



Sequence : An Extended Interview with James Wood

Sequence : An Extended Interview with James Wood

JWW: What inspired the writing of *Sequence*?

AFM: I think that primarily it came out of the ongoing development of my poetry, its successiveness. All poems have to have an occasion, of course: a happening that condenses a background power and awareness into a specific moment of form. But the main inspiration is...inspiration. The main inspiration is within the person constantly: a dynamic state of connection to creativity, life.

Let me stop aside to say: I'm a proponent of the tradition of inspiration, like Octavio Paz and like Breton and the surrealists. To say I'm a "proponent" is, I suppose, a concession to civilized discourse, in which you're supposed to admit your position may be arguable. It would be more honest of me to say I'm certain from direct experience that poetry is a mode of expression (which is to say a mode of existence) of the ongoingness, energy, essence of life and non-life. It's not an ability with language. It's a seizure of the substance and surface of language by language's depth, which is simultaneously the depth of everything. It's an

indwelling on the part of this depth, forcing the exterior existence to a momentarily more adequate realization of its own possibility. Its possibility, which is its nature, the underlying. Its possible future, which is its primordial given nature and its present accomplishment, though mysteriously veiled, though still needing realization. “The everlasting Universe of things / Flows through the mind,” as Shelley puts it. “A might Mind,” says Wordsworth, “What in itself it is and would become.”

Usually people think of the sudden, rare access to this as the “inspiration” of a poem but I think of inspiration primarily as the underlying reality. In a word, inspiration is motive. Another word for motive is origin. Philosophy and science massively fail to grasp motive. It’s the main fact of existence. Poetry is motive and, on its intellectual-cultural side, it’s the consideration of motive.

We don’t always feel inspired, in the usual sense of the word. We often feel tired, defeated, blocked...feel as if life is dreary, narrow, and the like. When I look at *Sequence* now, it seems clear to me that not only is its inspiration “inspiration” in the larger sense I’ve mentioned, but its subject is the relation of the two inspirations. The weariness, the sense of age and impossibility, at the beginning and elsewhere, incorporates and expresses, implicitly, nearly silently, the persistence of creativity even within this state. On the first page, the tired, aging traveller’s legs are like “damp logs that flicker with pains”. In this image I read that the body now impedes the fire, and yet it persistently burns, it flickers. This feeble burning is painful to it, as if life in this state is just a torture that the self wishes it could dismiss. But on the other hand, “flicker with pains” indicates that the pains themselves are flames, the flames of the persisting fire. You might say the rest of the book cups or tents this spark in the wet until it can be nursed back to burning, until the fire that’s within, possible, flares.

One aspect of my experience is that poetry seems to inspire itself, one poem seems to inspire the next, until you realize that, in one sense, the poems are places in a current, in another sense they're flowers rising from the same rhizome, in another sense they're stages of one another like new growth in spring on a tree. The other side of this coin is that you're aware that you're working on problems, like a philosopher and like a carpenter. Any poem just finished, just written, suddenly implies questions and objections that it hasn't covered, suddenly brings you to a new horizon from which you see territories not previously glimpsed. This is creativity: it does *not* come from us, this we know with inward certainty, and yet it couldn't be accomplished without us. It's a simple spontaneous happening that requires planning, skill and work. The substance and thrust are given, but these are not only an elan but the critical tendency of the mind to evaluate its environment and situation.

JWW: So if inspiration and creation are continuous for you as a writer, what specifically occasioned this work?

AFM: I had to have a serious heart operation toward the end of my work on it. This was for a congenital condition that had been detected fourteen years earlier. After recuperating for about a month, I was back to perfecting the book, which turned out to be a final significant stage of composition, because I saw a lot of changes to make, in arrangement, and to a certain extent in contents—changes that also provoked and required some new writing, beyond just the types of rephrasing or slight additions or omissions that shifts of position for texts often require in them.

After *The New Measures* was published in 2012, I saw my operation, which I knew was in the offing, as my next object or

encounter. Writing *Sequence* was more or less coextensive with this realization, first of all, then with the visits to the doctors: the concentrated writing in the run-up to the operation, the new work after it: a sort of waking up on the other side of the complete nothingness of the anaesthetic and the cutting. You might die, you're as good as dead, you're not dead.

Sequence is unusual among my books in that it came together in, more or less, the two years before the publisher's deadline, December 2015. With the exception of *Conflicting Desire*, which similarly was composed during the two or three years immediately leading up to its publication, all of my books are made up of poems that were first drafted no more recently than eight years prior to the book publication date. The poems develop over that period.

JWW: How do you see the new book's relationship with your wider body of writing?

AFM: In terms of its development out of my poetry, *Sequence* was provoked by *The New Measures* (2012), my previous book, and by the thirteen-part sequence that concludes it, "Open House". That poem addresses the fearfulness of transformation through openness: how can one accept all things, open to all things, and remain oneself...remain *anything* oneself? It ended on a note of embracing a future of making the self into a "house all doors". The poem led me to a sharpened sense of the fearful aspects of existence that must, if this is true, be let in. It's not so simple to say we can survive them, can survive the process of admitting them, or can look with equanimity on the notion that we *will* admit them whether we want to or not. Hence, *Sequence*. It was the next part of an unwinding skein that was a joy and enthusiasm of discovery, but also was a frightened, reluctant but

“determined” (in both senses) next step, and also was a critical examination of a crux in life, attitude, behavior.

There are a lot of relationships between *Sequence* and other moments and aspects of my poetry. Let me stick to a few. There’s more to be said about the sequential poem: I’ve always loved the sequence, from Whitman and Tennyson to Seferis and Bonnefoy, and you find it in my poetry from the start. There are sequential poems in *Black Orchid* (1981) and in *The Visitation* (1983). In the latter book, the sequence “You Whoever You Are”, the title a phrase from Whitman, is especially important to me. *A Houseboat on the Styx* (1999) is a book-length sequential poem. So is *Mahoning* (1996), though it’s disguised as a collection and the disguise was so successful that no one, apparently, has noticed that it’s a composed book, with as tight a unity as a novel, though of a poetic type. And I can also mention that within *Mahoning* as a whole there are several shorter, but still extensive, sequences that are plainly such, are made of numbered parts.

Then, journeys are everywhere in my work, and they mostly seem to be journeys back home, or in other instances journeys that try to get back home but as in one of those bad dreams just keep getting farther and farther away and into more and more frightening impasses. *Sequence* seems to me a comprehensive doing of this theme or obsession.

Related to this is the fact that in the book the central figure moves, advances in time, ages as it were, from age to childhood. Childhood defines home and is home. Something else you find throughout my work, for instance in *Mahoning*.

Then too, *Sequence* is an attempt to move toward simplicity in the constant oscillation I have between the simple and the complex,

the purified or essentialized and the all-inclusive. You might say its an attempt to converge and unite these by building up a complex out of the simple, and demonstrating, by the way in which every page in the poem refers to every other page in explicit or implicit but clear ways, that in fact the simple is the most complex, includes all complexity. This is a perception you find throughout my poetry.

I'll mention one more. *Sequence* expresses or explores the aphorism "everything is the essence", which I've recently been fiddling with as an attempt to condense my views. That is, the forces and structures that exist, exist only in and as the body and self. Only in and as each instant of the body and the self in its whole reality. The self's essence is not some refinement of it but everything that it is, which is the current state of everything that it was and is going to be. Current is the best word for present because it has both needed meanings. Being "is" only in and as the body and self.

The arrow of rational intellectuality, with its emphasis on the anatomy, the underlying structure, the patterns and forces that we and all things are just instances of, is pointed 180 degrees in the wrong direction. The body and all things that it implies by needing them—the *whole* world: *this* is the summit, the basis, and the most true. Searching for its reason is alright so long as you remember—but it's almost never remembered—that the reason is a mere subordinate component of the thing. This applies equally to all the discoveries or wisdoms about the unseen in physics, and in Buddhism, and in Heidegger, etc. The facts they get at are so. The cultural meaning they draw from the facts is entirely wrong. The sweep or structure is not more important or real or long-lasting than the individual thing in its instant. The sweep and structure does not even exist except as the individual thing and

instant. If there is any eternity, any immensity, it is you. This stance, which is all over my poetry early and late, is strong in *Sequence*. I was aware of wishing to develop it sharply, in writing the book. This idea in fact is the reason for the title: the central and supernal dignity, the eternity and infinity, of the individual life in time. One thing after another, one foot after another, day after day.

JWW: In the notes to *Sequence*, you reference writers as diverse as Tennyson and Walt Whitman as influences and precedents in the tradition of the long poem. Are you consciously aware of these influences as you compose – or are they part of the general ambit, what Forster envisaged as generations of writers in the same room in his mind, as you write?

AFM: *Sequence* is a long poem in sequence form and that itself is influence and allusion. I've always loved the sequence, from Whitman and Tennyson to Seferis and Bonnefoy, and you find it in my poetry from the start. There are sequential poems in *Black Orchid* (1981) and in *The Visitation* (1983). In the latter book, the sequence "You Whoever You Are" (the title's a keynote phrase of Whitman's) is especially important to me. *A Houseboat on the Styx* (1999) is a book-length sequential poem. So is *Mahoning* (1996), though it's disguised as a collection and the disguise was so successful that no one, apparently, sees it as a unified book. Within *Mahoning* there are several shorter but still extensive sequences that are plainly such: are made of numbered parts.

When it comes to influence and allusion, I think it's generally better to write out of what's entered your soma than to quote things sought out or noted for the purpose. Pound said that 'culture begins when you have forgotten from which book'.

Specific allusions of course can be important and effective, but in fact the most powerful sort of allusion is the resonance or echo of past poetry in one's lines, palpable but impossible to isolate.

Ungaretti had the idea that the poet's job, from the standpoint of culture, is to listen the poetic signature of his language tradition in all its changes through time (we have to remember that his translation work indicates that this includes Shakespeare, Virgil, Greek lyric, etc., not simply Italian) and to recreate it in the form that is possible in the poet's own time. This will be different, but the same. You will be able to hear Leopardi and Petrarch in Ungaretti without his being in the least imitative, and then any direct references will be subordinate to that. *La Terra Promessa* is a perfect example of this, in its engagement with Virgil. And, by the way, the poem from that book called, in English, "Choruses Descriptive of Dido's State of Mind" is one of the great sequences.

A final point. This view of influence goes to the heart of my poetry. One of its bases is that there's no separation between the visceral and the intellectual. There can be, of course. We can make an arid, arrogant intellectuality and we've done so. We can make a stupid vitalism, a crude parody of burning with a gemlike flame, and we've certainly done so. But the conflict between the visceral and the intellectual is not necessary, is not there in essence, is not there in the healthy and whole human being. The mind is of the body, the body is of the mind. In poetry, what is learned is of the blood and is experience. And physical and emotional reality is acquired, learned, improved...is of the mind. The cultural past is the poem's body as much as the personal past is. There is no membrane between the two. That they are separated for discussion should not be mistaken for the reality.

JWW: How do you write? Do you have a set time for writing each day, as Auden did, or do you keep notebooks? Are there any conditions that are important to you (room, time, place) for writing?

AFM: I don't have any routine that's persisted lifelong or over years. I constantly develop routines that last weeks or months and come to their end, in a new method, or even a quiet period, a buffer between one method and the next.

But there's one thing that's a constant: I follow a rhythm. First, sketching or drafting, in which poetry is "open to the air" – it occurs as I go through nature and the city. Second, intense work at my desk, many hours a day, every day of the week, for weeks or months: hours jammed into the days even when I have to be very busy with work for pay. This is the stage of seeing what you have, of gathering things together, improving, elaborating, deleting, adding. The book as the unit of composition, a new stage of creativity, not just because revision is creative, but because new poetry becomes suggested, needed, sung. These two phases aren't always entirely separate. I'll still be writing quick drafts and fragments, sometimes, while I'm in the "book" stage. For of course life as well as my loves and habits compel me to keep going around even when I'm largely at the desk.

That part, the drafting and sketching, is precious to me. I read in biographies, when I was 19 or 20, that Whitman composed this way: that affirmed for me of what I was doing and how I thought about it: the practice of composing as part of living. Part of being where you are. Then maybe thirty years later, I read Karl Rahner's "theology of going around", and that was another affirmation. These greats had discovered the same thing...before

me, it's true, but unbeknownst to me when I was developing it. Maybe the greatest, simplest, deepest capture of this is by the greatest thinker and poet, Breton: "soluble fish".

JWW: Excellent. I wasn't aware of that formulation from Breton. Your thoughts on the compositional method, what Shakespeare saw as being "subdued/ to what it works in, like the dyer's hand" – the poet being as much acted upon as actor – are some distance from the current view of creativity as a series of neurological impulses. To what extent are you conscious of being separate from today's trend for "neuro-aesthetics" and the quasi-scientific analysis of the creative process?

AFM: I'm far from disregarding cognitive science, the current neurobiological emphasis in psychology, and so forth. Who has time to keep up with all of this, but I find interest in what I know of it. But it can only give us ancillary approaches to creativity, and furthermore, approaches that have to be kept under watch.

By now the devastating critique of analytic rationalism, developed over more than a century, and already plain in Romanticism, is unarguable. Analysis can't encompass reality. Description is impossible, and to the extent it is possible, does not constitute or even resemble explanation, in any true sense that might be given to "explanation". Perhaps we should rather say that analysis is always retrospective and dresses up its explanations as creations that are coeval with reality, whereas they are always and only re-assemblages of selected, i.e., separated, elements from the past. Culturally and psychologically, analysis causes, and is, divorcement from reality. Yet one of the laws of its being is what we can call, speaking anthropomorphically but precisely, its arrogance. It automatically begins ever and again to substitute

itself for reality. The unarguable critique is “argued” by simply being disregarded, except for the occasional plaintive, defensive lecture by a humanistically inclined scientist.

With regard to neuro-aesthetics: neurobiological psychology, and cognitive science, bear the same relationship to poetry as biology does to a tree. Or better, to the whole of nature, to the whole of the living given and the entire nonliving reality it reposes on and emerges from. The tree was there before anyone suspected cells and mitosis and photosynthesis. Yet all that was in the tree and was in the poem when someone pronounced “tree”.

Do we now have a better understanding of the tree? In some respects, but it’s impossible to privilege those respects, although analytical rationalism automatically continues to do so. No one wants to forget there are cells or that we know something about how they work. No one wants to do away with scientific taxonomy, and so forth. But these cause a loss of *other* knowledge. It may be that some “advance” may lead to a knowledge of the tree that is just as unsuspected by us as biology was unsuspected by the people of long ago. However, such an advance is present right now in poetry. It’s the advance of retaining the ancient, of retaining that which is at once primordial, present, and prophetic: the prefigured and already accomplished presence of the future.

JWW: That’s what I’d call a bold statement. I would argue there’s a kind of rationalist hegemony at the moment, a sense that if you can’t quantify something, it’s not valid. And I think it’s this factor which has led to the attempt to blend empirical discourse with discussions about the unquantifiable through disciplines such as neuro-aesthetics...

AFM: Neuro-aesthetics will never be more than a schema, a description, perhaps helpful in some respects if it isn't take too seriously, of what is done in the poem, in making and contemplating.

The great thinkers of this idea – ever-present possibility as source, past, present, and future – are, in our day, Octavio Paz and Yves Bonnefoy. Especially Paz, for his presentation of it in great poetry and in great conceptual statements, essays, and for the unity, the resemblance, of these two parts of his work. He makes them “communicating vessels”, to use another of Breton's phrases.

But I'd like to add one important point here, a qualification yet something essential. I said cognitive science is to poetry as biology is to a tree. We have to add, though, that poetry, in being human, includes all thought...includes analytical rationalism. Poetry, and the human, is a thoughtful and a talking tree. In the balance that is poetry, analysis is included with, and thus subdued among, the other parts of the human: bodily feelings, relationships and emotions, the experience of culture and society and history, our thoughts and doubts about these things, our present circumstances and our memories, our realizations and our sense sometimes of a failure or loss of awareness or understanding...the whole of the human.

However, nothing that starts out in the human ever really leaves it behind. We have to be thankful for this. Analysis itself contains in itself, obscurely, its own humbling. The famous discoveries of Godel, Heisenberg, Bohr, Skolem indicate that even the most precise sciences, mathematics and physics, can't touch bottom. It's interesting that the typical response to these things among

specialists today is that “they are not bothered” by them, because they do not represent a “fatal flaw” in whatever matter is at hand. Set theory. Subatomic particles. Either a change in syntax is adopted in which the anomaly is not “serious”, or research simply goes on in the face of formal impossibility, so that the practitioner is buffered by immersion in the sociology of his work and can disregard the merely philosophical issues.

However, even if these things can be gotten over, new ones of the same type arrive. Science continually comes up against its own inadequacy, in its own terms. As poetry contains analysis and all the other parts of the human, fully and willingly, so analysis contains unknowability, though with reluctance and continuously attempted denial. This is a phenomenon parallel to the fact that we can abstract ourselves from death, but not really, because we’re going to die. The choice is between accepting it and living it, or denying and trying to live something else until, finally, we’ll find that it imposes itself. This keeps happening to science. And science keeps putting it off with the notion that one day all will be known in the sense of “explained”, even though this day keeps getting farther and farther away. And has to, and always will, for the reason I mentioned earlier.

JWW: That’s right. I remember when the human genome project was underway, claims were being made that sequencing the genome would allow for all manner of new cures. Instead, it led to the discovery of epigenetics; those genetic factors which are affected by our behaviours, both emotional and physical...

AFM: Right. And if it be said that this merely means that science, like poetry, has to change its form by incorporating new premises, and has to expect this process to continue, well, that’s just one

more thing that poetry knows much earlier and much better. I could sum up this somewhat wandering point this way. Science stands to poetry exactly as it stands to a tree, *except that* in poetry – the human tree – science itself is included in nature. In poetry, science is revealed to be a part of nature, is shown never to have left it, although it is a particular part, with its own form and dignity. And nature will always and anew disclose its horizon beyond any explanation.

JWW: When I studied the relationship between religion and poetry with Geoffrey Hill, he would discuss the relationship between the poet's work and musicianship, the importance of practice to the craft of poetry, much as a musician might practice scales. Thus the specific occasion – which we've touched on earlier in this interview – sparks off influences and experiences to create the poem. The poet becomes a kind of barometer, responding to specific pressures in his or her environment. Would you agree with that point of view?

AFM: This makes me think back to what we were saying before, about “inspiration” as a steady state of creativity—life and hope—and also as an occasion, as the explosion into form, into a particular poem, when a person has an encounter.

It also makes me think of what I was just saying about Paz, who was a friend and a descendant—never a “disciple”—of Breton's: Paz's idea of poetry as, of course, the art of verse, but also as a word for the pith of creativity, in all the arts, in life itself.

Thus, practice might be a making ready for a great occasion, and a seeking of an occasion. Yet the poem comes when the greater inspiration floods into the occasion, floods in through the occasion. You mentioned a course or lectures by Hill on the

relation of poetry and religion. Here we've got a parallel to the idea in religion, or at any rate in Christianity, that one must try to learn to pray, but finally it's only the Spirit prays in us. That one must work to be worthy but that salvation only comes from grace freely given...and even the work to be worthy of grace comes only from the grace itself.

You're lucky to have studied under Hill! I love his work. I loved his earliest books but now perhaps I love *The Triumph of Love* best. His idea that you quote is one I believe in. I didn't know, before you said this, that it was a position of Hill's. I first read it—or something much like it—in Pound, where he says that the poet must practice daily or he won't be ready, won't have adequate expressive and formal abilities, when a great moment comes. I remember Rubinstein's joke: "When I don't practice for a day, I notice; when I don't practice for two days, my wife notices; when I don't practice for three days, everybody notices."

JWW: ... and I'd not heard the joke from Rubenstein before. I imagine that the analogy between the poet's craft and that of the musician is hardly perfect, though ... obvious differences include the different ways in which musicians and poets express concepts such as tone and mood, and how the listener, or reader, derives meaning from their work?

AFM: Yes, but I think the idea is right as an overall schema, or useful means of comparison. When I read it first in Pound, it was illuminating. I'd learned the piano all my life and didn't think of my work on writing in terms of the word "practice". So Pound's idea was one of those strokes of illumination that come when you receive just the right word, the right concept, for what you're doing. It's exactly what you're already doing, because you grasped it instinctively and experientially, but on the other hand,

the statement transforms it.

Within my concept of inspiration, the idea of practice represents one danger. You try always to grasp and manifest the deep inspiration. Every moment can be an occasion to the alert soul. This is liable to make you think that every poem you write is a poem, is not practice.

In a sense you'd be right. Every poem is a poem. But not necessarily a good one. When you're practicing, but practicing by means of trying your best to write poems, not by means of purposely writing exercises, you have to be careful. You have to be careful to criticize severely afterwards. You have to throw a lot away. Or keep it in your notebook as "thoughts" toward real work.

This criticism, the kind that requires throwing things away, is something entirely different from the criticism inherent in laboring hard to perfect everything about a text you've written. This is a form of practice. But just because you've produced something doesn't mean that getting it as flawless as possible will make it good. I apply an aphorism: "What isn't worth doing, isn't worth doing well." This should be hung up in nice crocheting at the head of every creative writing classroom. It's often at the end of getting a piece absolutely right that you realize it's only worth throwing away.

You said that the occasion "sparks off influences and experiences to create the poem". That's what I find. The poem flashes *from* the occasion, but it also emits sparks of new experience and even of new "influence", in that the new poem newly illuminates everything it alludes to.

If the occasion "sparks off" experiences the way clashing flint and

steel make a spark, what the poem, the spark, contains is the original collision, in a new form. What I see in poems is a multiplicity of elements in a new whole. Paz says that every poem is a model of the unity of the universe in all its harmony and discord. Even if the subject of the poem is the anger of the hero, the sorrow of a lonely girl, or the dissolution of the identity of a man staring in a mirror.

JWW: So for you, the art of poetry is a kind of combining of act and occasion, comingling experience and observation, what the Germans might call a *Ganzheitstheorie* of what it is to be human?

AFM: Yes, exactly. And here's one of those places where, as in Bergson's method, the method is one with the subject, the fact studied. I have a "totality theory" or "wholeness theory" of the poem, of the art of poetry, which is consonant with my view that the poem is, as Paz says, a model and instance of the wholeness of existence and of being.

I love in a poem the sense of inexplicable but inevitable togetherness. This to me is the sense of life: is "mystery", in Gabriel Marcel's terminology: something seen wholly and brilliantly but which is inexhaustible to contemplation. This is a sort of spatial form of the temporal nature of identity, which the poem participates in. We can't predict what our friend will do, but as soon as he does something completely surprising we see that it is a perfect part of him. A poem is a picture in which you can't understand why all the things in it are there, but it's a perfect picture, they all belong, and nothing else, even though other things really could belong. And so the next poem starts to come.

It seems to me that, when you can honestly see in your poem a

barely-held-together and writhing concourse of things, a careening trip through far-flung places, a seemingly impossible trip because the places do not, it seems, even neighbor each other—and when, nevertheless, the chaos is togetherness, and the careening somehow doesn't wreck but is a journey of enjoyment, exhilaration, and precious memory—when the complete illogic of the poem has the logic of the astonishment at a real thing: that it is real! that it *is!*—then you have a poem that you don't have to throw away because it was just practice.

The Authors

Born in Scotland and educated there and in Canada, **James W. Wood** is the author of four chapbooks of poetry and the full length collection *The Anvil's Prayer* (2013). His long poem about the migration of generations of Scots to Canada, *The Emigrant's Farewell*, will be published in June 2016 by the UK-based High Window Press (www.thehighwindowpress.com)

Albert F. Moritz (A.F. Moritz) is the author of 20 books of poetry. He has received the Award in Literature of the American Academy of Arts and Letters, the Guggenheim Fellowship, the Ingram Merrill Fellowship, *Poetry's* Bess Hokin Award, and selection to the Princeton Series of Contemporary Poets. In 2009, for his collection *The Sentinel*, he was the recipient of the Griffin Prize, the world's largest and one of its most prestigious awards for a volume of English-language poetry. He has also won the ReLit Award, Canada's "anti-Griffin", for *Night Street Repairs* (2004), which in 2010 was named one of 39 "books of the decade" by the Toronto *Globe and Mail*. He has three times been a finalist for Canada's national literary prize, the Governor General's Award. A Canadian citizen, Moritz was born in Ohio and moved to Canada in 1974.