REVIEWS OF BOOKS I GOT FOR FREE OR CHEAP

A.F. Moritz's Great Silent Ballad

Not silent, but subtle

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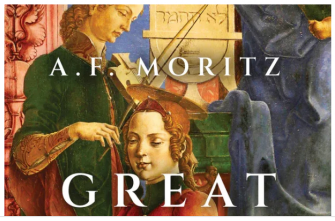
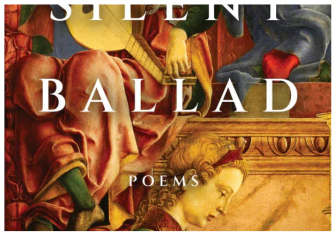
Back in May I'd written up A.F. Moritz's *Early Poems*, mentioning that I didn't have a copy of his latest, *Great Silent Ballad*. Well, the author has very generously rectified that little matter by having one sent to me—thank you Dr. Moritz and House of Anansi Press!





There's something dislocating about jumping a gulf of nearly fifty years in the development of a writer, from his incandescent early style to his mature reflection. The most obvious shifts are in syntax, with the new poems generally consisting of sentences that are complete and cohere and in which each word performs more or less its usual function. Looking back at the *Early Works* I find that they are more sentence-founded than I'd remembered, but the impression of being non-sentencical (? new word) arises from surrealist imagery, words standing in places they might not normally, as in the instance of the wild man who "committed a violin / and went on in his teeth". By the time we reach *Great Silent Ballad*, Humpty Dumpty has settled down and

contracted—far from it.

Great Silent Ballad is not a quick read. It's long for a poetry collection (127 pages, not counting notes) and pretty much every poem is a full meal, something you'll need a minute to digest. Going out and only have room in your bag for one book? This is a good choice. Not too much risk of finishing it at the bus stop, and if you do, you can just start over.

I've been puzzling about how to describe these poems—Moritz uses third-person perspectives a lot more than the typical lyric poet, so they're not confessional; we have characters here—some historical, some perhaps from the poet's life, some perhaps invented. There's a metaphysical turn in *Great Silent Ballad*, not totally unlike good old John Donne and his 17th-century pals (I guess not actually pals). In "Credal Statement" Moritz announces, "I am not a modern man" (though we should be skeptical as to whether this is Moritz speaking, or one of his

characters). “Words are beings,” he proclaims, “are / for being, not to be / adequate to things. Things are not adequate to things. / That

Moritz engages widely with other thinkers: there’s a section headed “The Death of Yves Bonnefoy”, a poem rewriting Plato’s allegory of the cave (“Once there was a garbagy shallow cave / where some of us sat, backs to the mouth, / and on the back wall we watched shadows created / by the sun outside (when, rarely, it was day)”) and a “Quibble with Hegel” that’s accompanied by two finely-printed pages of explanatory notes.

He also engages in a spirited fashion with his younger self—and this is really interesting to read back-to-back with his own earlier poems, as I’ve been doing. There’s a whole section headed “When I Was a Child” which kicks off with the image of a kid wandering along “the stream banks of Niles” (Ohio, presumably, not the one in Egypt, but the resonance arises, especially once he starts conversing with God). When he was a child, spirit was immanent in the world. “When I was a child it was clear / the stones are alive. … A stone / was no companionable creature like the wary / groundhog or blue jay watching us calmly far

creek.) He puts it all together in “The Memoirs of A. F. Moritz”, explaining that “I was born a happy boy / and grew to be a happy man” but after all this span, “a person is supposed / to gain self-acceptance with age. / This has not been my experience.”

My one criticism of the *Early Poems* was the way women tended to be equated with nature, and this hasn’t entirely gone away. “O those women,” he calls (though, to be fair, I think this is a semi-historical character speaking out of an earlier era, and not strictly the voice of A.F. Moritz). “I can’t see them, but I hear / them tossing their heads in sprightly dance / on a wooded lakeshore. Flowers!— / they’re flowers, as the ancient compliment says they are / they want to be flowers.” Well, okay. This feels a bit like the old, “hey, it’s a compliment,” but—okay. If I have to put up with a little bit of essentializing in order to get at the rest of this beautiful, intellectual, far-reaching and altogether astounding poetry, so be it.

I’ll accept quite a lot to read lines like these, from the poem “Mentioning”, just for another example:

> *climbing the antique stairs of love*
> *or contemplation to* l’esprit pur, *and on the way*
> *he passed, and like some dog could not help turning aside to,*
> *a teddy bear, a watchtower, the mother shattered in the bombing,*
> *the innocent stumblers being herded toward a train or*
> *disappearing*
> *into factory hangar doors or timber-propped mine mouths,*
> *the fox kit in its fur, a smashed ant, its front half still struggling,*
> *this willow tree, this one, standing and whispering right here,*
> *that the big people cut down despite all cries*
> *in that poet’s fifth year…I could go on but if I did*
> *you wouldn’t believe me, because all this*
> *goes on and on, is proof of eternity, the innumerable,*
> *where each item, each moment of an item, is*
> *greater than the world. This was his mentioning.”*

Friends, this is A.F. Moritz, just mentioning.

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1