

Freedom, The Prose Poem & The Imagination

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By Morton Marcus, © 2000

I discovered freedoms in writing the prose poem I was unaware I could attain. 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--with its riptide winds, its savage fighting with its shadow, its restless prowling the corridors inside my head, its unconscious, subconscious, or supraconscious motivations, as well as its tranquil interludes and maybe too many comic moments--I decided to let my imagination 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.