn’t usually read poetry’, and his critique consists of ignoring our market-driven culture’s many hollow frivolities and instead cutting at the universal urgencies often obscured by such clutter. This isn’t to say that *The New Measures* isn’t entertaining: on the contrary, it teems with arresting images, fresh optics, and panoramic thought-spaces. But in our current poetic milieu, it’s also radically serious. It may seem odd that I’ve cited only one poem from the collection in this review, but I’ve done this intentionally. “The Hand” is not the ‘best’ poem in the collection; in fact, it’s utterly typical of the deft, vivid, deeply searching work to be found throughout—and of the rewarding demands these poems make upon us. This touches on something else Moritz and Ashbery share: because of their difficulty, their staggering range of reference, and the persistence of their characteristic tones, both will always be a lot easier to caricature than to read closely. But I’d be willing to bet the lens of posterity will read them very closely (and kindly) indeed.

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(\*) Obviously I am not the first critic to cite Moritz’s relation to Romanticism. In an article entitled “Riddle’s Raw Material: A Rebuttal” in the December 2004 issue of *Books in Canada*, Chris Jennings makes this connection, but does not elaborate it with the same emphasis or to the same degree that I do here. Jennings’s essay is itself a rebuttal of an essay appearing in the same issue by Carmine Starnino, a skeptical review of *Night Street Repairs* entitled “Speaking in Human Language,” in which Starnino places Moritz’s work in the context of a Mallarméan Symbolism. Together the two essays represent the most considered engagement of Moritz’s work to date. Unfortunately they are not available online, but are well worth seeking out—Starnino’s for a compelling delineation of Symbolism’s borrowing of the trappings of religious mystery and Moritz’s debt to this lineage (counterpointing much of what I claim here), and Jennings’s for convincingly arguing that this framework is overly reductive of Moritz’s work, which draws from a much wider spectrum of traditions.

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