



Review: The New Collection by A.F. Moritz

June 24, 2008

The Sentinel
by A.F. Moritz

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The Sentinel's title poem emphasises the lonely plight of the one who waits, in the dark, poised between enemy fire ahead and friendly encampment at one's back.

American-born, Canadian-based poet A.F. Moritz, surely mindful of cultural and other borders, implies such a position is even more that of the poet, pressured to “innovate” into the absence ahead, but lapped by the traditional what-has-been always pressing at his ear. Either way, one is somewhat

*poetry
review*

damned – poems

thrown too-forward
are not deemed
reliable reports of
future incursions,
and if one becomes
too comfortable,
straining to make out
the shadows, the
accusation is worse,
of sleep or sloth. As
such, this collection
seems a noble
attempt to ride on
the sounds of the
past (mainly the
modern moment of
the first half of the
20th century), while
gesturing at
contemporary
diction, and detail,
from time to time.

The collection consists of 63 poems, divided into three sections, “Better Days”, “In A Prosperous Country” and “Better Days” (again). The collection is announced by an opening poem, “The Butterfly”. The presiding spirit of the collection is perhaps **Wallace Stevens**, or late **Eliot**, with something of **Richard Wilbur** and **F.T. Prince** in it, too: that is, the tone represents a style more than a voice: a vaguely dandified, discursive eloquence,

at once capable of
stoic observation and
melancholy
reflections on the
passing of time.

At times, the diction
shifts, as in **Laforgue**,
or **Corbiere**, from
high to low (and here
Moritz fails to live up
to his greater
ancestors). Over the
whole collection,
which seems
polished to some
form, or idea, of
perfection, is the sun
(the last poem is
titled “The Sun”), and
particularly the
Stevensian sun of
“Sunday Morning”:
“We live in an old

chaos of the sun, /

Or old dependency of

day and night, / Or

island solitude,

unsponsored, free, /

Of that wide water,

inescapable.” In

short, the splendid

munificence of

Harmonium bleeds

across these pages,

staining the poems

with, at times, a

Floridian radiance.

There are fifteen or

sixteen poems in this

book as good as any a

Canadian has

written, in this

particular, mannered,

abstract, lyric style,

and a few of them are

beautiful, in a way so

old-fashioned as to
be utterly admirable,
and brave. Several of
these moved me to
tears, in the way that
Housman or **Hardy**
(*or Larkin*) can use
form and
emotionality, and a
particular rhythm, to
do so.

I'd like to name the
poems I feel are
excellent, before
narrowing in on a
special few, and also
discussing where the
book's tone perhaps
fails to live up to its
full potential. Here
are the ones that any
reader who might
want to test Moritz

against the very best
poets should read in
this book: “Better
Days”, “Cassandra”,
“Failure”, “Childish
Willow”, “Memorial”,
“Poet And Sister”,
“The Ant”, “Old Pet”,
“Swiftness No Longer
Trusted”, “In A
Thunder Shower”,
“Place”, “Cleanliness”,
“The Moment”,
“Flower In The
Crannied Wall”, “The
Source”, and “The
Sun”. I should explain
that I have selected
here poems of rare
achievement, and
also, as Moritz would
agree, those which
are closer to a sense
of “pure poetry”, less

cluttered by the
intrusions of a
sometimes too-
clever contemporary
toxicity (no doubt
part of the test, but
fun, of being a
Toronto poet now).

Since Moritz has
seemingly political,
or at least, semi-
didactic aims in
places (some of the
poems bear the
stamp of valedictory
Tennyson) his work is
not all timeless, or
classical; instead, a
sometimes inept
hipster shift in
diction emerges (one
that **Geoffrey Hill** has
latterly assayed as

well, to better effect)

to capture the dross
of communication in
our idiotic time; this
is handled cleverly in

“Vermin; or,

Weariness” where

household pests

“have vice-

presidentially

overturned/ the

garbage can and

spread the repast” –

obviously a *Life*

Studies moment, but

accurate and wry

nonetheless. Indeed,

this poem builds to a

kind of Iraq of local

trouble with its

“smashed abdomen

of an hour ago” and a

crescendo of bile

aimed at all that is

officious and

relentless about the
current world.

No, the problem is
with poems such as
“The Titanic”, which
is actually a clever
idea: the ship never
sank, and circles,
housing infamous
missing celebrities.

Ah, but who shall
appear? Why, **John
Kennedy, Elvis
Presley, Hitler**, and
“the Roswell alien”.

Moritz skirts the
blandly expected
with such references
– something younger
Canadian poets, like
David McGimpsey, do
far better, by

knowing how to
extend the
audacious, near-
empty bubble of such
allusion and make it
pop with real oomph.

Moritz, who clearly
admires Stevens (see
“The Jar” for damning
evidence), sometimes
lacks that great
poet’s necessary
saving angel, always-
accurate (and
enriched) verbal aim.

In Moritz’s lesser
poems sometimes
the expected word,
the first word,
appears, and not one
that seems fought
for, and won.

In “The Butterfly”, a
poem about an
unearthly event,
sublime and
wondrous
description is sought.

We have “roiling
gardens”, the
creature is seen
“hovering” and it
even dives like “a
fighter jet”.

Nothing terribly
wrong with this, but
in a poem about
amazement,
somehow all-too-
poetic, the default
moves are simply
made. In “Your
Story”, once again,
“the perfect police
erased you” –

“erased” being the
right word, maybe,
but not the
astonishing,
revelatory one. It
may be that Moritz is
here testing the
warring aspects of
his art he delineates
in “In A Thunder
Shower”: “plain style”
and “decadent
decoration”.

Moritz has a strange
sensibility, which at
times has a sci-fi
aspect to it. When
treated whimsically,
it leads to poems
which are unusual,
and charming, but
perhaps less offbeat
than he might’ve

hoped (we are used
to strange things,
now). It would be
inaccurate and
malicious to criticise
this collection,
further, however, for
it contains more than
a dozen poems of the
first rank.

One of the poems
that works very well
in the weird style he
sometimes adopts is
“Old Pet”, with the
metaphysical,
startling opening
lines: “Come, my
body, leap up, while
you still can, / onto
my knees, into my
lap. Come let me pet
you, / comfort you

and take comfort

while there's time". In
this poem Moritz
orders his lines well,
and his images are
fresh.

"The Source", one of
the last poems, and
very nearly a sonnet
illustrates the
entirely successful
command of the high
modern tone (by way,
perhaps, of **Ashbery**):
"What would silence
be? The song/ of a
tempered shining,
almost too small / to
hear – the song itself
of the sun, / hushed
as it is by distance,
and so, hidden/ in
the ear's ignorance,

but in good time /

for no reason it
comes to notice”.

This sublime
mustering of lyric
sensuality and
cosmic distances is
light of touch, and
resonant.

Less lofty, and even
truer, the finest
poem in the
collection is the
lovely “Place”. It has
something of **Dante**
in its sweet style, and
the last few lines are
impeccable:

..... Then I
remembered
the molecular
diagrams she used to

send to me

in her letters: I'd look

and see her eyes,

where each

thing that exists

tumbled yet held all

space

like a ring in a box.

And O, I thought, if

only

I could go back and

write her, why did

you go

and what are you

doing there, love, my

only place.

In such poems,

Moritz gifts

contemporary

Canadian poetry with

something subtle,

graceful and

precious: the

absolute right to be

both emotive, and
intelligent, with style.

LABELS: **POETRY,**

REVIEW



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Anonymous said...

This is an
outstanding
review. I'm
currently working
my way through
the collection (just
finished "The Jar"),
and I'm not sure
I've read anything
quite like it. That
doesn't mean I'm
wild about it. I just
don't know yet.
Actually, I find this
more readable
than the recent
Hill -- who
stopped
interesting me
after
Canaan(which I
loved). Again,
thanks for all the
effort you put into
this. -- Steve

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