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## A CITY OF MERE LIGHT

The poetry of A. F. Moritz

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It is a little-regarded fact of Canadian literature that the best of our writers are not novelists--though we do possess some good ones--but poets, among them the fascinating A. F. Moritz. His fourteen volumes of poetry constitute a substantial and impressive body of work. *Early Poems* assembles his four early and now unobtainable books: *Here* (1975), *Black Orchid* (1981), *Between the Root and the Flower* (1982) and *The Visitation* (1983).

Moritz is oddly undervalued in this country. Apart from being shortlisted for the Governor General's Award for *Rest on the Flight into Egypt* (1999), he has been passed over for the major prizes, and he is sometimes left out of accounts of Canadian poetry, which tend to promote work that is accessible and anecdotal. This stands in stark contrast to his reputation abroad. He has received a Guggenheim Fellowship and the Award in Literature of the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters, and has had a volume of his--*The Tradition* (1986)--included in the highly selective Princeton Poets series. His work has been lavishly praised by John Ashbery and W. S. Merwin. In one of the two forewords to *Early Poems* (the other, equally effusive, is by Don McKay), the eminent American poet and critic John Hollander recounts conversations he has had with Mark Strand and Harold Bloom, both of whom are fervent admirers of Moritz's work. Hollander himself, not willing to cede this poet to Canada where he has lived for thirty years, calls him "one of the strongest American poets of his generation." This is a perfectly reasonable assessment of Moritz's position in contemporary literature, but I would go a little further and describe him as a cosmopolitan figure and one of the most gifted poets now writing in English.

Moritz's obvious roots are in North America, but he has a substantial debt to



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English and German Romanticism, and his work contains symbolist, post-symbolist and surrealist elements that remind the reader variously of Mallarmé, Baudelaire, Breton, Montale and Moritz's South American collaborator, Ludwig Zeller. The combination of a religious and political vision, the fascination with consciousness, insight and judgement, and the refusal to accept material description as the fullness of knowing puts Moritz somewhere close to the philosophical stance described by Bernard Lonergan as "critical realism." In a review of his collection *Conflicting Desire* in Books in Canada (30:3), I described him, perhaps too exclusively, as a surrealist. That influence can be readily observed in such poems as "The Wheelwright" and "These Dwarves," and over the whole of his career he can be judged the most important surrealist poet in English after David Gascoyne. Yet Moritz generally speaks of his poetry as "allegorical":

It creates a strange, "illogical" story out of visible things, wrenching them from their normal positions and their obedience to laws of nature and habit, by making them subject to an invisible meaning which, it asserts, is their deeper reality. The strangeness of what they do forces the reader to look beyond the palpable for the forces controlling them and giving them their meaning. And it also forces the reader to look beyond the customary for the true key to their relationship with each other. But in the manner of modern poetry, the poem chooses its emblems not as from a fund of established image-meaning clusters but from the association the author perceives and asserts between things/words and meanings.

It is perhaps in the last sentence of this self-description that the new reader's difficulty with Moritz's work arises. Moritz's poetry develops its own recurring emblems: the vision of the city in ruins, the dehumanizing machine, the diseased or dismembered body, the river, the sun, the moon, the stigmatized hand. He regularly uses "type" characters in his poems--the giant, the giantess, the dwarf, the lover, the sister, the dictator, the prophet--all deployed in a moral interrogation of the inner structures of consciousness and obsession and their relation to the external structures of tyranny.

It is difficult to find in this book poems that are not worthy of praise, and, in my view, some of them are masterpieces. There are a great many splendid shorter poems, among them "A Leaf," "Ulysses en Route," "The Quest of the Egg," "On the Preserved Body of an Inca Child" and "The Mantis," but there are also sustained and distinguished longer works such as "You, Whoever You Are" and notably "The Visitation," a monologue by Elisabeth, the mother of John the Baptist, in which Moritz explores issues of faith, fertility, childbirth, prophecy and oppression. On another level, "The Visitation" is a reflection on the notion of the poetic "word" in the French tradition and ends with an accomplished and unsignalled parody of Mallarmé's sonnet, "Quand l'ombre menaça de la fatale loi." While it is on the one hand natural and passionate, Moritz's poetry is also at least as intertextual as that of authors whose quotations are always on display, but he prefers to absorb allusions into the textures of his work rather than to place "all the heating ducts and elevator shafts on the outside." As a scholar of nineteenth-century British poetry, he is quick to assert an aesthetic preference for Tennyson over Hopkins precisely

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on this point.

With all that said, it cannot be denied that Moritz often seems a forbidding poet to new readers, but unlike, for example, Ezra Pound, his obscurities are always functional, and the effort of understanding them is invariably repaid. Perhaps the best introduction to his work is to focus on one of the longer poems, “The Death of Francisco Franco,” which is both representative of his method and, in itself, one of the finest poems I have read in a long time. It opens in a traditional manner, reminiscent of Wordsworth or Coleridge, with the speaker situated in a definite place; in this case, sitting on a bench overlooking a wooded ravine. He remembers that in this very place in October 1975 he wrote a surrealist “hate poem” or “curse poem” on Francisco Franco. While the rage is still present, the poet is now left to wonder how much denunciation changes the world.

Near the opening, we learn that Franco’s death was made unnatural by attendant technicians, who, “in their unfelt fear / at this ending, gulf or bridge, trammeled him / in wires and tubes and held him back.” His moribund body becomes the emblem of a diseased system. Moritz provokes the reader with the following lines:

*Franco. I showed him: man playing tennis  
with a lice-ridden chicken for a ball.  
I described how his nose was a gun  
which he blew in the petals of his daughter.*

There is no mystery in these lines, even if the combination of images is startling. The tennis-playing Franco has trivialized the political process; the lice-ridden chicken indicates his parasitism; the discharge of his nose is disgusting, murderous and destructive of innocence. These foul, nightmarish and, above all, unnatural images are immediately contrasted with a remembrance of autumn winds and the symbols of another death:

*. . . And the curled shreds,  
the dispossessed, the leaves, were still supple  
with an imitation life, the last of sap  
caught in the cut off veins. Lifted  
from the ground or torn from boughs,  
they eddied past me and dived in crowds,  
shades of myth whirled by a last passion.*

The speaker remembers feeling water rising through rainless days “from a source in the earth,” and in the death of Franco there was some reassertion of the natural:

*. . . a spring rising in October in spite of reason  
and the year’s cycle. A human spring,  
escaping only when deprivation*

has stripped the husk away,  
when there is nothing left of its old world  
for the seed to eat. Touching the external,  
the soil, the water and the air, and feeling  
above it through the mass the presence,  
the possibility of light, it can begin at last  
to augment itself and to live indeed.

Where there is hope of regeneration, it is possible even to “look forward to winter,” although the speaker fears that what has been lost will not return and that he has been in the grip of nostalgia. Yet he will not surrender his trust in the possibilities of natural desire and holds to the mysterious “promise” of renewal.

Much of this poem, and of Moritz’s work generally, turns on the imagery of flesh and blood. The abstract, mechanized or grotesque body is at odds with the body of innocence, in which desire reaches lovingly towards its other. However, the psyche and the political order are often locked as cause and consequence in a cycle of pathology. In this poem, the oppressive unreality of the dictator’s power is a torpor that covers the world like a foul body:

*That November Franco passed from death to death.  
In life he was dust, and only the spit  
of all good people  
gave him weight and kept him on the earth,  
stayed him in the real, prevented the wind  
from carrying him off to the realm of pure cruelty.  
In life he never awakened, but his snoring shadow  
spread out over the world. There in Spain  
they were covered by his anus and genitals:  
an elephant hidden by a dime.*

Yet the poet has lived to see the death of Francisco Franco. Time has brought the dictator down:

*All that we hated, all that we opposed  
is broken up. A winter-in-summer is ended,  
summer of seductive ice, the fleshly glow  
shining among reeds and green mounds,  
and over the face of the strictest wall  
a soft wind and birds in the blue-flowered vine.  
O sack of corruptions: body that we loved,  
falling apart, as a rotten mass in autumn  
goes its separate ways on the stream,  
or as ice shatters in the spring.*

Franco created a “false season” that drove great artists from Spain and forced heroes into caves and corners. The end of his regime, however, is hardly the

consequence of political protests, of great paintings or “curse poems”. He died merely because nature could not be resisted:

. . . But did anything that these men said,  
anything that I said, sitting here on this bench  
in October 1975, persuade those hands  
that reached at last through nature and bit by bit  
tore Franco into death? Only our living,  
which is the aging of the world, and was Franco’s aging  
had that power.

In this poem, Moritz is remembering an earlier poem he has written and so is reflecting on the power of the poet to effect political change. Certainly, he honours the struggle of those who resisted Franco and is hardly a quietist in political matters, but he also realizes that the poets did not bring down fascism in Spain--death did that. A great portion of this poem is given over to landscape description, since for Moritz the only true political poetry is rooted in the mysteries of nature. Ultimately, he looks for revolution in the cycles of the year and in the ordained processes of birth, desire, fertility and death:

*The feathery leaves come out in the street  
and among them the lamps light  
of their own accord. And men return  
to monuments that begin to move,  
to a deserted city intact, to empty land  
already staked out in farms, where Franco  
is a dried leaf that blows away.*

For Moritz, natural processes tend toward liberation and so speak to a deeper ordering of reality, a religious vision which is approached from many directions in this volume. In an age which chooses to see nature and human identity as passing constructs, this most experimental of poets asks to be made a prophet, listening “for a rumour of why the stars / flee and in what direction.” Although his work is profoundly influenced by Freud, he holds firmly to a belief that there is something sacred and durable about human beings. For him, all true perception widens into vision: “All this we recall while outward / our eyes are opening / into a city of mere light.”

