



Interview  
A. F. Moritz

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*—Thank you, Al, for your poetry, as well as for taking the time to speak with Volume. We met over ten years ago, now, when I was a student in one of your freshman English classes at the University of Toronto. I remember being struck—as I am struck now—by how your poems attend to the unvarnished objects and actions of our everyday, all while locating them within a mythic understanding of history and time. In “Long Struggle and Float,” for*

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*instance, the “day’s length” becomes a collapsing “civilization”; in “The Only Flower Remaining,” the speaker is a clear-eyed visitor, taking in a hospital room’s “plastic pot” and “dirty crystal,” and also a poet considering those observations as they relate to the fate of art. How would you trace the origin of this dual scope in your work?*

That’s a fertile question, Lauren. When I identify ideas, or intuitions, that are primordial in me, one is this dual scope as you term it—two-fold seeing, and three- and four-fold

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rather than single sight, as Blake says. Not only things, but whole ranges or orders of things, are superimposed on each other, penetrate each other, are both inside and outside each other, such that they aren't wholly separate but are one. For instance, my head and my body correspond to the sky with all that word means and the earth with all that word means. The same is true of my head and the visible rondure. I'm conscious of my thought—and of an image of my brain—that parallels and is in the place of the sky, and the

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tongue and palate is the ground and the nearer atmosphere, and the throat is the entrance to the subterranean...which, again, is the body. But then, also, the outside and the surface of the body corresponds to the landscape, and the head is like a mysterious cavern opening somewhere far away.

This correspondence, and this image, is a direct subject of many of my poems and is a background to many more. Maybe all? It's likely. But this has further dimensions. So, to take just one: the day

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corresponds to the year, and so the day has seasons. Morning is spring—and we say “dayspring” to name the dawn (and that word, by the way, also and primarily brings in the whole parallel notion of a natural fountain and stream). But to return: morning is spring, and the other parts of the day are also seasons. These are ancient ideas and perceptions but as far as I can tell I had them before I learned them. So I too correspond to the history of the growth of human... awareness, let’s call it. First there’s the

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sense that the day is a year and the year is a day. Then there’s the knowledge that others have thought this, and that it’s come to us from the past. Then: is it our own, and do we agree with it? So intellectual criticism is born. And in response to this, the attempt to get back to the immediate given and original experience.

From this in turn is born—in me, at any rate—a further aspect of the dual scope, the awareness that a human being is never without concepts, and this can be regarded as it often

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is, as a sort of screen and limitation. But, while I share this idea, very strongly in fact, at times violently, it also raises the corresponding idea in me, that in fact our concepts—when healthy—are *not* separate from “nature” at all, but are in fact nature working in us to create concepts: that is our place in nature. In transcending itself in us, nature fulfills itself, or rather, goes about its business, which is not the same everywhere, although, yes, it is the same, in significantly different forms.

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When I wrote “Long Struggle and Float,” I was prompted by the fact that its vision had long floated and struggled in me and it ought to be condensed, realized, brought forward. It’s an aspect of your dual scope. Every person lives as many lives as he or she has days, and these lives are connected the way cultures and civilizations are connected. They rise one after the other, and they each inherit some of what went before, lose some of it, cherish some both rightly and wrongly, reject some both rightly and wrongly.

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To a great extent they simply have a less-than-ideal grasp on the past, because the traces it leaves are incomplete, mute, enigmatic, and the uptake of the traces is inconsistent, subject to emotional fits and starts, etc. Each person is a long history of an earth in which civilizations rise and fall, usurp one another, remember one another, forget one another, exist in substantial ignorance of one another.

And how wonderful this all is! How exhilarating, the mystery of its infinite changes. And especially

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because the earth with its long history of all its successive peoples is one single person. One single person who works, loves, marries, attends to children, gets weary, sleeps, dreams, and wakes in astonishment he/she scarcely knows where, and invents, with tatters of imagination and memory, how it was done, or how to do it now.

One thing that the dual scope shows us is the essential unity of all things and the equally essential differences among them: the

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identical, and the innumerable and ever-appearing identities. I always reject the popular theory today of “binary opposites.” No. There are binary complements, binary loves. We don’t have opposite numbers, what we have is polarity, and the nature of a pole or axis is to be one thing, on which it is valid to name and distinguish this end and that end, but in which you can’t say where one “end” ends and the other begins, exactly. You have to see that they are, while different, also just aspects of the pole. Together, they are the

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existence of the axis.

So, I see this all around, always. We’re on and in the earth, but the earth is in us equally.

*—Borrowing from your poem’s title, we might define the year 2020 (coupled with the first months of 2021) as one “long struggle and float.” Entire nations are being forced to reinvent themselves, “scrabl[ing] for a purchase / in the flotsam of images.” What has it been like, this past year, to serve as Toronto’s poet laureate? And along that same vein, how does your*

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*understanding of what it means to be a citizen interact with your understanding of what it means to be a poet?*

Most simply, what it's been like is that I've been too busy and preoccupied to do much of what I would have liked to do as laureate, and I've been blocked off from some of it too, by lockdown conditions. I would have liked to do more but I'm not sure what it would be.

In poetry we're together while separate, and that's what seems to have come to sharp

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consciousness due to Covid, at least for many. The ideas that we're all in it together, that it drives us apart, that it thus reawakens or sharpens our need and love and valuing of togetherness. It's created great thrusts to replace physical and normal social togetherness with online versions, and strong reflections—even arguments—on whether these work or can ever work, whether they're real forms of togetherness, or a weakened second-best better-than-nothing togetherness, or an

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altogether ersatz  
togetherness: has the  
disease forced us, now  
that communications  
technology is prevalent,  
into the total clutch of  
that technology, which it  
has always,  
automatically, been  
seeking to impose?

My feeling is that the  
disease forces another  
aspect of the “dual  
scope” on everyone. It  
afflicts the human race  
and the individual person  
in parallel ways that are  
really one within the  
other, the race in the  
person and the person in  
the race. It threatens us  
with our individual death,

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unchosen, imposed, and  
it raises the image of the  
similar death of humanity  
as a whole. Within this,  
there are our works.  
There are the works of  
love, there is suffering. In  
these, the human  
predominates: human  
love and interrelation are  
powerful in each person,  
and even the fact of  
having to suffer in  
isolation reveals a  
shared reality. There are  
technological works, and  
in these the manipulation  
of methods and objects  
predominates, and the  
mechanics of  
togetherness threaten to  
reduce togetherness to  
a dull, arid skein of

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complications and operations. But the human, so far, never dies out. As technology automatically and always tends to absorb, replace, and eliminate it, so it always tries to rise up and make technology merely a tool, even though, sadly, we've let it escape far, far beyond its proper, very humble and limited station.

Dual vision tells us that this situation, and what it reveals, what it makes us see, is not different from the state of a war, for instance, or other forms of cataclysm. Near the very depths of all this

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lies, I think, the mystery of why we seem to see clearest and engage most intensely with and against what is deathly only in disasters. A ballad comes from people murdering each other. A blues comes from poverty, from being in the cruel, thoughtless or malevolent hands of the powerful with no recourse, no way out, from Beckett's "You must go on. I can't go on. I'll go on."

*—In March 2020, the Toronto Star published your poem "Thoughts in Time of Plague." In recent months, I have*

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*thought a great deal about the poem's final lines: "Failure was not / and success had never been / the end. The end was care." How do you understand the relationship between these words—these ideas of what constitutes achievement, or progress?*

The first thing I'd like to say about those lines is this. I believe in progress, but it's crucial to realize that the essential progress—the only thing that actually deserves the honorific title of "progress" – is the progress each person

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makes inwardly. Progress in creating himself/herself, in dialogue with everyone and everything around the person, everything given to the person in his/her life. Progress in opening to others, assisting them in their endeavor. In his poem "Love," Czesław Miłosz writes that "whoever sees that way, heals his heart... / A bird and a tree say to him: Friend. / Then he wants to use himself and things / So that they stand in the glow of ripeness."

Progress has little to do with communications

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technology, computers, rocket trains, space travel, lasers, and so forth. I don't say these have nothing to do with progress, I say "little." If such developments are forced to be humble servants of the other progress, then they're good. That's rarely achieved in what we falsely call "progress," but perhaps it's not impossible to achieve. We'd have to really start trying to achieve it, though, and we don't. We continue to let the technological attitude tyrannize, with increasingly threatening results.

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Progress takes place in the person and in the moment. That's why it isn't success or failure that counts but care. These lines contain of course a severe irony, a serious irony: a reversal of values. Not only does progress really mean care, but success and failure as usually defined were never what we aimed at—when we truly understood ourselves – and thus never what we really failed to achieve. Put another way, there is success and there is failure, except that those words need—and in fact, they really *have*—an

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utterly different definition, an utterly different meaning, than the usual one. Rightly used, they'd be synonymous with definitions of care. Success would mean taking care; failure would mean any instance of failing in sympathy and cooperative action.

Care takes place within each moment. It's a whole world, a whole life, but it can always be achieved. And for care, the state of exterior, "objective" progress doesn't seem to matter. Well, it does matter: care means trying to build a

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better world, certainly: "Creating the beautiful House for the piteous sufferer" was Blake's definition of society, to which I subscribe. But if we truly encountered and magnified one another, truly saw one another and treated one another in terms of the full dimensions of human being, it wouldn't matter if we were poor. Everyone would have a proper measure of whatever we had.

Presently, we're extremely rich and highly developed and powerful, and hundreds of millions are in horrifying poverty,

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exclusion, injustice, contempt, and despair. The technological and big economy world boasts that it is reducing poverty. But right now there are many more people in brutal poverty than even existed in 1800. What does technology do for them? And for all the others who have already died as industrial “results” over the last couple of centuries? What good does it do to actual suffering individuals that the true believers in the present system promise that “eventually” wealth and ease will spread everywhere, that justice

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and acceptance will eventually be extended to them? Their life on earth is the one they have now. What they need is a hand from another human being now. When that hand is extended, and people suddenly light up because someone has “gotten together” with them: then there’s progress.

I’ll go back to the idea of the double vision. The great poets know that our ideas of history are a truth but also a myth. We persistently create the story of a better past, a garden of love and

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justice at the beginning.  
Or at least a garden of  
freshness, of possibility.  
And then we narrate our  
progress as trying to get  
back there, or building  
something new and  
different that will  
correspond to and fulfill  
that garden. But the  
great poets know that  
this immense universal  
history is in fact the  
inner structure in every  
single moment within the  
life of any woman or  
man. This story of the  
garden, the fall, and so  
forth, is the true story of  
every moment we have  
in our lives. At any  
moment we can  
remember the garden,

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try to get back to it, in  
fact succeed in getting  
back to it, discover that  
within us is a permanent  
fountain welling up to  
eternal life, one we had  
somehow sealed or  
forgotten but that we  
can open and drink from.  
Then, we can form our  
moment with its  
irrigation, its fecundity,  
its model of proper  
growth and of a  
dynamic, living world.  
That whole history of  
humankind can and does  
happen in you and me  
right now, and in every  
one of our nows. And  
this dual vision is the  
form of great poetry.

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*—I confess that you were one of the first people who took my own writing “seriously”—not in the sense of lavishing compliments upon it (I no doubt submitted ream upon ream of very bad poetry to you, in those days) but because of the earnest attention you paid to it. And what you suggest is that “care” is, in fact, a quality of attention. In what ways does this notion of care inform your teaching and your writing?*

I like the word “care” for all its meanings. Ever since I was a small boy it broke my heart to see or

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to read about anyone who had no one to care for them, or care effectively: the blind beggar, Hansel and Gretel, the suffering servant in Isaiah that so fascinated me when I would hear it read from the altar, before I could read myself.

In writing, you have many chances and ways to enact care. You can look for the genius in things, and you always find some. “There’s no book of poems so bad that it doesn’t have some poetry in it,” wrote Mallarmé. And even where the writer is self-

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deceived and  
tendentious, producing  
an imitation of  
something he's decided  
is true passion or true  
innovation and the like,  
there's always life  
struggling to be  
something and to be  
itself. In a poem there's a  
human being struggling  
for full existence, and  
even in the greatest  
poem there's still only a  
human being struggling  
for full existence. Even  
perfect, glorious  
expression reveals itself  
as the margin beyond  
which lies the  
expression now desired.  
The great poem has  
gotten us to the point of

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new desire, and to that  
new intensity and  
freshening of desire.  
Even if it's a calm, a  
desire for rest.

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I'm proud you felt I took  
you seriously when you  
were just a tyke. I did.  
But it's no technique. I  
felt you and your peers  
were my peers. I always  
learn, I'm always  
astonished and  
surprised. Something a  
person can do is pay  
attention. What is it that  
rejoices a person? That  
you remember their  
name! But it's not so  
easy for a person to get  
and create a name, and  
it's not so easy for

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someone else to learn it. When you read a poem, and the works coming from a poet, even in a short course of a few months, you're sincerely trying to discern that name. That name as it changes and grows and can't be pinned down. You listen, you converse, you exchange, you come nearer, come nearer, you never attain... but maybe the other person feels your effort, feels how you discern, never fully yet always powerfully, a universe in him or her, a unique universe with its own infinite contours.

You know, in poetry and

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art people always argue about whether the meaning or the form and technique is the important thing. What a futile conflict! In poetry the subject is the technique and the technique is the subject. When we care about something, we discern its outlines, and this begins to give us what we'll say of it and to it, and how we'll say it, the form. But this is too weak a statement. When we begin to discern something, we're beginning to discern what we are in terms of what we pay attention to. And what we pay

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attention to is suffused with emotion, because you don't pay attention to anything unless it attracts you. And "attracts" is a word that has become dusty, weak-seeming, but really indicates an inner volcanic-magnetic response. Anything that you pay attention to... you've been magnetized to it. And you can't be magnetized to something unless there's an existing underlying connection or shared element. This is even more true with persons. Isn't it one of the most moving and true expressions in love

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poems, that the lover realizes he/she had always known the beloved, they had always known each other, even though they've only just now met? So when you pay attention to something or someone, you're beginning to emerge to yourself, and this emergence is already expression, in the seed or embryo, even if it isn't written down yet.

In other words, "care" meaning loving solicitude for human beings, and "care" meaning painstaking artistry and respectful,

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effortful attention to the art of others, are exactly the same thing, just seen from different angles. No wonder they share the same word. To attack “theory” once again: it’s stupid to think that a word is only arbitrarily related to its meaning and to what the meaning indicates; no, it’s part and parcel of its meaning and is a real thing among the other real things. Which is not to say that it does not have its own particular characteristics that no other things possess.

Care is perhaps the chief concept and reality

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that makes me sad about communications technology. Everything about it is so badly done, without care or even mercy towards human beings. Year after year it arrogates our attention to itself without ever being put in order; it’s ill made and cranky, and issues bland, incommunicative directives to its users. It emanates almost solely from companies that make even a bigger mockery of “customer service” than do the more traditional capitalist enterprises.

As poets, we’re used to

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doing things well. And every time someone writes a poem, he or she all alone, a single individual, has created something that is infinitely more complex than everything to do with computers and communications technology all put together—all the calculations and hardware and software and codes and gigantic infrastructure of cloud palaces and satellites.... And beyond its inconceivable complexity, the poem also has something that technology does not have at all: simplicity, the

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simplicity that underlies and envelops and transcends and gives life to all that is creative, that lives. Yet in the poem, everything is well done. Even in a “bad” poem, care is taken, and it doesn’t take much sympathy in the reader to get from the poem the refreshing, human experience, the coming forth of the person in honesty and artistry.

—*You have crafted a prolific body of work that is cherished by many. In fact, last spring, House of Anansi Press published your twentieth collection of poems! I’m curious: if*

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*you could travel back  
through the years to  
speak with your younger  
self—the A. F. Moritz,  
say, who had not yet  
published his first  
poem—what would you  
tell him? What piece of  
advice would you give  
him...whether about  
writing, teaching, or life?*

I might say, “Say  
goodbye a little earlier to  
the notion that nobody  
has figured it all out and  
seen to the bottom of it  
but that you will be the  
one.”

A. F. Moritz was interviewed by Lauren Peat, via email, in January 2021.

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