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Review by Michel Delville, pp. 247-250

## Pursuing the Dream Bone

Morton Marcus. Florence, MA: Quale Press, 2007. ISBN: 978-0-9744503-9-1

The concluding sections of my study of the American prose poem, which was published nearly ten years ago, were largely devoted to the two main camps that have allegedly divided the prose poem “scene” in the last quarter century. Until recently, the first camp—dominated by the language-oriented trend represented by poets such as Ron Silliman, Bruce Andrews, and Rosmarie Waldrop—was characterized by a desire to use prose to challenge the transparency and immediacy of the traditional lyric, capitalizing upon a poetical *Beaubourg effect* that sought to unveil the very mechanism of meaning while exposing, foregrounding and desacralizing the writer’s compositional process and emphasizing the role of language as a mediator between self and world. On the other side, there was the more imagistic prose poetry of Russell Edson, Robert Bly, Charles Simic, Maxine Chernoff, and a few others, writers whose “fabulist” (and frequently neo-surrealist) poetics bore more affinities with experimental prose writers such as Jorge Luis Borges, Henri Michaux, or Julio Cortazar than with any already existing poetic tradition, especially in the United States.

As we will see, one of the great merits of Morton Marcus’s *Pursuing the Dream Bone* is to demonstrate that such boundaries and distinctions are artificial and arbitrary. While a quick look at a poem by, say, Chernoff or Edson reveals as many meta-poetic, language-centered features as a piece by Charles Bernstein or Bob Perelman, the imagistic and surreal quality of Ron Silliman’s city poems or Lydia Davis’s absurdist fables is so obvious that any attempt to draw a firm line between the two opposite poles between which the American prose poem allegedly oscillates seems doomed to failure. Similarly, Marcus’s collection, which once again testifies to the diversity and richness of Gian Lombardo’s Quale Press catalogue, invites a reading of the prose poem (American or otherwise) that goes beyond the traditional oppositions between discursive and lyrical, narrative and confessional modes; this reading also would see beyond the all-too-obvious influences, ranging from Baudelaire’s *flâneur* poetics to francophone surrealism or the Cubist poetics of Gertrude Stein. Andrei Codrescu recognizes this fact when he describes Marcus as “the kind of priest-poet who, like Péguy or Jacob, gets to the Light by tearing up the universe in ecstatic dance.” On a superficial level, the pedestrian, modest, mundane character of some of the poems contained in this collection (the titles often speak for themselves: “The Match,” “My Mother Was a Beautiful Woman,” “When She Slept,” “The Tree,” “Cloudy Day,” “In the Repair Shop,” “Growing Old,” “My Day”) would seem to contradict Codrescu’s assessment of the fundamentally spiritual nature of Marcus’s work, which he himself has described as a spiritual orientation “aimed at a Dionysian life force... pulsating in every living thing and rooted in this world.” Such a complex approach is perhaps most apparent in poems such as “Meeting Places” or the more Stevensian “Listening to Rain,” in which the speaker bemusedly remarks that he “doesn’t know if he is inside or outside, if he is the house surrounded by rain, or if the storm is inside him.”

But the spiritual nature of Marcus’s prose poetry is obvious even in the shortest and simplest pieces of the volume which, far from resembling mere journal entries, seek to describe a different kind of intimacy that exists at a slight angle from what we often take for granted as the true nature

of subjective experience. There is the self-deflating confessionalism of the mock-Pirandellian “Ten Paragraphs in Search of an Author” (“When I was eight I went five days without eating. Another time I stepped heel-to-toe along the roof edge of a five story tenement for over an hour. I’d drive myself like that when I was young, always trying to discover how far I could go. Luckily, I never found out”). But there is also “Alzheimer’s,” the concluding poem of the collection (and one of a series of poems about growing old scattered throughout the book), which conveys the poet’s sad puzzlement towards a form of consciousness that causes the individual’s gradual estrangement from the speaker as well as from herself (“the easy chair he slept in watching TV, the table she sat at brushing her hair... thinking of nothing.... The crib in the attic, the home without furniture, the vacant lot without a house”) and nonetheless ends with a volcanic eruption that signals the advent of “the world about to be born.” Such a poem recalls Jerome Mazzaro’s apt description of Marcus’s “ethical lyrics” (Marcus’s unusual lyrical range has also been praised by Charles Simic).

Looking back on Marcus’s impressive career as a practitioner of the genre, one would be tempted to consider him as an odd fish in fabulist waters, one who could feature alongside other boundary cases such as Charles Simic, James Tate, and Peter Johnson. As I have argued elsewhere, what these writers have in common is a successful attempt to deal with real people and real situations, allowing them to drift into a dream-like world which is neither real nor unreal, neither here nor there. Marcus’s collection thus alternates between the whimsical and the solemn, the mundane and the poignant, the imagistic and the philosophical, in a way that does not limit itself to deliberately mixing up different, sometimes antagonistic, stylistic registers but also seeks to apprehend what he describes in “Pursuing the Dreambone” as the paradoxical nature of knowledge and non-knowledge, a process envisioned in Henri Michaux’s notion of “nescience” (“Each of my steps carries me farther into myself, yet farther from who I think I am”). It’s not that this book is completely devoid of some of the “mannerisms” that characterized the various “schools” mentioned above. Rather, Marcus’s extensive knowledge of those “trends”—as a teacher who has taught creative workshops on numerous campuses throughout the nation—is clearly transcended by a voice that remains his own, no matter how convoluted, intertextual, and complex some of the poems may appear to be.

Unlike Codrescu, if I had to place Marcus on a more international level, I would not necessarily think of Ponge or Péguy but, rather, of Belgian-born prose maverick Henri Michaux, whom the author cites in an epigraph to the book that points to the necessity of recovering “the special way children look at things, rich from not yet knowing, rich in extent, in desert, big from nescience, like a flowing river, a gaze that isn’t bound yet, nourished by the undeciphered” (*Pursuing the Dream Bone* is also dedicated to Marcus’s grandson). It has of course become a truism that the poetic function of language is to defamiliarize the familiar and evoke the brief period of uncritical wonder that characterized Wordsworth’s vision of childhood (Marcus’s superb title poem, “Pursuing the Dream Bone,” deals with similar themes but in a more oneiric and solemn fashion). But Marcus’s capacity to unskin the reader’s eyes is truly remarkable, and so is his capacity to avoid the risks and dangers of excessive self-consciousness that often lurk beneath any attempt to produce a prose poem that resembles a philosophical (and/or mock-) philosophical fragment (“The Reason Why?” “The Tree: Postscript,” “Mirror,” “Every Morning,” “Listening to Rain,” “Like the Back of Our Hands”), a *Dinggedicht* (“The Match,” “Fingers,” “The Tree,” “Shoes,” “Passports”) or a parable (“Laughter,” “The Story,” “Pursuing the Dream Bone”). In his recent autobiography *Striking through the Masks: A Literary Memoir* (Capitola Books, 2008), Marcus devotes an entire chapter to the prose poem and acknowledges his debt to such masters of the poetic parable as Michaux and Lawrence Fixel, whose formative influence allowed Marcus to explore the affinities between the prose poem and parable at a time when he was simultaneously

trying to rid himself of the “tyranny of the line” and create a world “composed of funhouse-mirror distortions of reality, dream visions rooted in metaphor and symbol, which for [him] evoke a more resonant picture of the world than everyday realism does.” —*Michel Delville*