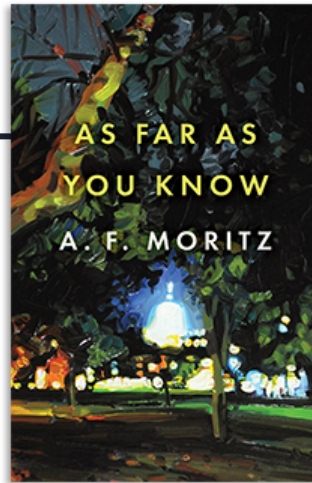


Book Review: Carl Watts / A.F. Moritz

HA&L RAVE REVIEW



BOOK REVIEW
by CARL WATTS



POEMS WITHOUT ORGANS
WUHAN REVIEWS TORONTO

As Far as You Know

by A.F. MORITZ

[Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 2020, \$19.95]

In his afterword to *Editing Moritz: Correspondence between Shane Neilson and A.F. Moritz during the Editing of Now That You Revive* (2007), Moritz compares his writing process with that of a sculptor. “Getting the idea for the poem and spilling out the first version is equivalent to going out to the quarry and discovering a block of marble,” he elaborates. “Producing the finished poem is equivalent to making your drawings and chiseling away at the block and polishing it until your Zibaldone has been disclosed.” Moritz’s poetry does have a lapidary quality, and yet his subsequent reference to a literary miscellany remains apt: one senses an almost haphazard, slow-motion mercury in his poems. A recombinatory quality emerges from the pages of his many books, with similar chiseled-from-stone images locking together in different patterns—creating, almost paradoxically, a fluid continuity. Reading Moritz’s work is like discovering new outcroppings of ruins that are nevertheless traceable to the same civilization.

The simultaneously elemental *and* slippery nature of Moritz’s poems is mirrored in the poet’s reception: amid the high praise Moritz has received, one finds few satisfying articulations of just what’s going on in his poetry. Don McKay’s foreword to *Early Poems* (2002) refers to an “ease and calm” that contrasts with the heroism of what McKay calls “radical romantics—Shelley, say, or Rimbaud, or Hart Crane.” (What? Who? Whither?) John Hollander’s subsequent foreword begins with namedrops and subjective raves: Hollander mentions Moritz to Harold Bloom, the latter exclaiming, “Yes, I know his work. He is a true poet.” Mark Strand comes next, declaring the true poet’s work to be “wonderful”; as though inevitably, Hollander learns that Ashbery and Merwin were also fans. About the actual poetry Hollander adds little—that there is a light surrealism, an innate coherence, a “great imaginative depth.” In other words, it’s quite lovely. All of which is to say that Al Moritz has some very fine appreciators, but so far, his work hasn’t met the criticism it deserves.

As Far as You Know is Moritz’s first new collection following *The Sparrow* (2018), a lengthy compendium that could be regarded as the capstone to the poet’s decorated career. Accordingly, one might wonder how the new book fits into the narrative. Given *The Sparrow*’s encapsulation of the Moritz continuum, is there any new inclination in *As Far as You Know*—any detour from or leap beyond his established ideas? Chris Jennings has described Moritz’s poetics as blending such capacious traditions Romanticism, modernism, and South American poetry, but this characterization still leaves a lot of room for something unexpected to occur.

Nine-page opener “Terrorism” provides both a summary of and an update to much of what has come before. It consists of visually staggered phrases, halting rhythm, and references to a jetliner and Pearl Harbour, all of which invoke a suspended state of urgency:

The silver bird on high
 passing east
 in its landing approach
 has buried
 or hidden itself
in the tip of a tree
 and the noise of the city
arises
 and fills the dome
 The silence
does not always appear to us
but we have seen it
 We saw the silent sky
of Pearl Harbor again
at the heart of the world
on nine eleven and after
 That moment of the sky
abandoned by man
 forbidden to us
feared
how desolate it was
 That desolation
was to be
the last man
and to walk under
 the emptiness

The “bird” is here marked as signifying modern times even as it draws from the omnipresence and near timelessness of the animal. The still more tangibly present location in “the noise of the city” is quickly modulated by the at once celestial and gladiatorial, almost futuristic image of the dome. The historically fixed moments of Pearl Harbor and 9/11 deal in (to draw on political scientist Benedict Anderson’s work) both the simultaneity of messianic time and the empty homogeneity of modern, linear time, with the universally existential dread of abandonment and desolation suspended amid the two modes of apprehension.

By the fourth section’s “Our Dark Hands,” the bird imagery appears in a form we might more readily expect:

There is no way, dear one, to avoid
the circle of our luck.
In the blue globe of your flocks
of birds flying over
in the last gold stretched between your green crowns
we’re still and we talk,
even if dying, consumed in peace.

On the one hand, there’s a maximalism in showing us only the most basic things and concepts—a curiously dead or empty imagism that eschews direct treatment of the thing in favour of taking for granted our innate knowledge of fundamental objects, scenes, and emotions. Here we have the dear one, a circle, the intangible quality of luck; birds rendered as part of earthly reality; a slow leap beyond primary

colours into gold and green; finally, speaker and dear one in repose, accompanied only by talk, death, and peace. It's showing and not telling taken to the barest syntactical level.

On the other, there's complexity in the sinews connecting these large concepts—the altering metaphors and the pileup of connections accumulating from line to line consist not so much of details but of the world-historical detritus we're invited to imagine accumulating at the feet of Walter Benjamin's angel of history—parts of identifiable narratives and histories that hang together as a single catastrophe, or, more frequently, an oddly discombobulated stasis. The rough contours of the scene are held in place with the help of the barest of half rhymes; a conspicuously long line seems necessary to admit an increase in detail like secondary colours. The poem's middle sections enlarge the almost disembodied voices by locating them alongside a barely tangible avian mass—"the distance-sweetened caws and screeches, / the soft twitterings of vast flocks / invisible in your oaks"—only to tighten up the unstable complex of voice, subjectivity, and communication into a still less convincing picture of unity: "Poetry is made in a bed like love: / made as love is made, in a bed / that is love."

Some imagery, like that in "Terrorism," contrasts with Moritz's earlier work, much of which just doesn't seem that interested in images beyond a biblical catalogue of wood, stone, fever, rivers, shepherds, and soil—it's like reading the Old Testament in a spartan contemporary English that knows its way around a line break. The next section, "Poetry," adds traces of sinew to such elementary particles. "The Ram" transforms the Binding of Isaac into a kind of storyboard, repeating "curled horns" and adding colour via the tactile and visceral: the ram's eye has "some gluey greyness in the corners" but is "filled almost entirely with the iris's / perfect circle of bright gold"; the man's head is "full of mucus and salt[.]" These effects delay and splice the familiar event into a slow churn of description and perception that ends in the moment before the next plot point, as the now garishly human head "turned and across the boy's / almost breaking spine, thrust-up sex and belly, saw."

The book's penultimate section, "The Art of Surgery," reproduces poems from a 2019 chapbook of the same name. It has a more specific backstory than usually exists among Moritz's microcosmic explorations, having issued from the author's time in hospital for heart surgery. References to God and Eurydice coexist with descriptions of "a slimy leaping heart"; even this treatment of the viscerally corporeal, however, is lodged in a system in which a pianist and engineer consider a "mechanism," the slimy thing itself?

struggling, with its love and fears this hour
in the abeyance of drugged sleep—the hands that know
the heart can't stop to be worked on or it disappears... it becomes
too visible, a still lump
inside a fallen formation
without the dignity of stone.

Moritz's poems are a place where organs and inner workings aren't clearly delineated, but neither are they absent; requiring repair, one might appear as the fleshy thing itself before blending back into an ancient city of stone and sleep. These distinct parts are visible only insofar as they perform together to sustain the messy process of the self perceiving and—almost unconsciously, but not quite wordlessly—considering. His poetics disorient but also frustrate because of densely packed metaphors that shift and mix, clashing as they lock together into a sequence of almost self-contained things, their tattered edges left as a kind of potential reaching outside themselves into something new. If this book isn't exactly new, then, it's made of the same singular stuff that makes Moritz *Moritz*—a combinatorial build and collapse as exquisite as it is unstable.



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