

The Artisanal Writer

About the Craft of Writing and Reading

Al Moritz

 [Artisanal Writer](#)  [December 1, 2021](#)  [Featured, Poetry](#)



1. In “Sparrow” you collected forty years of your poetry. What were the guiding principles that informed your selection process? If you were to look back at the poems that did not make it to the collection, do they represent questions that have been answered or structures that interest you somewhat less? Or something else?

I worked with Michael Redhill to choose the poems so as to make a book that would be not a mere selection but a new book in my sequence of books. In other

words, we did not try to choose “only the best” or “all that the author wishes to preserve or foreground” or any of those usual rubrics of selected volumes. I have to thank Michael Redhill for his encouraging sense that we couldn’t choose “the best” because that would make a book twice as long as the publisher provided us...which was already 380 pages. I placed a poem written about 1983 as the introduction to the book and a poem written about 1973 as the conclusion: in my beginning is my end. Though we left the poems in order of publication, we chose them—this is my formulation—to bring out the struggle for hope, the duty of hope (both to live it and to offer it), the nature and reality of hope, the oppositions to hope—metaphysical and social—political and personal—the failures or losses of hope, the perpetual rebirth of hope which is superior to the flow and ebb of time.

2. “As Far as You Know” was written around the time when you were dealing with surgery. Did that fact influence in any significant way the key questions you were asking in this collection in comparison to the questions that have concerned you in twenty titles previous to this?

Yes. It intensified them, but perhaps that term isn’t really accurate. It added a new angle on them. I wrote that “poetry is always a movement toward reality on all levels”. This was in an essay included in my early book *Black Orchid* published in 1981. I’ve always been aware that this access to reality is never complete. It’s always an approach. We hope that each time we approach, we get closer than the last time, if not to “reality” as a whole then at least closer to a previously little known or unknown aspect. This attempt to break through previous approaches to achieve further ones is ongoing in creative work, in contemplation, in thought, and in experience. A heart operation blended all these together for me around 2014 in experience, writing, thinking, wondering. But let me say something at least about “craft”! It can fit in well here. I reject the concept of craft as technique external to thrust. In the human being, the two are one and must be ever more perfectly one. There is no power without delicate accuracy and refinement of technique: ask a pianist, ask a defensive lineman. There is no refinement without power, no refinement that deserves the term. It’s true that technique such as prosody is important but the essential technique for the poet is to nurture and shape this thirst for reality and for hope. The “educated imagination”, said Northrop Frye. The education of creativity, creativity educating itself.

Your concerns are sometimes described as “metaphysical” and you have sometimes described your work as “mystical” and “inward”. Since the time you took up the role as poet-laureate you have admitted your work to being “increasingly interested in the social and... political side of poetry.” Since political poetry is determinedly outward, do you sense a conflict between the asks

{“tasks”?] of a role and your place of poetry? Or are they two coexisting (mystical as political) sides of “the glory and the tragedy of being human”? Do you for instance have to consciously deal with an urge to get back inward and balance that with the requirements of a public-facing role in a society where poetry is increasingly marginalized?

There are several important points in your question. The intensely inward basis of my poetry has always included the idea that these inward visions are, in fact, the most basic elements of social reality. Part of this idea is that this fact is not acknowledged and this non-acknowledgement is the basic reason for the hellishness and failure of our society. If you look for correction elsewhere, on shallower levels, you’re not going to find it, because you’re not going to the root. An aspect of this is that social reality and individual or inward reality (and we should add small-group reality: the couple, the family) are one. A great poet may conform to the cliché of a poet as a specialist in inwardness but will always be found if you scratch the surface to have profound, decisive social-political implications. Finally, in this area, I’d point to the type of poet, such as Czeslaw Milosz and Octavio Paz, who specifically grasps this unity and whose work is equally inward and outward, lyrical and political, in a total fusion. As to poetry’s being marginalized, that’s too big a topic for me to tackle in a reasonably short answer. I’d just make an assertion. Of all things humans produce, the poem is the one that is closest to human being in its fullness, and the one that, next to the human being, is most magnificent. It is not marginalized by people in their hearts. But it is marginalized by the technological-economic reality we’ve created, and this marginalization is the basic explanation of our society’s gimcrack shoddiness, its cruel injustice, its suicidal direction, its sad parodic and ruining version of power, and its failure to approximate the fulfillment of its explicit and implicit promises.

How did you come to write your first book?

When I first started concertedly publishing poems, in 1973, I was *concertedly* counterculture and small press, and in participating in that world, I had several poems accepted in issues of *Contraband*. *Contraband* was a magazine from Portland, Maine, in the great tradition of the “little magazine” of the post-Second World War period and the Beat era. Then Bruce Holsapple, the fine poet who was its founder, wrote me that he was starting a press, and he asked me for a manuscript. This galvanized me to refine, arrange, and add to the work I was then doing, and it resulted in *Here*, published at the end of 1974. I love that book and constantly go back to it. I’ve taken it through two subsequent revised editions.

What does it mean/suggest for you to think about your craft with each published work?

My first collection was a long chapbook, *New Poems*, and it really was a collection. Developing *Here* taught me to consider the book as something more than an album, a miscellany. In working on it, I saw that I had developed a coherent if wild style. I could consider the features of that, its implications, its possibilities, and develop them: revise some of the poems, do new writing that this new level of creative contemplation aroused in me. I could think of arranging the poems into a pattern, even if at times in those days I made it a sort of anti-pattern, to express the role in life and creativity of the impromptu, the *imprevu*, of chance and its possible, impalpable magnetization to a self and a situation—or on the contrary its purely accidental character. As a result of *Here*, I've always thought of the book as a unit of composition. It's a new layer and level and type of creativity, not an assemblage job. It's a rebirth of the poems in a new form. It's the poem's coming into new associations, as when a person comes into a new country. Even more importantly, I've realized that the "book of poetry" is an open question: why a "book", what exactly is it to be, why and to what extent should it accept and violate the conventions of the "book of poetry"...which aren't even conventions, really, but just acceptations based on the idea and prevalence of "collections". But is there any basic reason to the collection as a form? If you look at my books, it's unavoidable to see that every one has its own form. Not only is the form of the individual poem *expressive* in that the poem communicates more through what and how it is than through anything that, lexically, it says or any part of it says: this same expressiveness is true of the book as a whole. Or the sections of a book: for instance, *The Visitation* is a collection in the sense that it's a group of five short books, related but different.

Do you have a writing routine? Or writing rituals? Or patterns you must follow regularly? Or rituals that you practice say, when you are writing in certain forms, say a longer piece of work like a novel, as opposed to a shorter piece, say a poem?

Writing routines develop spontaneously and then get crafted to a tighter form in response to a given project, which is to say, a certain current of inspiration that arises with fire and drive. But writing routines are subordinate to a basic rhythm. The first part of the rhythm, diastole, is sketching: expanding to take in the world, writing as part of the spirituality of just going around, feeling, seeing, smelling, tasting, touching, and watching what people are doing, as immensely as you can. You write with no windows: fragments, quick drafts, poems that may be more or less fugitive, in the nights and pauses of your current. The second part of the rhythm, the systole, occurs when the daimonion enters you to grasp what you've

been doing in ways additional to feeling it. This begins the period of working like an obsessed inventor: many hours a day, week after week. A new white heat, a new level of creativity, the poems taking better shape and suggesting new ones and leaping into configurations. Here are large tracts of what seems like the most consciously constructive and painstaking work, and yet it too is an utter absorption, a different form of inspiration, and the so-called work, as it finishes, seems to have been a dream.

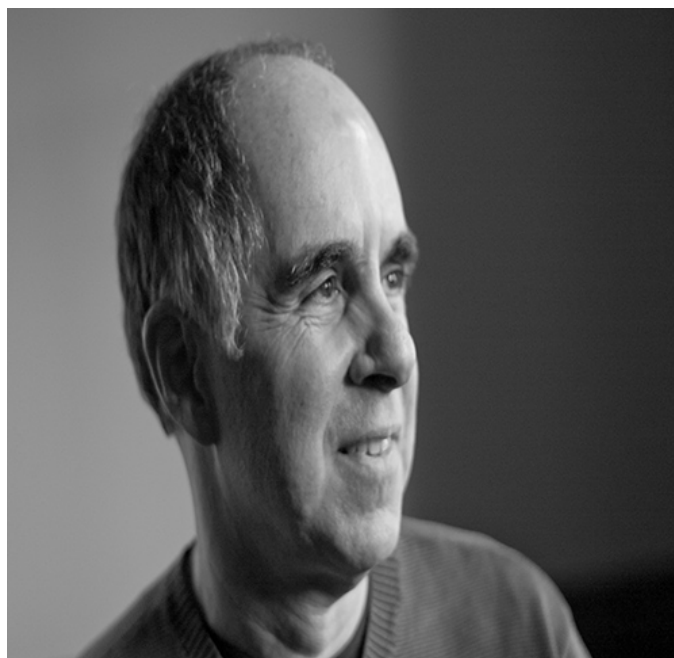
Would you consider your writing practice as an interdependent activity, something that is sustained by contributions from people around you?

Yes. And this is so in expanding rings. I'm helped by many of the people who are with me, around me; they help me consciously and specifically. I'm helped automatically, as it were, by my loves and my other encounters. These are not only aids and prompts to poetry but its substance. Then, a poet is aware that when he/she seems most alone, practicing in solitude, the whole of humanity is inside him in the form of language, which contains and conveys, livingly, all that people have thought, felt, dreamed, argued, everywhere for all of human time. No single person, no one poet, can immediately access more than a little of this within himself. But no place or plant or animal can immediately access all of nature out to the limits of the universe, either, but the totality of it and the whole webwork of it must be there for this mountain potentilla to be blossoming. So it is with poetry and both the human world and the natural world. You cannot be alone. You are made up of others.

Can you reflect on any (inescapable) social contexts that might have been inspiring or generative (or conversely, harmful, or inhibitive) to your writing practice at some point?

I was born in an industrial town and none of my people—Hungarians and Italians—or the others in the town, were people of the book. All were central and southern Europeans of peasant background. There was no one whatever who had any interest in or knowledge of poetry in my youth. In my town, Niles, Ohio, Kenneth Patchen was born, and William McKinley, a president of the United States, was born. I never met anyone in Niles who had heard of Patchen. There were of course statues and monuments to McKinley. The great McKinley Memorial housed in one wing the Niles Library in whose small poetry section I read poetry, starting in grade 3, and from the first moment I encountered modern poetry, in the form of Poe's poems, I wanted to be a poet and nothing else. This experience was crucial in forming my realization that poetry is from and for everyone but that it's also the prophet who is not accepted in his own town and who can work no works of power there because

of the lack of faith. I had to move on to elsewhere, and I'm still having to move on to other elsewheres. But I don't shake the dust of any of the places off my feet.



A. F. Moritz's most recent books of poems are *The Garden: a poem and an essay* (Gordon Hill, 2021), *As Far As You Know* (Anansi, 2020) and *The Sparrow: Selected Poems* (Anansi, 2018), as well as a new edition of poems in Greek translation selected from *The Sparrow* (Vakxikon, 2021). He has published twenty-three volumes of poetry. His work has received the Guggenheim Fellowship, the Griffin Poetry Prize, the Award in Literature of the American Academy of Arts and Letters, the Bess Hokin Award of *Poetry* magazine, the Elizabeth Matchett Stover Award of the *Southwest Review*, the ReLit Award, selection to the Princeton Series of Contemporary Poets, and three of his books have been named finalists for the Governor General's Award. He is presently the Poet Laureate of the City of Toronto (2019-2023), the sixth poet to hold that office.

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