

**THE BLOOMSBURY REVIEW INTERVIEW WITH MORTON MARCUS
BY RAY GONZALEZ (2001)**

1. *You have stated that you started writing prose poems late in your career as a poet. What led you in that direction?*

MM: My work headed more and more toward narrative during the 1970s. I'd become fascinated by Richard Ellmann's *Selected Writings of Henri Michaux* in the mid-1960s, and did imitations of Michaux's prose poems every once in while over the next ten years, during which I also studied W.S. Merwin's *The Miner's Pale Children* and Carlos Castaneda's masterly use of the anecdote in the Don Juan series, the latter a form I had come to cherish through my readings of the *Chuang Tzu* and the ancient Chinese historical records known as *Tso Chuan*. Then in 1977, a young publisher asked me for a short manuscript. I didn't want to give him my new ms. of poems, which was too long anyway (but which, ironically, he wound up printing three years later under the title *Big Winds, Glass Mornings, Shadows Cast By Stars*) and so I gave him twenty-three of the prose experiments I'd been doing over the previous decade. This became my first prose poem book, *The Armies Encamped In The Fields Beyond The Unfinished Avenues*. Three years later I wrote and published a novel about my experiences in Greece, *The Brezhnev Memo* (Dell/Delacorte, 1981) and after that I began the ms. of *Pages From A Scrapbook of Immigrants* (Coffee House, 1988) which I conceived of as a Tolstoyan panoramic novel that traced my family's immigration to the United States from Russia in fifty-eight "lined" poems, each poem working like a miniature chapter where I sought not the narrative movement but the lyrical moment at the center of the narrative event.

Four years after the immigrant book came out, I wrote a long review of a volume of prose poems, and the full import of the possibilities of the form shook me like a volcanic explosion. Prose poems literally erupted from me, and over the next four years I wrote almost all of the 71 pieces that make up *When People Could Fly* (Hanging Loose, 1997). I should mention that there were six precursors to that eruption, which I included as a "new" final section in the second edition of *The Armies Encamped*.... The precursors and what followed "felt" totally different from the prose experiments I had done in the seventies. It may have been that I had more control of my craft by the late 1980s, but whatever the cause, I was responding viscerally to an urge to write a completely open work guided, I realized later, by the whims and unexplained ways of my imagination: I had tapped into an area of expression where the full range of my inner being could be expressed in all its shifting shapes and shadows—or at least in as many of those aspects of my being as I was able to touch. That visceral feeling and my working in the prose poem have continued unabated ever since.

2. *What has writing prose poems done for your vision as a poet?*

MM: When I first immersed myself in the prose poem in the early 1990s, I discovered freedoms I had been unaware I could attain until then. Another way of putting this is that while writing prose poems I discovered restrictions in lined poetry I hadn't known existed. I had learned early on that the way poets of the past had solved the problems of getting from one line to another determined the way I did. They had shown me the way (s), so to speak, in their poems. But I also found that the line in closed verse determined how I used language and how I conceived of developing the structure of a poem. When I gave up closed verse for free verse, I experienced a latitude, a freedom of choice, and found a more lively, vital voice. When I gave up the line, however, I experienced new ways of seeing and saying. It was a complete turnabout of traditional ways of doing things in poetry for me. What I came to realize was that the line had inhibited my thinking process, since my choice of words and sense of structure (in terms of word choice, syntax and the overall development of the poem) was determined as much by the line as by the way I conceived of moving from one thought, image, or metaphor to another, and how, in the end, I structured the entire poem. In other words, I found content was as much determined by my using or not using the line as free verse had been in releasing me from the tried and true ways of getting from one line to another in closed verse. Thus, in getting rid of the tyranny of the line, I had also gotten rid of the baggage I had not realized came with it. The scales fell away from my eyes all right, but at the same time—joyous surprise!--the chains fell away from my imagination, and I decided to let that shape-shifting beast guide my words and determine the structure of the poem, because ultimately my greatest discovery in writing the prose poem was its ability to free the imagination, and this freeing has everything to do with

my vision as a poet, since I seek the level below consciousness from which to speak. My world is composed of fun-house mirror distortions of reality, dream visions rooted in metaphor and symbol which for me evoke a more resonant picture of the world than everyday realism does.

Looked at another way, my choice to abandon the line has allowed me to pursue an unshackled phrase as my basic unit of rhythm, which at times extends phrases to thirteen and even fifteen beats before a caesura—"a sweep of words," as I wrote in *The Prose Poem: An international Journal*, "that in its unfolding opens unexpected vistas of content by releasing my imagination from conventional modes of thought which the line and other poetic devices, it seems, unconsciously dictate." At the same time, I employ all the techniques of poetry, such as figurative language, assonance, consonance, and even internal as well as end-line rhyme to drive my rhythms and energize my poems.

3. *Many of your prose poems border on parables, fables, and short-short fictions, voices and presences that go beyond the individual "I" of the poet. Where do these voices come from and how do you know which ones to use?*

MM: I love all the ways of telling stories, the methods, modes, structures, and the expectations those methods, modes, and structures instill in the reader/listener—expectations I delight in breaking. And I love telling stories—jokes, tall tales, outlandish versions of everyday events, baroque structures composed of Bach-like intricacies, descriptions of walking from the dining room to the living room that become Icelandic sagas or suddenly transform into parables I hadn't suspected were lurking in the crevices between the words. I love parodying modes of discourse. That's what I thought I was doing in "When People Could Fly," parodying the historical monograph, when unexpectedly the real piece emerged from its cocoon as a full-fledged parable. And that's just one example of many.

Let me go back to my answer to the second question, where I said the prose poem allowed me to express the full range of my inner being. What I meant by that statement is that writing has always been an act of self-discovery for me. I never know what my subject matter or theme is going to be ahead of time. I can't plan what I'm going to write about. In fact, I may not even be doing the writing. It's not so much that I'm an explorer entering uncharted territory as I'm a conduit, a channel through which others speak. I realized soon after I began writing that there were many voices inside me that wanted to have their say, and my first prose poem may well have been my short biographical essay in *The Young American Poets* anthology (Follett, 1967) where I first expressed this idea. Therefore, I'm interested in the I that is the personal **me**, as well as any first person speaker I "invent," only insofar as the I expresses a communal or universal experience we all share—what I think of, in the end, as an archetypal experience dealing with the human condition.

For some reason Robert Bly identified my early work as confessional poetry, most probably because he attended a reading of mine in which all the poems I read dealt with my divorce. Several times after that night, he asked me how I could defend displaying my private life in public, especially since there was a good chance my writing would hurt people close to me. I explained that although I used "I" in a lot of my poems, and that although what I wrote about was almost always in part personal, I was only interested in making public those experiences that were common to us all, and that I was evoking those experiences under the guise, the "artifice," of their being personal. More important than the biographical revelations, I continued, was the uses to which I was putting that material. The personal was the mined rock from which I was extracting the hidden ore. I don't think Bly ever accepted that explanation. Later, as I remember, he thought my telling the immigrant poems in the third person made *Pages From A Scrapbook of Immigrants* too impersonal at a time when people needed the personal voice in poetry. That seemed to me an interesting change of position on his part, but then I'd always considered his comments were made more to provoke thought than to dictate rules, and the few occasions I was lucky enough to get his opinions, I always found them cogent and brilliant.

How do I know which voices to use, you ask? Answer: I don't. The voices speak. I listen, and transcribe: a Croatian butcher, a Jesuit priest, a waitress in an all-night diner, a diplomat visiting a country on the other side of dreams. I let them talk. So much of my work comes back to that notion: in my poems, I'm

speaking for dead relatives, ancestors, and all those who were silent during their lifetimes, watery voices whose words bubble up from my cells, from the strands of DNA seaweed knotted deep inside us all.

4. *People who criticize the prosaic turn poetry takes within a prose poem say too much of the writer and the storyteller is replacing the spontaneous moment of a poem. They claim prose poems try to swallow too much within their dense form. When do you feel one of your prose poems has ended, is done?*

MM: Interesting. I thought the main criticism of the prose poem was that it discarded the line, which many feel provides poetry's intrinsic tension—like a taut bowstring that launches the force of the arrow. That criticism was always hard for me to answer because I agree with so much of it. But this other criticism that "the writer and the storyteller are replacing the spontaneous central moment of the poem" is easier to deal with. First, what drove me to write the prose poem was an attempt to find the spontaneous moment, wrest it from the weeds and scrub grass of those traditional methods that were impeding rather than aiding me from uncovering it. That quest, in fact, is what always tugs me forward.

That said, let me quickly add that storytelling accounts for only one kind of prose poem. There are as many kinds of prose poem as the poet can imagine—lyrical, confessional, meditative, you name it. I use them all.

Prose poems "try to swallow too much in their dense forms"? In my experience, most prose poems are fairly simple, usually running no more than one paragraph in length and pursuing a single "spontaneous moment." Mine are among the exceptions to the rule: they're usually a page to a page-and-a-half in length—but again, each of them seeks the spontaneous moment.

I approach the prose poem as I do the lined poem, and as I said in my answer to your second question, I employ all the devices of figurative language, devices which compel the poet to condense, to say less and imply more. The danger prose poets face by using the sentence and the paragraph rather than the line and the stanza as their units of measurement is that they may be lured into saying too much, a situation that results in a bloatedness, a discursiveness. This is a pitfall prose poets usually tumble into if they think they're writing prose and not poetry. That's why a short-short, say, is not a prose poem.

I know I've completed a prose poem when I've cut away all extraneous information, words, and even syllables but am still rendering the **experience** of the piece in question for the reader. As with lined poetry, it's a point the poet "feels" is right—there is no hard and fast rule to guide you.

5. *You have recently completed your Selected Poems. What kind of work is included in the collection and how does a poet know which poems should be crowned survivors and which can go hide in obscure archives?*

MM: To clarify: the selected poems you're talking about are actually my new and selected *prose* poems, *Moments Without Names*, which will be out from White Pine Press in the spring of 2002. Of the seven books of poems I've published up to now, five are books of lined poems.

Most selected poems are chronological in structure and involve picking what the poet considers his best or favorite poems from his previous volumes. I've chosen to structure my new and selected prose poems thematically, grouping the pieces in five sections of twenty-two poems each. Each section marks a progression in a person's life, personally, socially, and historically, under the headings "Beginnings," "At Home," "On Streets & Roads," "Travels," and "Ends." The poems themselves use all methods and are on a myriad of subjects. Of the 110 poems in the book, 65 are new. So as you can see, something different is going on here from the usual selected volume. In addition, I chose only thirty or so poems from *When People Could Fly*, which Hanging Loose, the publishers of that book, were gracious enough to let me use, although they plan to keep the book in print. If I could, I would have used all the poems from that book, and I consider it a companion volume to the new and selected. Compounding the above mentioned restrictions was the problem of size. The selected is going to run over 200 pages, a large book for a volume of poetry, which prompted a selection that eschewed the inclusion of longer, and in a number cases, personally prized poems, such as the title poem of *When People Could Fly*.

Those specific considerations aside, I can say that in putting together a new and selected under ideal circumstances, I would have chosen not only the poems I considered successful from other volumes but ambitious failures as well as smaller pieces to which I had sentimental attachments or in which I had accomplished personal breakthroughs I was particularly happy with. Other poets may use different criteria.

6. *Many poets who start writing prose poems make the switch and find they can't go back to traditional, linear poems. They are either very happy to try new forms and work within the genre, or find they gain more confidence with the prose poem and don't want to go back to lyrical forms they claim restrict them, even if they were successful in those forms. What are some of the factors you think may be leading more poets in America toward the prose poem today.*

MM: I guess my answer to your second question could suggest that I'm one of those poets who claim that lyrical forms restrict me. But that's not what I meant. To put it more precisely, I was saying that I found traditional, linear poetry, by its technical and epistemological nature, inherently restrictive. Be that as it may, I neither deny the work of lyrical, formal, "lined" poets, nor have I stopped reading and enjoying them. As far as my not going back to lyrical forms, let me just say that I have continued to write lined poems while pursuing my experiments in the prose poem. In fact, next year Creative Arts will bring out *Shouting Down The Silence*, a volume of my new lined poems, almost two-thirds of which has been written during the past decade—the most creative period of my work in the prose poem. How do I account for this? Simply, I let the form of each poem I write be dictated by the particular impulse that drives me to put those particular words on paper, a process that remains as mysterious to me now as it was the first day I found myself writing a poem.

As for what is leading more poets to the prose poem—well, I don't know that more poets *are* actually writing prose poems these days. If they are—and this is supposition on my part—the increase could be because it's some sort of literary fad at the moment, or because there is the misconception that the prose poem is easier to write than the traditional lined poem. I can imagine novice poets coming to the latter conclusion. But as I hope I've made clear: to work, the prose poem takes the most exquisite control of the poet's craft: it relies on that craft to raise its bulk from the marshes of prose and soar above the landscape. In other words, I believe one has to master the craft of poetry to create successful prose poems. In an exchange of letters with Charlie Simic several years ago, I claimed that writing the prose poem had enabled me to tap into areas of my writing I'd never been able to reach before, and I bemoaned the fact that I hadn't discovered the prose poem's powers thirty years ago. Charlie, in his wisdom, tersely replied, "You couldn't have written them thirty years ago."

7. *As you continue to write prose poems, do you think you are active on the margins of the American poetry scene, or will your success with the prose poem lead you back into the main arena of the literary world? I ask this because it seems that many of our successful prose poets, like say Russell Edson, usually work as outsiders.*

MM: I've always been on the margins of the American poetry scene—and I've always been active. Of the two, activity is not more important, it is the *only* importance. Players on the scene come and go, the most praised poems turn to doughnuts and dust in the crypt. To me—second only to being fully immersed in the daily life of the world—the work is all, the moment of the work: surrendering to that high of higher consciousness, that "pitch which is near madness," and, with all the verbal powers I've developed as poet, to sing that divine or demonic music into the souls of my fellow humans so it vibrates in their vitals. At least that's what I try to do, and try to do to the best of my abilities.

Have I been successful in my prose poems? I don't know. I'd like to think I have in the way the word "success" has meaning for me—by enlarging the world of the people who read my work, by quickening and enriching their sense of life, not by saying, but by evoking in them through words a sense of the sacredness of existence.

Right now, the prose poem is still frowned upon by many poets, editors, and readers. The virulent attacks on Simic's *The World Doesn't End* when it won the Pulitzer are only a decade old. Many editors who published me as a lined poet, *malign* my work now. Actually, I know of only ten journals in the States that regularly publish prose poems. That means I have limited places to send my work. And some of the ten journals won't publish me. So my "success" is a question even among prose poets. Why? Besides the obvious reason that the editors don't like my work, I'd say because there are as many schools and approaches to the prose poem as there are to the lined poem, maybe more, and that to me is a sign of health and growth.

8. *You have written that you "conceive of a poet as an entertainer in words." Many poets and critics would frown at that and would tend to dismiss any notion of the serious profession of poetry wanting to "entertain." How does a poet entertain outside of the obvious situations like performance poetry and slams?*

MM: Yes, I wrote that. But the sentence I wrote following that one qualifies and focuses my meaning. Let me quote them both together: "I conceive of the poet as an entertainer in words. But he also plays a social and spiritual role in that while he entertains he simultaneously reminds us of what is important in our lives, in many cases what we've forgotten or lost in terms of cultural traditions and a sense of our place in the universe." The word "simultaneous" is all important here, and I'll come back to it in a moment. But let me lead up to it by giving a pedagogical, if not pedestrian, reason for my statement.

One reason I describe the poet as an entertainer in words is to shock my fellow poets and students into an awareness that they must get out of themselves, out of the attitude that the art of poetry is a form of solipsistic self-involvement. I'm trying to make them keep in mind that their words are aimed at an audience, an audience whose interest and attention they must capture and hold—just like an entertainer. Understand that I think that writers initially write for themselves for any number of reasons I won't go into here, but if they are writers and not merely diarists or keepers of journals, they are seeking to communicate with others, i.e., an audience. I'm not saying that a writer should pander to an audience, or seek the lowest path of communication to them, but that he should be aware that an audience is out there and should seek to engage their imagination as immediately as possible. And since the only way we can communicate with each other is through language that strikes the reader / audience's imagination through the senses—language that evokes the experience the writer is talking about—I urge the writer to use a language as concrete and evocative as possible at all times.

That evocation of experience through language is all important to the way I conceive of the art of poetry. Jack Gilbert once told me (and this is not a direct quote) that of all the different levels we think a poem may contain, the only important one is the first level, because if the reader isn't engaged, if his interest isn't aroused and held by the first level of the poem, he won't give a damn about whatever other levels, implications, suggestions, or whatnot the poem may contain. I call that first level the entertainment level, and out of Jack's comment I evolved an idea that the excitement, and let us not forget the joy, of the poem for the reader is the awareness, however unconscious initially, of *simultaneous* meanings occurring as he reads the first level of the poem—what I call the "resonances" a poem generates. Actually, the first level is the *only* level in this definition, and if I remember correctly, Jack hated talking about the different "levels" of a poem.

To describe more forcefully what I mean by "resonances," let me give the example I give my students. I ask them to picture the poem as a giant gong that when struck vibrates so intensely, it visually seems to shiver into a number of gongs. To put this in the context of your question, the language of the sleight-of-word performer who entertained the audience has set in motion in their minds and hearts the plethora of suggestions, speculations, feelings states, and ideas that almost all serious poets intend in their work.

9. *You also claim there is a great deal of humor in your work. Again, many serious poets*

trained not to laugh at themselves, or their art, would never admit making room for humor in the poetic act. How does humor work for you?

MM: People, not only poets, take themselves too seriously. They are intoxicated with their own self-importance, with visions of their own nobility and grandeur. Maybe that's why the comic has been relegated to secondary importance in the arts down through the ages. As a film critic and poet, I've tried to show that the comic is as legitimate an attitude in its depiction of the human condition as the tragic or pathetic. One reason is that I almost always see the humorous aspect of things. The other is that I believe all of us incline to one of two views of life, whether we realize it or not, and it colors not only the way we respond to experiences, but to the attitude we bring to them. The two views are the tragic and the comic. But these views are not necessarily a fixed dichotomy. Most of the time my vision is comic, but the shadow of the tragic is always hovering behind it and at times overwhelms it. Then the shadow of the comic hovers behind the tragic, watching and waiting. Henri Bergson insisted that recognizing the comic aspect of our actions was really an acknowledgement of mortality—an acceptance of our imperfections, of our being just matter that decays. So comedy in the end is a humbling experience that teaches humility. Maybe that's why we relegate it to secondary importance.

My predilections for the comic extend to my favorite authors: Rabelais, Cervantes, Sterne, Swift, Aristophanes, Zhuang zi (Chuang Tzu), Rumi of the Mathnawi, the folk hero Nasrudin. I'm drawn to the holy fools, cosmic clowns, idiot savants, not just for their boisterous, fun-loving, and at times scathingly sardonic attitudes toward humanity and the bumbling ways of the universe, but because they upset our habitual ways of seeing the world, show us new perspectives by presenting us with the unexpected, and destroy our comfortable expectations and conventional values so we will once again encounter the world in a fresh way, renewed.

At times, my poetry reads like fun-house mirror distortions of the everyday world, showing our foibles and hypocrisies as physical manifestations. At the same time, I hope my writing is compassionate, not bitter, empathetic, not belittling in its view of humanity and our place in the universe. For this reason poignancy always undercuts my comedy, although comedy is just as likely to undercut my moments of poignancy. Let me explain. For me the poignant moments in a work of literature, free from sentimentality, are more powerful than the dramatic moments of revelation a piece aims for. Chekhov is my model, who started off by writing jokes and whose early stories were outrightly comic, a strain that can be detected in his later "serious" work, especially in his use of gentle ironies. It's that paradox once again of the tragic being the shadow of the comic and vice versa. But one way or another, I hope my use of humor is never read as merely frivolous, but always as deadly serious.

10. *As more poets in the U.S. write prose poems and you see more of them being published in journals, the fact remains that the poetry world is still very hesitant to publish prose poems. We've just found out that the wonderful journal, *The Prose Poem: An International Journal*, edited by Peter Johnson, has ceased publication and presses that are devoting resources to individual books of prose poems are having problems staying alive. Is there anything the individual writer and literary activist can do to get more people to give prose poetry in the U.S. a chance?*

MM: As I see it, there is a bigger problem than getting more people to give prose poetry a chance: it's giving poetry, even literature in general, a chance. More and more people are well-educated in this country, but less and less are reading serious literature, and I don't mean esoteric literature, but accessible, serious-minded popular literature. Less and less people are reading—period! I feel I write for everyone, but no one really cares. On the other hand, I have to write. It's not a choice, it's a necessity, a compulsion, and I have to write what I want to write. So the problem, in the end, is no problem for me: I write. And if, as many savants are now saying, the Age of the Book is in its death throes, so be it. I'll continue to write, and write what I have to.

11. *As you look back on your work, what is the most powerful or unforgettable of your own voices that you hear?*

MM: For me, writing—and I'm not just talking abstractly, but every time I sit down to write—centers on tapping that place from which I speak, finding the voice within. It's as if I'm asking which of the voices inside me wants to say something more urgently today than all the others, which, in sports parlance, is the hungriest? It's like a shape-up on the docks: who most wants today's work unloading the ship of the imagination? Come on, speak up! Oh, yes, I might start off with a line, a phrase, an image, a rhythm, but I conceive of each of those elements being spoken by a voice. I even conceive of my role as a workshop instructor *first* as a coach helping fledgling writers find their voices, *then* as a trainer shaping and honing their techniques.

It follows that I prize those poems I've written where the voice is most distinct, since they use the most telling phrasings, rhythms, and syntax to evoke the sense of a living voice speaking to the reader. For me, this focus on voice comes down to tone and nuance. What is the tone of voice the speaker is using in the poem—ironic, reverent, sarcastic, angry, meditative? Have I been able to get that tone on the page so the reader hears it? And many times not one tone, but several tones—shifting tones. Tone and nuance create the "resonances" I talked about in question #8. They control—again for me—all the technical aspects of a poem. That's why I prize Donne's poems so much. It's not his wild imagery only, but the voice speaking so clearly from the page. Donne's is almost an oral art. *The Songs and Sonnets* are one man's shifting attitudes about love, expressed in shifting tones of voice, a spoken voice, usually speaking in a dramatic situation, like a monologue in a short play. The tones are cynical, rapturous, overwrought, reverential. And then there are the many tones—like riptides, swirling ocean currents—of his religious poems. Donne is a companion speaking in my ear, although he's been dead for over 400 years. That's what I look for in poems.

So which of the voices in my books—each of which is different in style and tone—are the most powerful and unforgettable for me—which, in other words, blend the most tones in order to express most fully the complex psyche of a speaker? Even though the haiku-like expostulations of *The Santa Cruz Mountain Poems*—and especially, scattered among them, the cranky untitled "spirit voice" poems—still fascinate me (as do many voices in my different books) I don't hesitate to name the prose poems in *When People Could Fly* and the sixty-five new poems in *Moments Without Names* as the most powerful and unforgettable voices for me among my poems. The lined poems of *Pages From A Scrapbook of Immigrants* are a close second because it is such a personal book (it's my family's history) and summons up the voices of my relatives, but they're mostly funneled through the objective narrator. The release, the freedom from the shackles of first closed verse and then the line—the release into the realm of the prose poem—has been the release of the voices inside me to speak more freely, more clearly, more mysteriously than ever before from the uncharted landscape of the imagination.