



Week 57 – A.F. Moritz presented by Elana Wolff

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Upcoming Author Events

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[Jessica Moore reads in Montreal](#)

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[Carolyn Smart reads at Twisted Poets literary salon in Vancouver](#)

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[Carolyn Smart reads at Planet Earth poetry series in Victoria](#)

TIME: 7:30 PM - 9:30 PM

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Albert Moritz attended the Guernica Editions group launch at the Supermarket in Kensington (Toronto) this past spring. He arrived early. I was photographing the event, so I was there early too—chatting, snapping, making my rounds. When I came to the table Al Moritz was sitting at, I lingered. He spoke warmly of the translations Guernica publishes, of the importance of translations, and of his personal connection to the poetry of Octavio Paz. I got a few good shots—Al looking serious and casual in a brown crew-neck under a mauve plaid button-down. I would have liked to linger longer, but I had to move on.

In October, browsing the poetry section at Indigo Richmond Hill, I came upon Al Moritz’s new collection, *Sequence*. I picked it up, examined the cover art. Before flipping through the pages, I scanned the back cover blurb: “In *Sequence*, the human person moves ... through a haunting mercurial world... the poems pursue innocence through imagined landscapes and the lush world waiting outside the writer’s window. This is poetry of intense observation...”

I was a bit mystified by the term “human person.” Isn’t a “person” ipso facto “human”? Also intrigued—by the pursuit of “innocence” and by the relationship of “imagined landscapes” (images in the mind) to “observation” (the action or process of closely looking at persons or things in the world). I didn’t need the blurb to make me want to buy the book, but the wording did bring me in. I bought the book and have since been engaged in the rite of reading and rereading.

Sequence is a long poem divided into ten sections, and according to the Notes, influenced primarily by two modern sequential poems: Tennyson’s *In Memoriam* and Whitman’s *Song of Myself*. But the allusions extend beyond the modern, beyond the sequential, and the English: There are eight pages of notes at the back of the book.

I first read fluidly—not bothering to interrupt rhythm by flipping to the back to check sources. It’s easy to do with this poem. Though long—over 140 pages—it flows. And it’s not visually dense. There’s generous white space and the line-lengths and cadences vary. The tone too—by turns conversational, philosophical, taut, open, gnomic. There are repetitions and echoes—the reading-voice is buoyed along, the reading-eye remembers. It’s a reassuring experience, even when the content slightly shocks. I say slightly—because there’s nothing gratuitous or sensationalist in this writing. It feels pure, truthful, reverent.

Every so often in reading poetry (or prose) a phrase or line opens you wide. This happens to me in reading *Sequence*, from the first section. I’m struck by “pleasure / in knowing your great heaviness / sinking into a greater”; by “panicked light”; by “a journey... / that continues in the form of rest”; by “only in the dead / of night... is attention real, godlike. Then it sees / how far it is from being god”—I’m only on page 7 at this point and am so wide-eyed I’m beginning to choke up.

The grace of style, the subtle transformations—condensed and splendid.

I’ve now read *Sequence* many times. It is a journey work, a work of the journey— the continuing and continuous journey.

After the first reading I began to consider the relationship alluded to on the back cover blurb— between the imagined and the observed. The sense-based observation of the outer world— “This

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Eric Schmaltz
@eschmaltzz

2h

I offer a few words on my own encounters with the performances of Kaie Kellough (@arawakaie) for @BrickBooks:
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is lush Ontario” (pg. 26) —and what is also observation, of the inner world, of the world of thought, dream, imagination. The former tilts to the material, the scientific; the latter to the spiritual, the divine. And I wonder who wrote that back cover blurb. Was it someone at the House of Anansi? Was it a university friend, a relative? Or was it A. F. Moritz himself?

I’m still pondering “the human person”... Whitman, whom Moritz counts among his mentors, expressed a desire “to live amongst the animals,” to find divinity in the insects. Whitman warned that the ‘I’ of the narrator is not be equated with or limited to the living Walt Whitman. The person Whitman transcends the boundaries of any self confined by pants and hat.

The “person” of Moritz’s poem likewise seems to exceed Al the man, also the human self and place and time. “The stars... / seem like former beasts and heroes” (pg. 18). And “women and men / rising around you, no longer shadowy dwarf bulks” (pg. 24) are like the metamorphosing, or they are the metamorphosing—up from the ‘lumpen’. And “the useless boy with books (Perhaps little Al himself?) ... could not understand the way the birds, the thick green, and the light of the sky / mixed in [him] — or did not mix, merely dwelt, merely abided — / side by side with the broken stones of the ... old mill race / from the patriarch Daniel’s time” (pg. 41).

In *Sequence* “time... will always be coming ... / from past, future, and all directions.” Everyone and everything is permeable and journeying. “And there is mercy of eternity.” (Pg. 57). How deeply this resonates with me.

There is a “human” human in Moritz and there is “the human more than human” (pg. 70). (Maybe this is the innocent, merciful person.) There is the “just a brain” person (pg. 76), the modern “body” man (pg. 85), there is the yearning to be recreated—“to be triturated like the rock, / split and split and split / into crystal flakes / that never wounded give / ... always new bodies / to transparency” (pg. 87). And “to be alone is the less than human” (pg. 109).

In reading *Sequence* I feel myself brought into an ongoing conversation—deep and old, yet new and ever-present. Immediate and accessible, yet challenging too. It resists interpretation, provokes interpretation, and personalization. I am drawn to locating myself within the work. I want to participate in it, and I do. Spontaneously, I place myself, I distill—one line from each section of A. F. Moritz’s *Sequence*—and create my own ‘offspring’ sequence. I insert my own punctuation. It is an exhilarating exercise:

Sequence: A Distillation

by Elana Wolff

I

Damp log legs.
Tired to death
of the stubborn elderly motion,
the death of sleep
in the dark between the stars.
In such dead of night,
dark is desert,
monotony of desert,
outside of time.
Why not stay here?

II

The desert releases you—
a way
beyond the dream
of burying
and seeing.
I see
the flesh—
how beautiful it was—

gone wrong.
—Like gunshots
without an end, without ends.
The desert is desert—
a path, a dream,
the idea of the journey
that comes to be where our steps go ...

III

I remember the end of my house.
We crept down from the bedrooms.
In my child-mind's map
I saw things newly,
two weeks of heaven
rose in me
and I could go within there, whenever I wanted—
in the freedom of the every-deepening indifference around me,
out into the desert,
a circle of white.
And I stood in the circle.

IV

Where we stand, walk, and lie,
we are blind to see any transformation.
The last passing—
whose movement is so agile—
is a widening tract of sand.
And the sufficient illusion [that] childhood is
will come back.
Thanks to the bones' complicity with time,
the lights of the stars are like the sight of human eyes.

V

When the heart receive[s] the idea of desert,
dreams and memories
wander,
rose and white
in the wind.
Let's say a prayer.
Who knows?
A former world that rested, breathing,
the human more than human
is there, was always ... the wandering came later.

VI

A wish:*
motions,
a brilliant smile,
murmurs of
sea,
a smile
in a new light.
Children looking from windows,
the path to the spring,
particles of the stars
in the guise of

stone.

Always new bodies
beginning, to be

(* My grandson Judah would say, "You said a wish, Savta, that means one.")

VII

We came to a city of
the fountain that saves.
Often I think back to that city,
that common gift.
Where is there that life can't be sung?
The stream's surface,
transparent slenderness
is—

VIII

We take our pattern from our animals
in their song of complaint.
I'd like to say our bodies shine
and the rift will be healed or sealed.
To be alone is sadness ... less than human.
Only your tongue muttering to its own ears—
called yearning,
pure and powerful—
was in a dream you have of me.
How did I dream such a thing?
It turns to memory, an idea.

IX

Water in me,
Earth,
two dreams.
Here and there the grey ellipse of a water tower.
In the torn-open heart, a prophecy.
I love you. I side with you.
I vibrated,
I went home and slipped back into my quiet house.
It was easy to be alone with you.
But how was it we talked as if we were one person thinking,

X

The public fountain turned on again,
light over everything.
Next I learned your body is
an uncontrollable gift.
All this is the love song,
the new moon,
the other way of seeing,
its lemma (by which I, Elana, mean gloss).
Admit the bleeding stranger. Else there never will be anyone with you.
The window of my vision is draped
seeing you
shining in lace—
how good
to get up in the room in the sun.

This is one distillation. The possibilities are endless.

In a recent piece in the *Globe and Mail* (December 17, 2015: L3), Russell Smith writes, “In a sense all art is about other art, if only that it cannot help but refer to art that has preceded it. If it is a poem, it echoes all other poems that use the same language; if it is a painting, it exists in a continuum of paintings....” We are all in the continuum.

To learn more about A.F. Moritz, please visit the [House of Anansi website](#).

Elana Wolff’s collection of selected poems, *Helleborus & Alchémille* (Éditions du Noroît, 2013; translation by Stéphanie Roesler), was awarded the 2014 John Glassco Prize for Translation. Her essay, “Paging Kafka’s Elegist,” winner of the 2015 Edna Staebler Personal Essay Contest, appears in Issue 136 of *The New Quarterly*. Visit Elana at the [website of Guernica Editions](#) and read more about her most recent book *Poems and Songs of Love*.

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