



## Stand Magazine. Vol 13(4) #208

### Reviews

#### A.F. Moritz, *Sequence*

By James W. Wood

Modern Canadian prose has flourished in recent years. The consecration of Alice Munro as Nobel Laureate apart, many other writers – from Yann Martel to Michael Crummey and all points in between – confirm the strength of talents that have been the beneficiary of excellent support from both the state, Canada’s provinces, universities and, lest we forget, an engaged reading public.

If Canada’s prose is in rude health, much of its poetry offers ammunition to those who would argue that literature has become a proxy for identity politics. There’s no less support for poets in Canada than prose writers: universities offer a fair range of fellowship and teaching opportunities, and Canada garlands its poets with the Griffin Prize, the world’s most munificent award for poets from a single country. National and regional newspapers do their part, and most of the larger cities – in particular, Toronto and Montreal – host a considerable number of well-attended reading series.

These positives apart, Canadian poets are more eager than any others, except perhaps their neighbours in the US, to define themselves by their inherited culture, sexual orientation or gender, rather than as simply “Canadian”, or, “poet”. In part this fracturing stems from the typical ‘cultural cringe’ of any country nestled close to an economic and cultural behemoth; the huge number of first and second generation immigrants in Canada no doubt also plays a role. More than fifty per cent of those living in the Greater Toronto Area were born outside Canada; of those born in Canada, most were born to parents who came from somewhere else.

To a large extent, Canada is still very much under construction in both the literal and figurative sense, a country still searching for its Walt Whitman, its Robert Frost, its Emily Dickinson. Even when Canadian poetry slap-shots its way into popular consciousness – most famously in John McCrae’s “In Flanders Field” – many assume, by virtue of the author’s name and the locus of the poem, that the poet is from somewhere else: in McCrae’s, case Scotland. Discounting Margaret Atwood, who is indisputably better known as novelist than poet, perhaps only Irving Layton, Earle Birney and David Wevill have earned an international reputation as poets; and of these, only Wevill gained any real traction on the international stage, publishing several successful collections in London in the 1960s before moving to the USA to teach in Texas.

A.F. Moritz emerges from this unmade bed of languages and cultures as an unlikely yet plausible candidate for primacy, albeit one still tangled in Canada's lingual and cultural quilt. Born in the United States (never the best thing to happen to a Canadian), he has lived and worked in Canada since 1975, publishing a series of well-received works which have been honoured with a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1990 and the Griffin Prize for poetry in 2009. An editor and translator as well as a teacher and scholar, Moritz's work is as well-known in the United States as it is in Canada, yet remains less appreciated in the wider English-speaking world.

*Sequence* marks Moritz's first publication since the Griffin award six years ago. A book-length meditation on aging, spirituality and death, the work is both striking and refreshing in its refusal to submit to Canada's vogue for confessional self-reference in verse. By locating the first sections of the work in an imaginary desert populated with myth and symbol, Moritz unsettles the reader and marks his determination to explore the universal and the human, rather than the limits of what the late Mick Imlah referred to as "the vertical pronoun" – the self.

Although Moritz references a number of long poems in the notes to *Sequence* as the models for this work including, tellingly, Whitman's *Song of Myself*, the feel of much of this work is closer to Kahlil Gibran or Rumi, or perhaps the Eliot of *The Journey of the Magi*; the first poems in the book map a journey through utopia in its most literal sense, no-place, an area "not in the stars but in/the darkness between them", or, "a deep valley outside of time." With a keen eye for detail and deft imagery, "the shape of the leaves is insanity", Moritz places the reader in an unfamiliar environment, the better to focus on his concerns with death, "the other sleep", and the value and meaning of human experience.

In travelling through this desert environment, the narrator evinces both wonder and doubt; Spinoza's God-in-nature, *natura naturans*, is much in evidence, "who traced a finger through the night/drew a finger along/the way a lover scribbles a name on a beach?" – if spirituality is important to the lived experience, then Moritz makes it clear that doubt is no less a part of that experience; "the only life our prayers had/was that dead day." Prayers are "said with boredom", but still "more living than all the steps we'd taken." For Moritz, following Spinoza, any God there may be lives in nature, and our experience is what defines us – "there's pleasure/in feeling your heaviness/sinking into a greater."

Enacting ritual through techniques such as repetition and the rhythms of chant, the early sections of *Sequence* strip away familiar detail and leave the reader facing themselves; from Section III onwards, though, Moritz intermingles history, memory and myth as if to demonstrate that the heart must "assume the desert" if we are to derive meaning from what we see and feel. Tales of tragic families in rural "lush Ontario"; imagining a Ulysses with "old brown teeth, veined with streaks of remnant white", and more personal recollections of, "beloved/foreign streets and images/we had stayed in" accrue slowly and severally, suggesting that whilst experience brings richness and pleasure, it is always accompanied by doubt, a doubt occasioned by the search for meaning – where to find meaning, or even God, in all of these narratives, all this sensual impression and materiality.

Experience itself becomes meaning in the poem; it is "the path/that comes to be/where our steps go" – and yet to rely on one's memories and sense of personal, created history is, for Moritz, to rely on "forgetting and decay." Instead, meaning and the sense of a deity are found in the act of living itself, "the lonely public road/no-one escapes.../the most lonely place on earth." *Sequence* offers a design for living drawn chiefly from the Zen tradition in which it is "better to know every step/for the place the long journey/begins and ends." Authentic, lived experience is the means by which humanity can heal

“the rift/between aspiration, delusion and your body”: the physical world manifests the spiritual and enables humans to “produce your own style or faith.”

Given the broad scope and ambition of this poem, criticisms of technique may appear as cavilling. However, if a writer evinces Tennyson and Whitman (among others) as their models, then they set themselves a high standard against which they may be judged. If the distillation of experience is one of the essential qualities of poetry, and compression one of its most distinctive techniques, then Moritz may not have achieved the heights to which he aspires. Whilst there are memorable lines, “nymph, your orison/was my origin” and phrases, “the marriage bed of yes and no”, the reader waits largely in vain for passages, or poems, that achieve the same memorable quality as Whitman, Tennyson or Eliot. Part of our condition as human beings is that our reach should exceed our grasp; and in its scope and ambition alone, if not always in its execution, *Sequence* is an important landmark in Canadian verse. The sparse use of full rhyme in the work may be one factor in diluting its impact; another, arguably more significant, choice is the use of a wide range of metres over such a long work, a technique which gives some passages more power, but fragments and distends other. One thinks of Walcott’s *Omeros* or Harrison’s *V* as successfully executed long poems which use more regularity in metre and rhyme – as well as alliteration, assonance and other effects - to sustain their power.

Rich, allusive and highly ambitious, *Sequence* repays close study and repeated reading. In what may come to be seen as the capstone of his lifetime’s absorption in verse even if his masterpiece still lies ahead of him, A.F. Moritz has delivered a reflective and frequently powerful book which questions how human beings might find meaning in their lives, and why we are here.

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