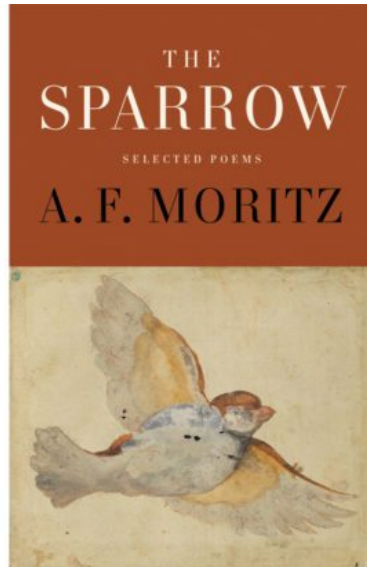


# ★The Sparrow: Selected Poems

by A.F. Moritz



The opening poem in this new volume of selected work by A.F. Moritz claims, “I am at an age when words should be finished.” *The Sparrow* testifies to the fact that this is simply not the case. The new book stands as a comprehensive overview of a jaw-dropping and prolific career. An author’s note acknowledges the difficulty that Moritz and editor Michael Redhill had culling down the selections. Ultimately, the two decided they “should concentrate on what *could* be present ... in such a way as to bring [the poems] into a closer, more intense relationship.”

By way of this choreography, and the book’s cohesive arc, Moritz reveals his own fascinations and worldviews. Poems inhabit a sphere of transcendence, sharp irony, and deep – sometimes dark – nods to the ever-present paradox that exists at the point where the sacred and mundane collide. Themes of transformation and otherworldly spaces inhabit many early verses, which also come complete with brush strokes of Jungian archetype, shape-shifting metaphor, and the occasional ghost. From “The Art of Poetry”:

The alarming radio of morning spoke  
of eastern wars. But the same voice, changed,  
came also from a blue tulip by the bed  
with news of a wanderer underground.  
So dreams died. How could we sleep again,

be scissors closing to cut  
the flower of intellect from the images?  
A new light was changing the kinds of space.

These considerations are pervasive in *The Sparrow*. Many poems – “Orpheus in Ontario” and “The All-Night Café,” for example – feel like thinly veiled self-portraits. The opening lines of the latter poem reflect the narrator’s sublime powers of observation but also reveal something essential about the author’s own stance in the world: “I like to see a boy writing poems / in the window of an all-night café. / His almost empty cup, his pack of cigarettes / are at his elbow in the papers scattered / over the wet table.” The middle of the poem offers experiential wisdom: “the great illusion that his youth wraps around him. / He doesn’t know, can’t know, and yet he knows, / writing, that his effort too is illusion.”

Moritz reveals one of his thematic concerns –that, to paraphrase Jeffery Donaldson, the individual expression of an evolutionary narrative is taking place beyond us. The penultimate lines emphasize the optimism of the poet’s quest: “Relentlessly moved ahead, restlessly striving / to desire what is, still wonderfully far from the goal.” The poem reminds us that poetry is a means to wrestle with existence and a way to make sense of the nonsensical world.

That said, Moritz has no particular fondness for optimism; other poems in *The Sparrow* render human obsessions trite and ridiculous. “On Distinction” remarks, “Yet we keep a hungry eye on old schoolmates / and everyone born in the year of our own birth, / and spend the nights ranting over them,” a habit that results in “the squabble over who will write the history / of this paradise of demons casting each other out.” Elsewhere, it is hard not to hear Ezra Pound’s call to “make it new” echoing ironically in the words of “New Storytellers”:

The gobbets of flesh fall fast,  
sully the mud, and the intangible  
ashes of the wreck sift down, choking the summer night:  
a warning:

we should shut up,  
indulge our love of ancient reading

and go quietly to a longing grave.

In both of these poems, Moritz reframes history and its repetitive patterns in a way that almost scolds humanity for its ignorance and myopia.

At the level of craft, Moritz proves to be a master of the poetic line. Astonishing moments are so frequent that it is hard to choose which one is most brilliant. The opening lines of “The Sentinel” (the title poem from Moritz’s 2009 Griffin Poetry Prize–winning collection) provide an example of both situational tension and lilting musicality:

The one who watches while the others  
sleep  
does not see. It is hoped, it is to be hoped  
there is nothing to see. The camp has  
quieted  
behind him and all is peace there – let it  
be

A few years ago, some critic grumbled about Canadian poetry’s tin ear. Moritz’s work is an antidote. The consonance of the “w” and “s” sounds in the lines above lull the reader as the pull of the long “e” repeats to create a perfect tonal contrast that mimics the scene being described. Syntactical refrain creates a subtle chorus that offsets the corporeal muck the poem addresses.

The effects of Moritz’s poems are startling, unnerving, and deeply satisfying, often demanding time to digest. It is evident that something masterful has been accomplished by the accumulated work in this volume, although it would take weeks to pick through all the nuances – as might be expected from the cumulative work of a lifetime.

*The Sparrow* is an essential read.