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## A.F. Moritz on the "illiterature" of poetry

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A.F. Moritz discovered his love of poetry at a very young age, sneaking off from the Cub Scouts to go read more Edgar Allan Poe at the library. Today the award-winning poet has more than 15 major collections to his name, including his most recent work [Sequence](#).

We asked Moritz to answer questions from our Magic 8 Q&A. He let us in on everything from the sweat, exhaustion and trembling he feels when completing a poem to his fear of failing to do justice to his subject matter.



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1. [Lynn Coady](#) asks, "Why do you write poetry? That is, why is it your chosen genre? What is it about the genre that you think makes it distinctive and/or important, vital?"

First off, poetry isn't a genre within literature. It's one of the dozen or so principal categories of human endeavour, along with literature, music, architecture and engineering, science (i.e., the

classical sciences, biology, chemistry and physics, taken as one), visual art and sculpture, mathematics, religion, philosophy, history, maybe a very small handful of others.

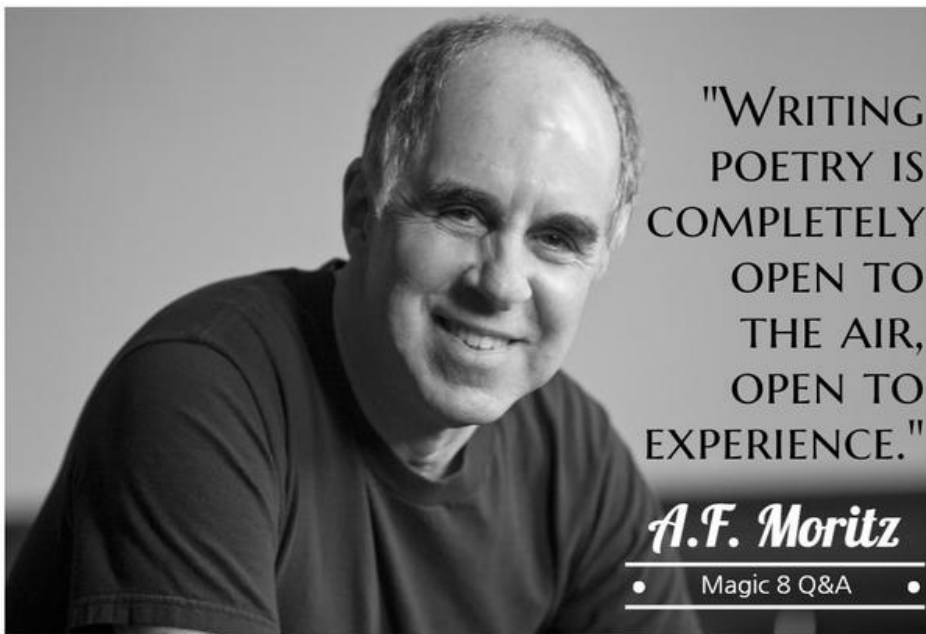
It's my chosen metier because, though not a precocious reader in the usual sense, as soon as I began to be taught reading at the start of grade one, I read at a very high level, and before Christmas of that year was immersed in some of the great stories, especially the tale of Troy and the Arthurian tales. Not in kids' versions; in Malory, in Gustav Schwab, etc. For two years I thought what I would do in life was write something like that. In grade three, I was fascinated by a small selection of Poe stories I received as a present, and one day, when my parents had dropped me off at the school for a Cub Scouts meeting, I waited for the car to get out of sight and skipped the meeting and went to the library to look for more Poe. I found a big two-volume edition with his poems at the end and, starting from the back, I read the poems, and immediately I changed. I wanted to write this, to write poetry, and that has stayed with me since, with the same astonishment of recognition, the same utter immersion.

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As I got a little older, I realized and prized that I'd been fascinated by poetry from much earlier, from well before I could read. I connected Poe and the other poetry I soon was reading to the poetry I had heard, from nursery rhymes adults read me out of books, to children's traditional street and play rhymes, to the Catholic liturgy which, of course, contains some of the world's great poetry. For instance, I can remember clearly that the suffering servant song of Isaiah was both searing and dear to me from before my ability to read, probably from a couple of years before, although times are impossible to recall precisely in that period of life just emerging from the childhood amnesia. Anyway, this poem has always remained as a chief basis of my work, as something that I remember constantly, and probably don't have to "remember": by now it simply is me. So too with the psalms, passages of Paul, and the like.

I soon realized that poetry is what I might call an "illiterature". For all the sophistication and total, even prophetic modernity it gains and accepts from the technologies of writing, it exists before them. And in its essence it exists apart from them. I deal with this for instance in my poem "The Underground". Poetry is ancient, primordial, like drawing, dance, conversation. So I prized the fact that I had repeated the phylogenesis of poetry in my personal ontogeny, if I can put it that way: it's like the popular metaphor in which the human embryo's development is seen as recapitulating the sequence of evolution. There was the shock of introduction into a splendour of human culture. But this was soon followed by my first recognition that poetry had already been in me before I encountered it in writing. And that this oral-aural poetry was preparing me for poetry's written form, and to some degree inoculating me against writing. Because the written form of the poem is a symbol of the poem, just as many of the contents of the poem are references to something else that isn't, maybe can't be, "said" straight out. As I gained more knowledge of the history and forms of poetry, this was always accompanied by a deepening of knowledge about the time before reading and writing, in me and in the race: the time of original poetry, of primordial poetry, so hard now to glimpse.

This is a big reason for the constant return in my poetry to the idea, the task, of retrieving the primitive. I use "primitive" in a wholly honorific sense: the ancient, the dawn, the fountain, the deepest past that is yet always with us, always present, always accessible. Of all the possible answers I could give to the part of Lynn's question about what I find important, vital, about poetry, maybe I should stop with this one. It's enough. Poetry constantly speaks from the origin. In fact, it's wrong to say that it speaks "from". It is the origin, speaking. It's one of the principal forms of the origin. It's the form and activity of origin as it exists in our consciousness-experience-utterance. Three things that are the same thing, just as creativity, life, and hope are three things that are the same thing.



2. **J.B MacKinnon** asks, “You can write your next collection at a desk with a view of the sea, of a busy European plaza, or of a blank wall right in front of your desk. Which do you choose, and why?”

This is one of those questions that I just have to answer “both/and, not either/or”. I’ve actually written poems, and hence the books that later came of them, in all the situations that J. B. MacKinnon names. But the list leaves out one of the most important sites, which doesn’t correspond to any of the three. I “write” almost all my poems while just going around. I write them in fragments in my head, first of all: songs that, usually, are just shreds of songs, though sometimes they’re fairly complete. This goes on in the streets, along the railway tracks, in a park, by a river bank, in a parking lot... Of course, I often forget exactly how they went and have to try to recall them later, or if I can’t recall them, reconstruct them. So writing occurs, whether while still on the fly or much later back at home at a desk. Then there’s also writing while going around: not dreaming up and maybe mouthing words, but sketching a written poem, a poem that is writing from its origin, in small notebooks or on scraps of paper in my pocket or by dashing into a fast food restaurant and stealing a napkin.

Writing poetry is completely open to the air, open to experience. For me, anyway. It takes place in the action of one’s body in the midst of the fluid interchange between moving and perceiving and responding. There does also come the moment when what you have been doing gathers, constellates, and calls you to sit down with it as continuously as you can stand to, and serve its completion, its intensification. After the composing in the open air, there’s the two or three months of working twelve hours a day, seven days a week, because it’s grasped you: the “it” that is the unity and fulfillment in the fragments. That kind of work sounds onerous, and it does have its difficulties, but it’s mainly a question of absorption, an experience that lies entirely beyond pain and pleasure, work and play. And this phase of the work does not occur facing a blank wall, a desk. Sometimes it’s in the companionable hum of a plaza or the gracious immensity of an ocean beach. And besides, the desk, the wall, isn’t so bad. It only sounds bad. When you’re absorbed, all is transformed. It’s one of the meanings of the idea of finding God in everything.

3. **David McGimpsey** asks, “What classic quote about writing could you live your entire life without ever having to hear again?”

David’s question is a hard one for me to answer. I’ve never sought or even paid attention to writing prescriptions and so can’t remember many. I guess I’d choose the commonplace that one should show, not tell, though that’s not exactly a quotation. Who knows, maybe someone once said it in a classic formulation that I just never came across. Anyway, it’s stupid. The poet, and also the writer in the case of fiction and such forms, has to use tact and experience to choose the effective, appropriate means for the moment that’s seeking expression. That might be telling (the approximately million things that might come under “telling”), or it might be showing (the million things that might come under “showing”).

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A second problem with this rule is that it joins with the prejudice that poetry should be "concrete", concreteness being conceived as descriptive or allusive detail. But it's truly a fool's game to pile up details, and even to describe them well, whether we're talking about all the things in a room, or all the chips on one of the things, or all the nuances of someone's feelings as he or she looks at one of the chips. Anyone who has gotten the idea of doing this, and can write a little, can do it, and it's boredom. In and of itself, it has zero to do with expression. The concreteness of a poem is poetic, it resides in the poem's voice, its physical characteristics and the human person and moment that shines through them. A poem in which every word is an abstraction will be utterly concrete and specific in itself if it's written with genius and originality. A poem that piles up the details, the 'things I, the poet, noticed or can come up with', will be in itself completely abstract and lifeless if it is not written with genius, if it is not in itself, as a poem, distinct and peculiar. It will become ever more dead the more it tries to compensate for the lack of fire and form with this method of "showing".

**4. Johanna Skibsrud asks, "What are some of your biggest frustrations while you work? In what ways do you continuously fail at what you do?"**

My biggest frustration while I work is the constant experience of failing to get something right and not knowing how to do it. This is a craftsman's worry, but it also connects to There are things I've received from my people, my loves, my losses, my experience, that I have never written because I don't feel adequate to them, and to write them inadequately would be to traduce them. It may be that everything can in principle be spoken of. But that doesn't mean that I myself can speak of everything that I possess, just because I might want to. So when you can't speak adequately, you should keep quiet. To speak adequately requires making a poem that is fit to join the world of your subject matter as a fully worthy element of that same world.

In Johanna's question, what does "while you work" mean? I literally work all the time, but in a lot of different ways. I think another big frustration I encounter "while I work" is that, after I work, I see imperfections and incompleteness in the poem which, while I was working, and especially as I was approaching the end of the work, were invisible to me. What had seemed securely adequate now doesn't seem so. This after-work perception, and the anxiety and desire it generates, is one of the most essential experiences of work.

It has some very good aspects. It falls in with a proper humility: no work of yours is going to be definitive, any more than is anyone else's. It's not going to be final for humankind or even just for you yourself. Any work always suggests what more there is to do: what in it is wrong, missing, partial, suggestive but unfulfilled, and so forth. This is one thing that leads you on to further work.

**5. Kim Thù asks, "Doctors are often the worst patients. Are writers better readers, or worse?"**

It's hard for me to answer. I'd have to know writers comprehensively, and readers comprehensively. My observation, based on myself, is that writers do not read better than other people. I'm constantly coming across readings by non-poets of even my favourite poems, which I've known for years, that are a revelation and an inspiration to me, readings that add perspectives I had not thought of and probably never would have thought of. These come from conversations with friends and others who are "general readers," from books and lectures by scholars and critics, from students in classes and in chats...from a lot of sources. One of my favourite things to do is to seek out these readings. I can remember, I had soaked myself in Blake since discovering him when I was twelve, and then, coming to university, I read Northrop Frye's *Fearful Symmetry*. What a revelation about something that in a way I knew up and down and had known for six years. I spent about two months thinking that Frye was greater than Blake himself before I regained my senses. I'll assign an essay about Octavio Paz or Hannah Arendt or Jacques Ellul, and then as I'm reading one of the papers, mainly thin and disorganized and not too correct, three or four sentences of astonishing insight will leap out. I'll have to go buttonhole that kid. I learn about the person who wrote the essay and I learn about *The Human Condition* or *The Technological Society*, which I've read nine times.

**6. Alan Bradley asks, "Does the act of writing ever have a physical effect on you? If so, can you describe it?"**

Yes, it always has a physical effect on me, but the effect is several effects, depending upon the

stage of the writing. When the writing isn't yet writing, or is scarcely yet writing, it's associated with an access of nervous energy and curiosity and what I can only call travelling...or "just going around", as I said above. In the end stage, when the work calls for completion, the writing causes a vigor of concentration that often continues to the point of exhaustion and trembling, although that doesn't cause me to stop work. The work pushes on through, and this is also a physical experience—working easily, enthusiastically, while at the same time exhausted. To me, a peculiar part of this experience is a stage of copiously sweating from the armpits to the point of producing drops that fall: I doubt this is unusual in itself, but what I notice about it is that it's exactly the experience and feeling I had whenever tremblingly on my way to meet a girl when I was thirteen or fourteen.

Those are a couple of the physical effects, and there are others. But just to stick with those two, for a moment, it's not accurate to say that I have the one feeling at some points in the process, and at other points I have the other. There's a more or less constant oscillation, with varying peaks and troughs of intensity, from one to the other.

**7. Charlotte Gray asks, "Do you think creative writing courses encourage or discourage originality?"**

Maybe the question just means to ask what I think is the usual result. I don't know. There are so many creative writing courses and I've seen very few. I never took one. They often are accused of or credited with such and such results, but I do not have any knowledge that they actually caused these results.

Maybe the question means to ask what I think is the nature of a creative writing course and the outcome logically to be expected from this. I don't think they have some essence that inevitably causes one result or the other. I don't think that one can teach creativity. One hopes for a course that has attracted mainly people who are truly talented and committed. Such a course is likely to encourage creativity in the sense that the people are there to be poets or writers and the course and the teacher are nothing but enriching experiences they've chosen to have, driven by their passion. Then the course is another experience for them alongside the summer they spent drunk on the work of William Carlos Williams.

*"I don't think that one can teach creativity."*

So for the course to encourage creativity, the teacher has to give up the idea of providing creativity, and has to hope to find and encourage a creative atmosphere, a small temporary literary cénacle, something that for the students will accompany the literary life they're leading, I hope...or more likely in this day and age, the literary life they're lacking.

What a course can teach is that writing is rewriting. Maybe it can help the student arrive at a valid perfectionism sooner than he or she otherwise would have. The teacher can insist on the aphorism, "Writing is rewriting". This is entirely true. Poetry is not rewriting. But getting the poem right for the preservation and broadcasting represented by the page, the screen, by the technology of writing: this is writing and it is always rewriting.

I'd say another valid thing the teacher can do is try to enforce another aphorism, "What isn't worth doing isn't worth doing well." If creative writing courses have one inherent flaw that's greater than others, it's that they automatically encourage everyone to squint earnestly at, and suggest the most minute and delicate improvements to, works that are thin, or slapdash, or commonplace, etc. The more perfect you get it, the more nonsensical it will be. So the teacher should try to subvert this.

**8. Shani Mootoo asks, "Do you find that you are influenced in any aspect of your writing by other art forms? If so, which and how. If not, why not?"**

It's easy to answer the first part with a yes, but hard to answer the second part without descending into a list. Probably I'd think first of folk song and the popular song. The blues, for instance, and doo wop and R&B, and North American versions of the border ballads, and the "American Song Book," Sinatra and Ella Fitzgerald and the like... stuff I grew up on. I draw from these all the time, i.e. "allusion," "intertextuality." Often I refer to them explicitly and quote them. Less visibly but more basically, they're in me as one vital source of form: they're in my soma, I'd say, in the same way as the poetry I mentioned above that I absorbed before I could read. Other kinds of music also come in very prominently, for instance, "classical" music.

Probably I use and refer to movies the next most after song. Bergman says that movies are mainly related to music, despite the fact that most see them as related mainly to fiction or drama. I agree

with Bergman. Since for me the most important of poetry's components and aspects is the musical one, I find in this an explanation of why as a poet I feel close to the movies.

On the other hand, I'm not really sure that I refer to the movies more than to painting. In *Mahoning* I've got a fifteen-part section, "The Faithful One," in which the speaker metamorphoses from being Claude Lorrain in the first third, to Goya and then Mark Rothko toward the end. And there's a lot on the drama in my work. As with movies closeness to music in Bergman's idea, the reason may be that the drama simply is very close to poetry. In fact, I'd say that almost the entirety of modern drama is poetic, and that the modern drama is best understood as poetry. Maybe Ibsen is in prose.

Just looking at even the basic level, subject matter, you'll find poems by me about films, about paintings, about statues, about pieces of music, about buildings and cities, about songs, about singers, musicians, composers, directors, painters, sculptors, architects, planners... I love them all. I think they're a part of life just as trees and lakes are, birds and tigers are.



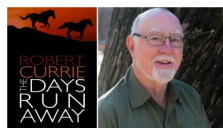
A. F. Moritz has published sixteen books of poetry, including *The Sentinel*, which won the Griffin Poetry Prize, was a finalist for the Governor General's Literary Award for Poetry, and was a Globe and Mail Top 100 Book of the Year. His most recent book is [Sequence](#).

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