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## A.F. Moritz interviewed by Evan Jones

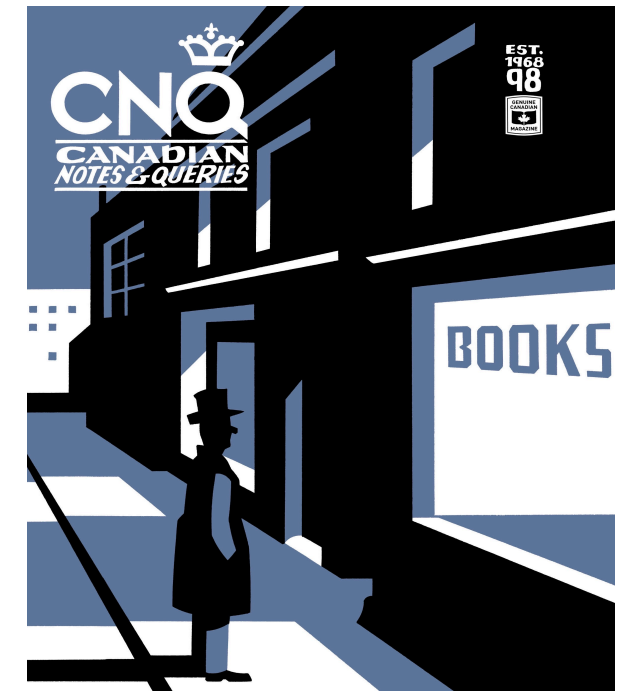


*Albert Frank Moritz was born in Niles, Ohio, in 1947 and educated at Marquette University in Wisconsin, where he completed a PhD on British Poetry (1700-1900) in 1975. He has published eighteen books of poetry, translations from the French (Benjamin Péret) and Spanish (Ludwig Zeller), and non-fiction with his wife Theresa (biographies of Stephen Leacock and Emma Goldman). Among his many honours, he has received an Ingram Merrill Foundation Fellowship (1982), and a Guggenheim Fellowship (1990). Three times a finalist for the Governor-General's Literary Award for Poetry (2000, 2008, 2012), he was awarded the Griffin Prize for Poetry for The Sentinel in 2009. His most recent collection is Sequence (2015). The following email interview was begun September 2015 and concluded March 2016, the interviewer in Manchester, UK, the interviewee in Toronto, Ontario.*

*A. F. Moritz*

**Evan Jones:** I'd like to start back some – with your decision to leave the US. You're not a draft-dodger. Can you tell me about your move to Canada?

**AF Moritz:** Theresa and I and our son Blaise, then three years old, came to Toronto so that Theresa could enter the doctoral program in medieval studies at the University of Toronto. This was in September of 1974. While I had been doing my doctorate at Marquette University, 1970 to 1974, in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British poetry, she marked time getting master's degrees in Spanish and in English, and in the latter became fascinated by aspects of the Middle Ages, and she even had written a book on the ordering of *The Canterbury Tales*, published by The Ohio State University Press. She was a brilliant student, could have gone to various high prestige places, but Toronto was recommended as the very best, and in addition the city was a media centre. So maybe I could help support us through journalism, in which I had a degree and considerable work experience. And it was a literary hub, which interested us greatly.



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Another factor for me was that I was happy to be going into voluntary exile for political reasons. The election of 1972, in which the excellent George McGovern was trounced by Richard Nixon even though it was known to a moral certainty that Nixon was guilty of the things for which he was later impeached, and resigned – this convinced me that “the great American public” knew and cared nothing for the Constitution, American traditions, the essence of America as found in Thoreau and Whitman and Emerson and Melville, cared in fact only for the representation and continuance of the immediate *status quo ante* in terms of class, power, wealth and publicity. In other words, “conservatism” in the sense of inertia. I don’t like a principled conservatism but I don’t scorn it and I don’t think it is impossible. There’s no such thing, however, to be found in America.

**EJ:** Can we discuss “Kissinger at the Funeral of Nixon” in this biographical light?

**AFM:** When Nixon died in 1994, I sat watching parts of his protracted funeral, the various ceremonials in Washington and then the helicopter delivery of his body to California. I listened to Henry Kissinger’s eulogy. And I heard and read a lot of commentary on his career. A lot of it, whatever stripe of opinion it emanated from, was good: informed, alert, insightful. And yet, it didn’t tell me anything I didn’t know, and I thought it missed the essence. I thought: I can do better than that, and the reason is that the truth about Nixon is one of those many, absolutely central, utterly essential things that can only be put in poetry ... the fact that few read poetry, or have the ability to read it anymore, explains a good deal of why society is in increasingly parlous shape for lack of the basic nutriments of human sensibility.

It’s a dramatic monologue but it’s really interior discourse à la Virginia Woolf. Kissinger is portrayed as thinking a long skein of thoughts to himself as, adeptly but distractedly, he mouths the funeral oration that he actually gave. In this interior monologue, he even refers to some of the things he is saying (i.e., did say) out loud, to the assembled. The myth of the poem then is the idea of conscience, that Kissinger, my Kissinger, represents someone who knows perfectly well that the things he does and says have a different motive, meaning and goal from the one he bruits. This characterization of Kissinger’s mind is paralleled and buttressed by an aspect of his reflection on Nixon: that Nixon was the founder of one of the basic elements of current “culture,” namely, the behaviour of resolutely affirming whatever foolish or criminal thing one has done and gathering, if one can, a party around it. I’d identify that as Kissinger’s dream-nightmare, that he is suddenly Ahab’s mate. Unfortunately, it may belong only to my Kissinger, not to Kissinger. But peace. Who knows what may come to him?

*the fact that few read poetry, or have the ability to read it anymore, explains a good deal of why society is in increasingly parlous shape for lack of the basic nutriments of human sensibility.*

**EJ:** Along these same lines, I’ve been thinking a lot about “Artisan and Clerk,” with its focus on a better America. Is there a connection between that poem and Donald Trump’s “Make America Great Again”?

**AFM:** I think to myself, “Great again compared to when?” On the question of economic prosperity, everyone wants the great American market but if businesses continue to move elsewhere, pay lower wages, put downward pressure on benefits and lifestyle, there soon won’t be any great American market. This is exactly like trying to convince termites not to eat the house they’re living in. “Artisan and Clerk” is about the profundity of that problem, not anything Trump can grasp.

The illusionistic nostalgia, and the element of coded racism, in Trump’s “Make America Great Again” is almost the least of the potential evils the slogan expresses. Most politicians are blind to the fact that they only serve, and only can serve, the basic drift of our world. As Jacques Ellul says, we have to recognize that there is good politics and bad politics and we have to support the good with all our strength, as if it really mattered, but in the current situation politics is completely helpless. True power is elsewhere. The politician who did anything about technology and economic power except work to augment them for the competitive benefit of his country (while mouthing the empty “ideas” that, oh no, competition isn’t a cutthroat game to dominate and eliminate, it’s good for everyone!) would be out of office immediately. You can “lead” a great corporation as long as you lead it to make more money, cover more territory, destroy more rivals. You can be a “visionary” of the future, like Steve Jobs, as long as your visions and your future are to make more powerful, faster, universal versions of exactly what we’ve got and what we’re doing. The great horror of Trump is that he is not even, as a politician, someone who is consciously or unconsciously a helpless servant of the drift. He’s one of its partisans, one of its enthusiastic helpers, one for whom criticism of it means only criticizing whatever holds it back from growing still more omnipresent and dominant.

**EJ:** Let’s step back a bit: what was literary Toronto like when you arrived?

**AFM:** By the spring of 1975 I had my feet under me enough to go out and try to make some acquaintances in poetry. I have to record with gratitude that perhaps the first thing I did was go up to York University, on a very wintry windy day, and to go to York in bad weather in those days was like going to the moon, to hear a poetry reading by Giorgio di Cicco, whom I’d read about as one of the most prominent and promising of the new poets. He read excellently, and made a lot of humour out of a mouse that ran up the tall curtain on a window behind him as he read one poem, and he befriended me as soon as I talked with him.

Around this time, a great Toronto tradition called the Bohemian Embassy moved from its longstanding place to a room in the just-then-developing Harbourfront Centre, and this reading series was run by Greg Gatenby. I would go there

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practically every Tuesday and hear the readings, and sometimes give one.

I believe I experienced the tag end of one of the great times for poetry in Toronto. One result of this activity was that an international poetry conference was organized and held at Hart House. I was lucky to be selected one of ten younger poets who got to read in panels and on the stage with international invitees. As a result I met Yehuda Amichai, for instance. This poetry conference of several days, with an impressive international roster, was the ultimate origin of today's International Festival of Authors. Greg Gatenby established it as a rather modest yearly festival surrounding his weekly series of readings and still mainly devoted to poetry. Over the years it grew and finally has almost entirely deleted poetry, without which it wouldn't exist. Kind of like the rest of the world. At this festival in its earlier years, I heard and got to shake hands with Octavio Paz.

**EJ:** There was always a sense of your writing being outside what was happening in Canada, and yet what you describe sounds much more friendly and approachable. Is this a myth of the times?

**AFM:** Maybe like me you sometimes think back to your childhood and wonder whether it was happy or miserable, convivial or lonely. Truth is, probably, it was both. I'd say the same about my poetry childhood in Canada. I was indeed off to one side, but for the first five years or so I was so intent on my own work, primarily, but also on the people I knew in poetry, and some of the activity of trying to get published, that it took up my attention. One is happy in activity. I ran into some opposition and some bad luck in getting my books published, and three quarters of the work I had finished in my twenties did not appear until the early eighties. This was a barrier, obviously, to anyone's recognizing what my work *was*. Then, I got sick of advertising, which was my livelihood, and Theresa and I decided to make a living as independent authors of books, nonfiction. We wrote some good books, but as a living, it was not one. We got poorer and poorer. In 1980 or 81, a combination of poverty and the extreme, energy-draining busyness that it always entails in anyone who hasn't simply given up made me unable to participate in literary society anymore, and this lasted for twelve, thirteen years: 1980 to 1992 inclusive. I'd say I was completely isolated during this stretch.

**EJ:** You also wrote some early reviews that separated you from the in-crowd.

**AFM:** It's possibly true that I occasioned some of my isolation and my feeling of disaffection through my reviewing. In 1977 through 1979 I was the chief reviewer for poetry for the old *Books in Canada* under the editorship of Doug Marshall. During this period I did twenty-nine reviews for the magazine. I enjoyed and am proud of a lot of this activity. My bio-critical article on Miriam Waddington is still, to the shame of the academy, cited as the most extensive piece of writing on her work. I welcomed Margaret Avison's *sunblue*, from a tiny Nova Scotia press, in very round and vivid terms when it had otherwise gone unnoticed and when awareness of Avison was in a trough. I reviewed with high praise Erin Moure's first book, from galleys, before it was published, and the review influenced, I would say even determined, the terms in which that book and her next two were discussed.

On the other hand, I savaged some poets who were much more prominent and influential than these, dismissing books of theirs that everyone else approved, and which are now generally regarded as classics. This didn't win me any affection, I imagine. But as I said before, there were other reasons for my disappearance and isolation, having to do simply with hard times.

**EJ:** I'd like to move now to your latest book, *Sequence*. Am I right to think that this book comes out of an occasion which isn't discussed in the text?

**AFM:** I had (or have?) aortal stenosis. This is an arterial hardening, and what it does is progressively narrow the degree to which the aortal valve opens, until a crisis state is reached, at which point the valve needs to be replaced, now that it can be replaced. This is a congenital condition. It was diagnosed in me as the condition underlying a heart murmur that emerged in one of my yearly physical exams in my early fifties. The cardiologist told me that the condition generally bespeaks itself in the fifties and has to be corrected in the sixties. This is exactly what happened with me. I'd been under observation for it for thirteen years when Dr. Drobac (Milutin Drobac) said to me he was sending me to his surgeon, Dr. David (Tirone David) for his opinion.

While all this was happening, I was struggling to complete my book. After the operation—this is a serious procedure, and it was difficult, and I had some complications, was in the hospital longer than had been expected—I wasn't up to much. Strength only gradually returned, and then only a little of it. It may be that this experience intensified the book. The whole situation and how I handled it certainly seems to parallel the themes.

I was going to dedicate the book to Theresa. I always think this is a sort of imposture. I could dedicate a book to many people, but not to her, because to dedicate it to her belittles her importance to it, which is total. As if I could really offer it to her in any way that goes beyond the way she has first offered it. Really, it ought to be she who dedicates my own book to me. But I thought of dedicating this one to her but she said no, dedicate it to the doctors, and that's what we did.

**EJ:** In the note to Part III, you write "The details of this section are from my experience, but..." There are clearly fictional and biographical elements to the "I," who at one point says "I am more than eighty years old..." Is the "I" consistent throughout? Or should we identify the "I" differently in each of the ten parts of the poem?

**AFM:** Identity is a vexed question. The book's meant to convey in its very form my feeling that in all its variety and changes, identity *is* identity, identity does exist, and does so through dedication, through unity of effort: "What thou lov'st well shall not be reft from thee / What thou lov'st well is thy true heritage". A person is a vow, a promise he makes to himself and others, a faithfulness to a love, and not in the sense that we usually give to making a vow, but in the sense of a decision which is an orientation of the total self. This grows from the self's origin, develops and increases, and gradually reveals its form and becomes apparent. Hence the importance of the theme of "roots". Our first place

seems to be our first love, first loyalty, or at least to express our first love well, to symbolize it well. At the same time, we have to move, we're not rooted, if we don't move we won't be living and human, so as to be or become worthy of the one we love. As Jiménez says: "Roots and wings. But let the wings take root, and the roots fly."

**EJ:** But *Sequence* is also a story.

**AFM:** I might discuss its story as one would discuss a novel. If you could go to the Greece of the time of *Zorba the Greek*, you would expect not to find Zorba. Zorba and the whole foreground of the novel is created by the novelist for his expressive purposes. On the other hand, you would expect to find the landscape, the material culture of the small towns, the folkways, exactly as Kazantzakis describes them, and you wouldn't be disappointed, no doubt. These are exactly true. On the other hand, in the foreground story, there are also many incidents, personal characteristics, and other elements that occurred in life—whether in Kazantzakis's own life or in lives he knew about—and that have been adapted into the fiction and that might be discovered. At this point, the truth of the foreground story and the truth of the background story blend their different natures. It's like this with my poem.

**EJ:** What about the form?

**AFM:** An idea, a feeling, found often in the book is that each day is a life, and so is each breath, each step, if we could only feel it: step, breath, day, life are equivalents, just as Gabriel Marcel shows us that life, hope and creativity are equivalents. We struggle to affirm the automatic ongoingness of the body—breath—which can be a torture to us when we would like to leave life but our animal won't let us. We struggle to connect the breath to the step, the willed going forward, the work we accept in one way or another, though it too can become just a weariness, a torture. These things have a rhythm. They mean that something stops and starts that does not stop and start, but continues, flows. The heart pulses and the breath moves like a goldfinch, which beats its wings and rises and then folds them and dips and then beats them again and rises, making a path of plateaus and shallow valleys.

I am trying to make the "free" verse itself a symbol—i.e., an emblem that is an emblem because it is another thing belonging to the same genus—of the flight of the bird. Each line is a segment of flight separate from and connected to the others, with mysterious gaps or cessations, which are not gaps or cessations, in between.

I feel this is a meaning inherent in free verse, and in another way in verse itself. More regular verse seems to mean the relatively trustworthy stability of repetition in similar form, yet the danger and questioning of the stops and turns are there. Free verse seems to emphasize the difficult need to remake each increment as a new thing, a new beginning, that is yet similar to the past it's part of. It needs to make itself as a corresponding if very different component, independent yet dependent, apart yet part, in order that the being should not disintegrate. It also seems to emphasize willy-nilly the sense of threat that exists in pulse, breath, and step, that each might be the last, that the

heart might not start up again, that the most recent footfall might prove the final one.

**EJ:** There are a number of refrains in *Sequence*, not least “What did you come out into the desert to see?” This is biblical, and like Jesus the speaker refers to himself as a “wanderer.” Where is the modern world in the poem?

**AFM:** As perhaps doesn’t need to be said after our comments about “Kissinger at the Funeral of Nixon” and “Artisan and Clerk”, the modern and contemporary world is all over my poems, in its material reality, in its conditions and themes, in its politics and sociology, in its incidents and personalities. I think of myself as the unity of my tensions, a unity forever sought, and one of my chief tensions is, Should I be Whitman or should I be Mallarmé? Should I include everything explicitly, which is so beautiful a thing to do, so powerful, so right, or should I severely essentialize, going deep, deep to the very end of depth, through one tiny jewel of approach, making as little concession as possible to any verbal elements other than the strictest needs of refined poetic expression—which is so beautiful a thing to do?

*Sequence* represents a moment of reaction from Whitman toward Mallarmé. I said to myself I wanted to sink, if that’s the word, into spiritual basics, and for once leave the specificity of the moment and history, our wars and our poisoning of the earth etc., outside my door. In this sense, you might say that *Sequence* takes place, all of it, in a single day: the days, pages, breaths, steps, each of which make up a part of a life and yet also are a life entire. *Sequence*, the whole of it, might be all one breath, one step, in which, nevertheless, everything occurs and has occurred.

**EJ:** Part VI of *Sequence* begins, “Still another retelling of the tale from a minor player’s part”. It seems to me that *Sequence* both criticises and works with that idea.

**AFM:** The idea of retelling a tale from the viewpoint of previously non-central characters goes way back. We only have to think of, for instance, *The Trojan Women*. Or Aeneas, previously a bit player, telling the tale of the fall of Troy...within whose re-envisioning is enfolded Sinon, previously it seems a non-existent player, telling the tale of the Greeks’ apparent withdrawal. In our time, it would be hard to count the number of poetic inhabitings of Persephone, Eurydice, and so forth, sometimes to critique what tradition supposedly uses the stories to mean by telling them from an objective or an Orpheus-centered viewpoint, and sometimes to draw out meanings that tradition has supposedly missed. This has been a procedure for some of the greatest passages or poetic elements in some of the greatest recent poets. The poem-section of *Sequence* that you mention refers to Seferis, the crucial prominence of Elpenor in his versions of the voyage of Ulysses.

If you want to call the above sort of thinking criticism, then *Sequence* and my work in general criticizes the minor-character-narration sub-genre. Here, though, I think the important thing is to look at the meaning through the dramatic situation, not just the lyrical impression. It is Ulysses who laughs at the notion, not me. And then Ulysses turns out to be, or turns into, an incoherent homeless person. Reliable? The self who is

harangued, sort of like the wedding guest in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, has to contemplate the spectacle of a ruined person, whose eloquent existence emerges also (at least as symbolized in the poem) as pointed speech: a person who is emblematic but who completes being and act with the word. It's the word, which comes only at the beginning, the first line and a half, that allows the speaker of the poem, the one confronted by "Ulysses", to see the reality. And near the end, he asks the question: "if we're not all kings, / we're nothing?"

**EJ:** Can you tell me something about the process of writing a longer piece like *Sequence*? Is it assembled sequentially? Or have the parts been moved around?

**AFM:** The answer is both. I had the idea of it, and this came after some of the poem-sections had been written as short poems, a page or usually less, sometimes much less. I thought these would make a succinct sequential poem, and as I began to assemble this, the idea for a more comprehensive book arose. This partially came as a concept, and partially as a result of the continuing production of these short poems out of one another, as the existing ones provoked others and they seemed to strive to fill out an entire trajectory.

They also revived and absorbed some previous material. For instance, the first six pages of Part VI, the pages about Ulysses that you mentioned in asking me the "minor character" question, were an earlier meditative poem. Some new material arose, and the existing material changed somewhat as this pre-existing poem separated into semi-independent poem-sections to fit into the concept of the forming book. A bigger example is Part III, the quasi-autobiographical part with the plot based very loosely on a one-paragraph incident in *Jude the Obscure*. This was something I intended to write and started to write about 1979 as a narrative poem on the models of "Aylmer's Field", and the early narratives of Robinson Jeffers, *Tamar* and "Roan Stallion" etc. I was going to write such a poem in an industrial context, not the context of the rural or the near-wilderness. Or rather, the encroachment of the industrial on the rural and wilderness which is the story of modernity. This project stalled but there was a lot of existing material and the love of the idea always stayed in my mind. One thing about poetry is that you're a poet entirely apart from writing anything because of the poems in your mind that as yet haven't gone farther.

—A *CNQ* Web Exclusive, January 2017

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