

The Lost Paragraph

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By Morton Marcus, © 1998

The prose poem has many alluring features, but what makes it unique to me is the tension that holds it together in an excited force field, so to speak, created by the attempt to combine the antithetical elements of narrative prose intentions and poetic techniques. This tension has much to do with the narrative's impulse to expand on one side and poetry's compulsion to condense on the other. This force field that occurs where prose and poetry meet--where the narrative faces the lyrical head on--has fascinated me for the past twenty years. It is the impetus behind my next-to-last book, *Pages From a Scrapbook of Immigrants* (Coffee House Press, 1988), which I conceived of as a Tolstoyan panoramic novel tracing my family's immigration from Russia to the United States in 57 "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.

The most rewarding aspect of my experiments to join prose and poetry, however, has come from my decision to discard the line. I've said in print that in the prose poem I've been able to escape "the tyranny of the line." By this I mean that in using the unshackled phrase as my basic unit of rhythm, I have been able to pursue an unrolling mellifluousness which at times extends phrases to thirteen or fifteen beats before a caesura--a sweep of words that in its unfoldings has opened unexpected vistas of content by releasing my imagination from conventional modes of thought which the line and other poetic devices, it seems, unconsciously dictate.