



CURRENT ISSUE



Connectivity of Humanity through Language: Samantha Ainsworth in Conversation with A. F. Moritz

Malahat volunteer *Samantha Ainsworth* talks with *Issue 186, Spring 2014* contributor *A. F. Moritz* on his contribution of 6 poems. Read on to learn about *A. F. Moritz's* early poetic influences, various works of translation, and how the best exacts a full look at the worst in literature.



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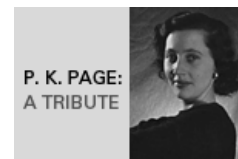
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As one of Canada’s prominent poets—more than fifteen books of poetry under your belt, plus numerous major awards—what advice would you offer to new or up-and-coming poets?

I can’t remember anything more joyful than writing my early poems in loneliness. I can remember things as joyful, but nothing more so.

There’s a time in the course of one’s poetry that’s like adolescence, which participates in both childhood and adulthood. The childhood of poetry—maybe I’m talking just for myself, but this was my experience—was the period, a long time, many years, when I had no awareness of the poetry world outside the books I knew. This is like the time of childhood, when one’s nearly an animal, when one doesn’t know death. I read Blake and Wordsworth and Shelley, Poe and Coleridge, Tennyson and Whitman, and simply knew I was one of them with no anxiety to get anywhere. In fact it’s false, ridiculous, to say I ‘had no anxiety’ to be ranked with them: there was simply no awareness of any such thing.

Adulthood is the time riddled with anxiety and thus ambition or the attempt to scorn or allay ambition, which is quite parallel to the attempt, in the awareness of death, to come to terms with it. Adolescence glimpses and moves into this horror while still retaining the “glad animal movements” of childhood. The parallel in writing poetry is the time I was talking about at the start: writing one’s early poems in loneliness. You can’t help seeing the sad human reality, and that you’ll have to enter it, but it’s still far off, and the music of poetry for the time being effortlessly exceeds the doom, which nevertheless is there. That’s the time to hang onto and savour. Later, the struggle to balance the two, to return to music, will be hard.

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Your six poems included in Issue 186, Spring 2014 of *The Malahat Review* vary in form, style, and subject, but each one packs a punch. The compelling diction and language draws the reader in, creates lovely and sometimes horrific images and revelations. How do your poems present themselves to you in their infancy? Do you work from an image or thought and then go from there?

They present themselves as music, an idea for music. Now, in poetry of course, and this point is often missed, meanings are a major part of the music. The sensible qualities of words include their meanings as a major part, and the poet has to have a concept of music in which the rhythm and the adherences and repulsions of ideas are prominent, and in which there's something analogous to chromatism in the arrangement of the colourings of words, which include their sounds and accents, yes, but equally their meanings and connotations.

The poems are definitely explorations, walking and feeling along from point to point, although that doesn't exclude an initial prefiguration of an end. Sometimes the poem arrives as a prefigured end, and sometimes it even arrives at the prefigured end, sometimes another one. But in the latter sort of case, the prefiguration of the end adjusts as the poem moves forward, although where it winds up can still be a surprise.

This is my answer to 'how to my poems present themselves in their infancy.' My answer to whether the poems start from an image or a thought, is "Yes, they do." Except I'd like to say 'an image and a thought' or 'an image which is a thought and a thought which is an image'. This is in tune with what I said about music. Images, as well as other sorts of words, are laden with experience, are formed of experience, and they bring that history of experience to the poem. One important work of the poem is to allow this reality of words to express itself, not to be suppressed by the usual relegation of words to functions that block out most of their treasury of experience. So thoughts and images initiate the poem as much as an idea of music does, and simultaneously. For the thoughts and images, music is their unity, in which they're annulled in one sense, by being joined together, made into a new body. For the time being, as we say.

In your poem, “Entrances” you give thought to the earthworm, make “her” not so lowly—climb into her soft body and push through the soil, experience her “pleasure.” In doing so, you maintain a childlike sense of awe/empathy. This point-of-view examines the micro within the macro. As a poet, can you explain the importance of exploring this aspect, staring a cricket in the eye, if you will?

To me this isn't just important but essential. Talking about it makes me blush. When Stevens says that "we reason about" certain things "with a later reason," he's talking in part about questions like this. The experience of following an earthworm or an ant, when you're a child, with your eye, your hand, your fascination, your imagining... your nose... isn't just crucial or necessary, it's unavoidable. It's part of existing. It's one of those aspects of having a body that lie beyond the visible boundaries of the body, which Dewey talks about so well. It's something the being simply *does* as part of being. It's impossible to say how far beyond important this experience is. When the poets talk about the necessity of retaining childhood wonder, this is what they mean. It's the necessity of retaining life itself. Of not amputating the body at the apparent limits of the body. Which kills it. Although it may persist as a zombie for a while. When Coleridge says the person who's a poet carries the wonder of the child into the powers of adulthood, it's retaining the love the earthworm that he's talking about, transferring it to general terms.

Can you recall the first poem you wrote?

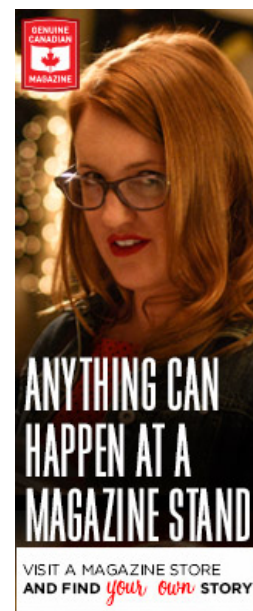
Yes. I was eleven. I'd been content for some years to intend to be a poet without feeling the need to do anything about it. I was a poet, that was that, the writing could

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come later. I was doing a chore on a late spring afternoon, sitting under an evergreen tree and pulling the weeds out from among lilies of the valley that grew there. And a poem came to me, two ballad stanzas. I clearly recall being very pleased with this poem, because I already knew enough to know that it exhibited some traditional folk distortions of the ballad stanza in ways that had become identified with the late nineteenth-century innovations of poets like Rossetti and the early Yeats. Should I quote this poem? I suppose if I don't I'm being coy.

Lilies of the valley
Grew in my mother's garden
Under an evergreen tree
And I was the lilies' warden.

I pulled the grass from around the lilies
And they grew white and sadder.
Never were lilies white as these,
Never was gardener gladder.

In "Poetry" you allude to the Chilean poet, Pablo Neruda. You explore the profound effect of reading Neruda's work, transcendence through poetry: "You look up from his book / and are in a world more world..." Your poetry has much the same effect on this reader. While writing, creating a fresh view of our world, are you aware of your future audience?

This is a great question, a much-discussed question. Reading "Song of Myself" and other poems by Whitman, one becomes aware that the poem is very much about imagining the reader, the future reader, and the future. And trying to form that reader. And the nation which, for there to be such a reader, has to come to exist. The poem is prophetic, which is to say educative.

Whitman is beautifully, powerfully explicit about this, but most great poetry strikes one this way. Which is why it gets argued over. Do readers agree with what they're being formed into? Do we think it's a good idea? The Greeks' scripture was Homer, and the first book of political philosophy, *The Republic*, starts as and basically remains a critique of Homer from a moral standpoint. We can at least arrive at this definite fact: a real politics, a critical politics as opposed to a coercive one, has at its heart the visions of poetry and the consideration of them by all, the submission of them to judgment by all. No poetry, no polis.

From an anarchist perspective, the question makes one think of whether it's possible to address the future in a way that does not have designs on it. The idea of envisioning it as transformed for the good includes our fear, even supposition, that left to itself it will be bad. I've got a poem, "To the One Unborn" (in *The Sentinel*, Anansi, 2008) in which I try to address this, and it ends on the speaker appealing to "you, quiet, powerful, come from the future / rescuing me not as I imagined you but as you will be."

I guess I'd say that we have to imagine our audience, but doing so is part of the poem, as when you speak to someone you know who is absent for the moment. The audience is imagined in that our speaking has to proceed from our knowledge and also our hope as to what the other person will be to us, but the speaking awaits an answer, and ought to await it in the realization that the creative response will be beyond our predicting, even though, mysteriously, it may seem, as soon as delivered, exactly what we should have expected.

In one sense the poet's work is self-sufficient and eternal, but clearly in another sense it requires rescue by the reader. Only the free reader can perform this. The poem needs to be rescued not only from the darkness inside the closed book, but also from ignominy, because remember, there's nothing so beneficent that some human monster hasn't claimed it as what prompted him. So the poem needs the good,

generous reader. For instance, when we discuss *The Aeneid*, isn't what we're doing to return from the future to Vergil to redeem his incomparable human depth from imperialism?

But I don't want to lay too much stress on the tyranny of the poet, the author. That would be too modern and post-modern, things I don't much like. Another view of Whitman, for example, and a better one, is that of Gabriel Marcel. Marcel says that if America has ever yet achieved any way of existing according to its real nature, it is the poetry of Whitman.

Aside from Neruda, which other poets have influenced or inspired you?

Well, I've already mentioned a lot of them! I have trouble answering a question like this with anything but a long list. I should say that as a child and adolescent, I soaked myself in the Romantic and Victorian poets and Whitman and Dickinson, and they remain central to me, and also in Pope, Milton, and some of Shakespeare, especially *Macbeth*, and toward the end of adolescence, *Hamlet*. I remember, once, I'd read in a psychology book that one's most profound influences are gained by age 18, so worriedly I sat down and read *Hamlet* seven times in a row without pausing, to be influenced by it before it was too late.

It was in the second year of university that I realized that I'd have to become a modern poet. So then I read Pound and Eliot, at first with fierce resistance, but also with admiration. I loved Eliot's selected poems of Pound. I read Stevens, starting from the back of the book, so my first Stevens was "To an Old Philosopher in Rome", "Credences of Summer" and "Esthetique du Mal". Around the same time I discovered MacIntyre's translations of Rilke, Mallarmé, and the symbolists, and the first New Directions selected Montale, and the Keeley-Sherrard translation of Seferis, the initial Vallejo versions of Clayton Eshelman, with whom I was sometimes in contact in those days, the old Grove Press edition called *Human Poems*. I discovered Ashbery's first three books. When I add Muriel Rukeyser's *Selected Poems of Octavio Paz*, and a little later, Kenneth White's selected poems of Breton, I've pretty much given my curriculum for forming a modern style when I was around 20. I'm not mentioning Neruda just because we started with him. For a couple of years I still wrote mainly in the romantic-traditional verse forms and meters, and my effective modern influences were Frost, Wilbur, John Crowe Ransom, and I don't repudiate them, but I was simultaneously under the spell of Seferis and Montale, as I have been ever since, and was moving that way.

This is so long, but it's hard for me to leave it even at that, because it seems to me unfair! Where is Ungaretti? Quasimodo? W.C. Williams? Roy Fisher? And all the old poets who were influencing me at that time, Clare, Smart... But I'm just beginning to make that list.

Your poems sing with passion/imagery/life and remind this human of the true purpose of poetry, connectivity of humanity through language. What do you draw on to produce poetry that reverberates in this way?

I have to thank you for the flattering terms in which all these questions are couched! Maybe I've already answered this question, if a bit abstractly, in what I've said in the other answers.

I just keep to my own experiences, even when I'm writing somewhat philosophically. The "philosophically" is the attempt to refine the experiences for what could become part of the world of anyone. I like your phrase "connectivity of humanity through language." Not connectivity to humanity, but of. We are connected, whether we want to be or not. The task is to make the most of it, even if this is to suffer it, really suffer it, when the connectivity is a Nessus shirt, as it sometimes is.

You have translated works of poetry from Spanish to English, including *Body of Insomnia and Other Poems (Cuerpo de insomnio)* by Ludwig

Zeller. What motivated you to do translation? Do you impart your voice into these poems or do you take on the personae and/or voice of the poem's original creator?

Spanish-language poetry, and surrealism, both meant a lot to me, and Zeller was an intriguing if shadowy figure in my knowledge even before I realized he was in Toronto. I knew the Kayak Press translation of *Woman in Dream*. Then I read *When the Animal Rises from the Deep the Head Explodes*, which was a trilingual edition, the Spanish, and a French translation, and a wonderful English translation by John Robert Colombo with Susana Wald. This was one of my main books in the mid-1970s, along with the Seabury Press-selected Czeslaw Milosz, and the poems of Anne Hébert and St.-Denys-Garneau and John Newlove.

I just longed to bring more Zeller into English, and I got a chance to meet him, and this led to friendship and to working with him. Also, in the early 1970s Theresa and I had gone to Mexico several times and met young Mexican poets there, some of whom I'm still in touch with, and in the mid-1970s the two of us were translating them, too. So it was a natural progression. Zeller to me is a great poet. At the very least, he's an entirely unprecedented, *sui generis* poet, even though he *can* be called surrealist. People claim that their criteria for a writer is to write as well as the best and to be truly different. Well, then, Zeller is as good as it gets. I've gotten to work with him now over a period of thirty-seven years! It's been a blessing and a provocation.

I have noticed that you do not tiptoe through the creation of a poem. Your writing surprises the reader with visceral, gritty elements and is non-apologetic to the squeamish. Can you speak about this aspect of truth-telling, and the importance of being true to oneself?

It's good of you to take such a golden attitude towards this aspect. I often find myself glancing ahead through a poem I'm planning to read to an audience, and thinking, "Uh oh, maybe I'd better turn the page, or at least give an advance warning: X-rated". There's a poem of Hardy's in which he's responding to the charge of pessimism he always received, and he says that to see the best "exacts a full look at the worst." Czeslaw Milosz says in one of his poems, "What has no shadow has no strength to live." Well, everything has shadow, but human cussedness can and does try to eliminate it from the things under our control, and succeeds in doing so, for a time and to the extent possible.

This may wind up ruining the earth. At the very least, one can get a bowdlerized life. In the streets: death hidden away behind walls or moved to elsewhere. But everyone will have to face it. The only choice is whether you do it willingly or you refuse until dragged to it by time and events, and even then closing your eyes. This is a choice between living your existence and trying not to.

In books: the evil and the problematic can be left out, or, more frequently, changed into a cartoon reduction, and one result of this is a picture of human triumph that is a joke, because everyone can see that the resolutions come against paper tigers and straw men. The other result, which culturally we suffer from very badly today, is a constant fishtailing between ridiculous extremes. First, a reduced art that only pretends to address reality. Then, in reaction, an enraged art so hungry to shout sex and violence that it thinks that's enough. Then, back to the cute and clean. And so it goes.

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Samantha Ainsworth

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