

IMAGINATION & THE SHAPE-SHIFTING BEAST:  
AN INTERVIEW WITH MORTON MARCUS BY ROBERT SWARD  
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RS: Mort, what do you mean by plain style?

MM: To me, plain style is clear style: clarity of expression that is always conversational in essence and tone. It is never ornate or pursues verbal pyrotechnics. Although I've used many approaches in my poems over the years, for the most part I've presented them with an austere clarity, almost a simplicity of grammar and vocabulary. And again, I'm more concerned with giving the impression of a voice speaking than singing. That's pretty much William Carlos Williams' legacy for the poets who started writing in the 1950s and after. Find the American voice box, he said, We don't speak English; we speak American. And we speak, we don't sing. So with me, voice rhythms are all. As is clarity. The pursuit of clarity has always been a conscious decision on my part and has to do with my focus on imagery and metaphor as the core of my work.

RS: How do you hear your poems? That is, what do you "hear" first in your mind and--tricky question--how then do your poems find their way from head space, so to speak, to the physical page?

MM: One of the ways, a predominant way I think, that I develop a poem is through imagining a voice speaking, a particular voice that is talking to me or which I'm overhearing, a voice whose rhythm and tone I let guide the method and structure of what I'm writing in so far as tone, line length, stanzaic arrangement and form are concerned—some of the latter, of course, are only relevant when I'm writing verse poems.

RS: You're saying the voice mode is primary...

MM: No, that's just one way I develop a poem; a major way, it's true. But for me, the voice is secondary to the imagery and/or metaphors that reveal themselves in the course of the writing.

RS: Explain.

MM: Maybe if I described one of the methods I use to write a poem, this will become clearer. But let me warn you that my description may sound fanciful...

To begin with, images and metaphors in almost all cases appear like golden medallions in the vaulted darkness of my psyche—

RS: Sorry to interrupt, but the preceding sentence strikes me as out of keeping with what you said earlier about "plain style."

MM: No, no. You're confusing two things here. My imagery may be baroque, even decadent, but my language is plain. —And I warned you that this might sound fanciful. But let me go on. I was saying that images and metaphors in almost all cases appear like golden medallions in the vaulted darkness of my psyche. Let me add that their appearances are unplanned and unexpected. A long time ago I decided that these appearances were in many cases the beginning of the creative act for me, and that it was my task to pursue their meanings by following their development, which many times consisted of grappling with their changes in shape and direction. Is that clear?

RS: Go on.

MM: ... Well, along with the notion of pursuing whatever images arose in my psyche and grappling with their changes, I postulated that images and metaphors were never to be used as mere decoration, nor—and this is most important—were they ever to be conceived of as occurring accidentally. There were reasons why their glinting shapes suddenly appeared in my "psychic darkness." I've described this process by comparing the image or metaphor to a runaway horse I woke to find myself riding bareback, and what I had to do to survive was grab its mane with my hands, grip its flanks with my legs, and hold on for dear life as it took me wherever it would.

RS: Again, how does such a florid metaphor tie in with what you said about plain style?

MM: Good question, and the answer is "easily." You see, many of the images and metaphors I encountered while writing were so strange, and took even stranger routes in their uncontrolled gallops, that to make sense of them, and more important to have the reader make sense of them, I had to depict them in the clearest, simplest, most accessible language I could muster. This was especially pressing to me since I have again and again stressed in my classes and writings that the poet has to evoke in the reader the experience the poem is depicting, and only by clearly presenting my "strange" images and metaphors could I achieve that. To complicate the matter—and the metaphor—even more, the metaphoric horse might at any moment change shape under me, as if I were riding not a horse but some shape-shifting, Proteus-like beast on the road to oblivion, which is a further inducement to use the clearest language I'm able.

RS: You may have founded your work on the pursuit of "strange" metaphors and plain style, but it sounds to me as if the core of your work is really about the imagination. It

strikes me that you have an almost Blakean reverence for this ability of yours to form images.

MM: I view the imagination very much as Blake did. It is the source of the images and metaphors we spoke about earlier. Like the Tao, the imagination is the beginning before the beginning, in this case before the existence of the psyche's darkness. It is from the imagination that the gold medallions enter the psyche. In this definition, the imagination is the godhead of poetry, the prime mover that, like the Tao, cannot be named or explained, the mystery of mysteries, which, of course, as poet I must try to name and explain.

RS: I think I follow you, but what then is its connection to your use of metaphor as a shaping force or tool in making a poem?

MM: Let's say that the imagination is not so much "imagery" as "imaging"—that is, it is not a noun but a transitive verb, an action, an act of becoming, the core of creativity. It propels the images and metaphors out of nothingness into being. So as I ride the shape-shifting beast, I pronounce (intone?) both its twists and turns and the twists and turns of its route. When the beast finally collapses in exhaustion, I sift through and polish my memories of the ride and from them shape a verbal map from this formerly uncharted landscape, a structure the reader can follow for whatever reason he chooses. And that's the poem.

RS: More...

MM: More? More what?

RS: We were speaking about imagination...

MM: You want more about the imagination. Let me see... Hmm. Well, here goes. It became evident to me early on that the imagination had several "levels." I was struck by Coleridge's separation of fancy and imagination into two concepts. He looked at the imagination as a mental process which allowed one to penetrate a dimension beyond sensory experience so one could body forth profound, even visionary material. He also seems to have seen it as a disciplining, organizing agent. He revered the imagination in the same way Blake did, but he thought there was an aspect of superficiality—a flighty baroque decorativeness without substance—to which the mind was prey and which he called the fancy. To him, the fancy was akin to whimsy, an almost daydream-like association of images that spatter the mind without meaning or direction—and without shape or organization. Montaigne had similar qualms in this area, but he assigned his misgivings to the imagination as a whole. Of course, he lived in the sixteenth century, almost two hundred years before Coleridge came up with his

definition of the fancy, so who knows how Coleridge's definition might have changed his attitude.

RS: That's all well and good, but what's your attitude toward this concept of "the fancy"?

MM: To me, the fancy is a plaything which can be taken in hand and elevated to the level of the imagination—that is, it can be forced to be more than itself. But not always. And one should be on guard against it. Weirdness for weirdness sake is not acceptable, nor is the poet's indulging his facility for invention unless it is being used for specific purposes in a poem, and the poet should be wary of both these temptations at all times. The imagination's "genuine" images and metaphors are the way into vision, to the momentary glimpse we can get of the essential order of things, which is what the creative act allows the poet (or artist) to apprehend and through him the reader (or audience) to experience. The last part of that statement, which is really talking about structuring and craft, is what I take to be Coleridge's notion that in the end the imagination was more genuine, more solid, because it was also an organizing agent.

RS: One can read that statement, too, as a leap of imagination, of the poet's understanding that there is, as you say in "The 8<sup>th</sup>, 9<sup>th</sup> & 10<sup>th</sup> Wonders of the World," "something beyond imagination." On the other hand, one might say you ground the imagination in what one understands to be realistic observation.

MM: The wilder the imagination, the simpler the language to express it, so the imagery can be not only understood but experienced by the reader. We're back to my definition of how I "use" plain style.

RS: By the way, I was struck by your use of the phrase "human-hearted" months ago at a particularly moving reading you gave in what has become your hometown, Santa Cruz. I believe you were alluding to a Chinese saying. For me human-heartedness calls up something like 'generosity of spirit...' and the capacity to forgive.

Here's a three-part question:

WHAT is human-heartedness? HOW does it find its way into poetry and WHAT (name names?) poets give evidence of it?

MM: In the Chinese sense of the term, "human-heartedness" means humaneness, benevolence. It is the foundation of all the virtues and ways of behaving, privately and publicly, and is expressed in the character *ren* (*jen*), which pictographically represents "man," as if the essence of being a man (i.e., a human being) is being human-hearted.

Privately, this character refers to one's behavior with all members of the family. Socially (or publicly) it refers to being part of a community. This is shown through "good manners" or "right conduct," which is represented by the character *li* where courtesy reflects inner goodness. This is more than "generosity of spirit." It's compassion, and in art it's expressed in empathy—the ability to experience as one's subject does: to put yourself in the subject's place, to fully identify with others. This allows the artist to "feel" the sorrows, joys, angers, and frustrations of the human condition. It makes itself known not as a rational aspect of art but as an emotional power that gathers force and launches itself at the reader in the work of such writers as Chaucer, Shakespeare, Dostoyevsky, Phil Levine, and most evidently in the short stories of Anton Chekhov. Human-heartedness is to me the elemental power that must be projected in a work of art and pervade the beholder in the form of poignancy. Without it, art is dry, detached, solipsistic, self indulgent, even selfish—never engaged with the world. A poet must have this human-hearted empathy not only to enter the lives of human beings, but the worlds of animals, plants and inanimate objects. Supposedly Keats said that the poet should be able to empathize with a billiard ball, although I've never been able to find the quote.

RS: Over the years you've drawn on, been influenced by an unusually wide range of sources, among them the legends of the Baal Shem which, I imagine, must strike a chord with your Jewish roots. Hassidic tales seem to have influenced your work, too, especially the prose poems. Assuming this is the case, how were you introduced to legends of the Baal-Shem?

MM: I first came across them when I was in Iowa City, specifically the *Tales of The Hasidim* by Martin Buber. They struck an almost biological chord in me, I felt them to the very nuclei of my cells. I didn't think of using them in my own work until the mid-1970s when I read Elie Wiesel's *Souls On Fire*, his very poetic and personal take on the Hasidim. A marvelous book. At the time I was working on the poems that would become *Pages From A Scrapbook of Immigrants*, the story of my family's immigration to the U.S. from Russia. Understand, however, that I'm a sucker for wisdom tales. I love the *Zhuang-Zi* (also known as *The Chuang Tzu*), both for the wisdom of its tales and its humor. That goes for Rumi's *Mathnawi* and the comic folk tales about Nasrudin. I love the idiot savants, the holy fools. Their humor is, and always has been, mine. That is, the humor has, but, alas, not the wisdom.

RS: Dana Gioia has encouraged me --and others-- to develop the narrative line in our poems, including a clearer story line with a variety of characters and, where appropriate, dialogue. That advice, I feel, is yielding fruit. Most I think of you as a terrific storyteller both on and off the page. Storytelling strikes me as a form or expression of human-heartedness and, as a fellow writer, I am intrigued with both the techniques involved and the aura, or warmth of spirit, the finished work throws off.

MM: Yes, human-heartedness is part of storytelling, but it is of poetry as well, and, actually, of all literature. That's because it has and can evoke the power of pathos, poignancy, which I feel is the most human of emotions, the recognition by the reader through the writer of our common humanity—the sufferings, joys, and experiences all of us as a species share. More than epiphany or insight or even vision, this poignancy is the heart of literature for me. I'm not talking about sentimentality here, but rather sentiment, a recognition that goes beyond the rational and touches the heart.

Storytelling itself is—pardon the pun—a different story. It's a learned thing that has to be mastered. Very complex. Choices have to be made all the time—who's telling the story, from what perspective is the scene being shown, what scenes are to be developed and what not, into how many characters' minds should the writer go? Is the story to be realistic, symbolic, or both? Plot-driven or character-driven? Is it to be a parable, allegory, what? Each kind of story has its own restrictions and demands a different approach.

RS: Let's go back to human-heartedness for a moment. Ted Solotaroff claims aggression is a writer's main source of energy, "the fuel for all those stories and poems about betrayal and bad luck relationships... plus anything else a person wants to write about."

MM: Solotaroff said that, did he? Well, that's not what drives my creative energies. My main source of energy as a writer is a dogged determination to achieve heightened consciousness, to "live at that pitch which is near madness," where I can envision—or think I can, anyway—the unity in the chaos around me. Maybe "vision" is too grandiose a word here. Maybe I "live at that pitch which is near madness" as often as I can in order to "detect" for a moment here and there the unity of all things. That was what Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz tries to do in my poem, "A Votive Offering To Sor Juana." Her mistake in the poem, as I believe it was in her real life, is that she thinks she can hold onto her vision. Like an elegant plum-colored vase that slides from the hands and shatters on a stone floor, the vision is momentary, can never be held. Its wholeness explodes and scatters in all directions, a jigsaw puzzle of meaningless shards that must be meticulously pasted piece by piece into its vase-shape again and again by the artist and through him (or her) made whole to his audience (or reader).

RS: Working in the prose poem form, how does one manage to combine (as you often do) the narrative with the lyrical? "Story-telling" with song. Plot and music.

MM: My prose poems obey all the trappings of verse poetry, especially the condensing methods of heightened rhythm and poetic language. The only difference is that they are not written in lines. I found that the line inhibited my imagination, and dispensing with it allowed me to enter an area where the imagination has free reign.

As for how I combine storytelling and music, plot and song in the prose poem, let me say it's the same way I combine those elements in verse. Many of my prose poems are purely lyrical and tell no story—have little or no plot line. See "The Seduction of The Trees," "Waking," "What's In A Name," "Calendar," "Spring Laughter," "Friday the 13th," "In Passing," "Angels," "Visions," "Journeys," "Swallows," "'The Eternal Mystery Is As Mysterious'," "The Photo of Pessoa's Trunk," "Blinking," and "At Peace." If those poems were in lines, they would be considered lyrical and not even raise the reader's eyebrow.

RS: Okay, then what's the difference between micro-fiction, so-called, and prose poem?

MM: Micro-fiction doesn't need to be as concerned with rhythm and poetic language as poetry does. It starts from the context of prose, of storytelling. For me, prose poetry begins from the concepts of poetry. Both may meet in the middle, but they start from different places. Let's say, poetry begins on a beach overlooking the Pacific Ocean, and micro-fiction begins on a beach bordering the Atlantic. Both can meet in Kansas, set down their knapsacks, and throw their arms around each other with equally joyous cries, but both are coming from different places.

RS: On to another topic: how has your interest in film carried over to—or influenced—your writing of poetry? After all, you're a TV film reviewer and critic.

MM: The only way film has affected my writing is that it's given me the all important sense of the camera at work; that is, it has made me aware of the importance of always knowing from what perspective a scene I'm describing is being viewed by the reader. All of Hemingway's stories seem to be written with the camera in mind. The same is true of Shakespeare, whose plays were presented on a bare stage and showed scenes to the audience through the characters' descriptions. The camera seems to be at work in Donne's poems too, almost all of which are dramatic monologues—that is, in each one a voice is speaking to someone else in a specific environment or situation. Almost all of Donne's poems evoke a sense of place in the same way Browning's dramatic monologues do.

On the other hand, I interpret, or more accurately "read" films as I do literature. This is not only because I'm a writer, but because narrative film developed by using the techniques of the nineteenth century novel and Belasco melodrama. That's what D.W. Griffith, the shaping force of narrative film, claimed in interview after interview. Griffith said he modeled his manner of telling stories on film after the way Dickens, Thackeray, and others, who he read voraciously while working in a bookstore as a teenager, told theirs on paper.

RS: I love that comment of yours: ONLY WHEN WE NAME THINGS DO THEY HAVE A SIGNATURE. It calls to mind Adam naming the animals in Eden. Would you elaborate on that theme... of the poet's role in naming or defining those things in our experience that may not previously have had a name. For what it's worth, I think it takes courage to name, to truly see what is happening, say, in a political context, and to name it, which means to nail it, to see it for what it is. Telling truth to power... but naming, of course, can go beyond that... in another context it puts us in touch with the essence of things.

MM: When I talk about the poet's role in naming things, I'm referring to three areas at once. First is the spiritual, what you term putting "us in touch with the essence of things." That is the holiest of utterances. The Sufis and the Taoists, like all mystics, know that the essence of things is unnamable and so they suggest the nature of that essence through comparisons—metaphors that give their readers the sense of what cannot be described by comparing their experience of the essence to familiar objects. That's why Rumi's poetry, for example, is so astonishing. He may be the greatest maker of metaphors in all poetry. I'm talking here of the sheer inventiveness of his metaphor-making, not specific metaphors. Every other phrase of his poetry, it seems, is a metaphor, an ingenious comparison to say the unsayable or at least suggest an aspect of it. Similarly, many poets, realizing that the essence of things is unnamable, don't try to name it but to hint, to suggest the nature of its being. It's like putting a fence around a form you cannot see, where the shape of the fence implies the form.

RS: I see. And the second kind?

MM: The second kind of naming is epistemological: people can't experience phenomena until they're named. They can't see the tree outside their window until that tree is defined for them in a word. Twenty or thirty years ago, astronomers found objects at the edge of visible space that were totally unique, bodies that obeyed none of the laws of physics known at that time. The only astronomers who could "see" these objects worked with the most powerful telescopes on earth. When they delivered their findings at the annual international convention of astronomers, their colleagues were astounded—and angry: angry because they didn't have the instruments capable of observing these unique bodies the finders called quasars and described in detail. When they went home to their inferior observatories, however, these grumbling poor cousins turned their telescopes to the heavens in search of the new bodies anyway. And guess what? Armed with the name and definition of the new body, they discovered quasars scattered all over the inner precincts of the universe. They just never had the word before that would allow them to see what was literally right in front of their eyes. So words are like Ali Baba's magic command, "Open, Sesame!" When said, they allow the blindness to slide from our eyes and the treasure trove, that was hidden from us but always present, to be revealed.



RS: Two good metaphors. I wonder what you'll come up with for number three.

MM: I may disappoint you on that count, since the third kind of naming is political in nature and all I can think of right now as a definition are examples. So: bureaucracies and governments generally use language to obscure what they're really talking about. Appeals to patriotism and morally correct action are many times solicitations to commit heinous acts against fellow humans for political or economic reasons. During the Vietnam war, Robert Bly pointed out that Nixon's "incursions into the north" were really descriptions of "bombing the hell" out of the North Vietnamese. Similarly, the powers that be have renamed the unemployment office the Department of Human Resources, as if to hide from the populace the numbers of people without jobs and thus promote a false picture of economic well being. Of course, I'm not just talking about the political and economic spheres. Any discipline, whether of the sciences or the humanities, develops its own vocabulary, it's own jargon, that many times hides the banality or emptiness of its concepts. By using language that is clear and concrete, language based firmly in the senses, the poet almost inadvertently reveals the deceptions of those who would misuse language. That is why the poet has been deemed subversive by one government or religion after another down through the ages.

RS: If the world began with a kiss, as you say at the end of your prose poem, "Kisses," how will (or how might) it end? We are living in a dark time. Speaking as a poet—and as an eminently generous and moral man—do you have any thoughts on how we might conduct ourselves in this post 9/11 era?

In short, what is the writer's role in these times? And I don't mean the writer's self-chosen role necessarily but, rather, how does a being, any being, maintain functional equilibrium... and perform humanely when, at any moment, our increasingly aggressive country may go to war with another and/or be attacked with nuclear, biological or other weapons?

MM: I don't know how the world will end. It may already have ended. And it may not have begun. Chuang Tzu wondered if the world was a butterfly's dream. If so, I'd say it was more like a scorpion's. Yes, we're in a dark time, but the world has been in such eras before. Many times. As an ex-historian, I know that quite literally. And unspeakable, horrible times may be coming. In many ways this planet is a bone pile, and many of the bones bear sword chips and bullet holes. How do we conduct ourselves in such times? Each person must answer that question for himself. Under fire, the urge to survive makes us do many things we never conceived we would do. As for me, I'll live on my own terms so I can live with myself—hopefully with compassion and honor, still singing the wonders of what we can achieve for ourselves and others. It's what I believe the poet's role demands he do in such times. In bad

times more than ever, he is the purveyor of hope, of sanity, of possibility, whether people listen to him or not.

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