

From Russia With Love

Morton Marcus' Family Album

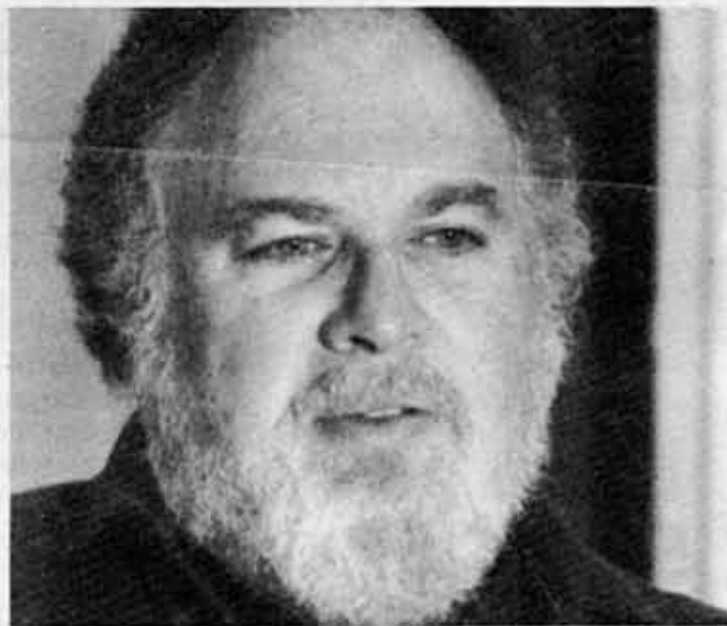
American poetry in the 1980s is inhospitable to the book-length vision. Exceptions can always be found, like Donald Hall's award-winning *The One Day*, but by and large our culture risks losing a place for the big song-of-myself spirit of Ginsberg's *Howl* or Williams' *Paterson*. That by itself makes the appearance of Morton Marcus' *Pages From a Scrapbook of Immigrants* a blow for poetic conscience. The nearly 60 poems in Marcus' book chronicle a family's journey from the 19th-century *shtetl* of Russia to the laissez-faire shores of contemporary Monterey, where Marcus now lives. The sequence is further unified by heirlooms mentioned repeatedly, by hand-me-down stories and recipes (onions with everything), and by the eerie mnemonics and meditations that linger with the poems' present-day maker.

Better yet, Marcus digs for his roots with a touch at once stubborn and delicate, unearthing more than a few family skeletons — Jewish self-hatred, boyish gangster uncles, and a neurotic runaway mom — as well as the occasional warming chunk of old hearth. His ruling tone is that of the urban storyteller, stoops-of-Brooklyn, yet when necessary he allows himself something more: "... the moon flies over freeways, farms, / cities resembling overturned jewel boxes . . ." Not for nothing does the poet use photographs, mirror, even fish eyes and sunglasses as recurring metaphors; he's determined to see clearly, wholly, unblinking, whether he stares east toward the Russian diminishing past or west over the fogbound Pacific.

Part of this praise is due Marcus' publisher, Coffee House Press. Coffee House, out of Minneapolis, is one of the happier byproducts of the publishing industry's increasingly common escape from New York. Just now, the 15 or so major Northeastern publishers too often practice blockbuster economics. Even the most literary of these firms would hesitate at taking on such a hard-to-market project as a book-length poem. So the last decade has seen a flowering of alternative houses, which by now range from the splashy and prestigious North Point, out of Berkeley, to the feisty and Southern-saturated Algonquin, out of North Carolina, to the slower-moving university presses such as Indiana. Coffee House would place in the upper quarter or so of the range, officially a non-profit organization at present, depending on public monies as well as on sales. Its list includes such critical successes as Frank Chin's 1988 collection of stories, *Chinamen Pacific and the Frisco R.R. Co.*

The brainchild of Allan Kornblum, Coffee

House began in West Branch, Iowa, in 1971. At that time the name was Toothpaste Press, and Kornblum published only poetry chapbooks in finely detailed letterpress. Today these chapbooks continue under the name Morning Coffee — a rare thing in a house that also markets some eight to 10 trade books a year. The dedication to craft pays off in the product. I do wonder, however, about *Pages'* cover art, a line drawing of a Russian grandfather in greatcoat and fisherman's cap. It smacks of TV stuff, immigrant hoke. But the cover design itself is faultless and as-



Morton Marcus

sertive, the binding snug, and the print both large and small reads easily.

Of course immigrant hoke is the great danger with any of this material. Marcus himself acknowledges the point at the beginning in a brief meditation on an old photograph: "The family," he admits, "could be anyone's." Further along in the book the line resonates differently and hints at the poet's larger purposes; nonetheless at first it comes off as a shrug, a smile. A lot of the Russian material, roughly the book's first third, comes likewise leavened with acceptance and humor:

And watching over all is God,
who, His people understand,
must wait for that moment
He has inlaid somewhere ahead
in the elaborate dark
to rescue them.

In the opening poems the material recalls Isaac Babel, his Cossacks and sudden cruelty, but the slant on life is closer to Isaac Bashevis Singer. In these ghetto villages daily life admits only two mysteries: love and distance. Of the women in his antique photos, Marcus rises to a superb poetic abstraction: "Are they only an enclosed dampness, / a skinny sob robed in sour breath?" And speaking of the world beyond the Carpathian Mountains, though his tone remains down to earth, the poet nonetheless captures the peasant's frightened awe: "To pass through into Hungary or Bohemia / is to be

swallowed by the Dark One, / who lies with his chin to the earth, mouth open, / waiting for anyone to wander in." In such a world the mating of grandmother and grandfather has no less an impact than that of the flight to America. And — clear-eyed — he's uneasy with the older generation's smiling and silence: "as if they formed a wall together / called Grandmother-Grandfather." So while Marcus isn't above a line or two of joshing mimicry, while he clearly relishes both storytelling and *shtetl* onions, more often than not his verses move toward the few hard motives behind the mystery: violence, stubbornness and the otherwise inescapable grind.

Indeed, Marcus seems always to be earning his insights by moving first through some other story or point of view. Once we have come to the New World, in the book's second section, a few poems still concern his older relatives' memories of Russia, and yet these belong with the American experience precisely because they are *memories*: revision, second sight, reordered understanding. A light piece about food, for instance, poking fun at the urban Jew's "remedy for everything," darkens its tone once re-experienced through the medium of memory:

"The memories of hunger grew,"
his grandfather says, "until the
body was an empty place demand-
ing to be filled, as if from one age to
the other the cells have been hous-
ing the hunger of the dead . . ."

In relying on second sight — on an indi-

rect and laughing approach to ultimacies — Marcus has much good company among American Jewish writers. The foremost example would be Philip Roth, who has made a career out of inverting and thereby reinventing his obsessions, but Leslie Epstein pulls a similar trick in his "Holocaust comedy" *King of the Jews*, and Jay Cantor's *Krazy Kat* depends on the same effect. What Marcus brings to the party

PAGES FROM A SCRAPBOOK OF IMMIGRANTS: A JOURNEY IN POEMS

Written by
MORTON MARCUS
Published by
COFFEE HOUSE PRESS
Minneapolis
(130 pages; \$8.95 paperback)

is, first, a poet's concision and handiness with metaphoric ellipsis; he can jump, for instance, from a piano recital to an earthquake.

Second, the funhouse mirror of Marcus' family memory picks up a black-sheep type seldom unexplored in literature, namely, the Jewish gangster. A central poem here, longer and more deliberate than most, concerns an uncle in the numbers racket, a Meyer Lansky colleague. The man is remembered first as a dream confided to an aunt, then through

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In Development

BY HOWARD RODMAN

When F. Scott Fitzgerald came to Hollywood to write screenplays, he simultaneously wrote (brilliant, playful) short stories about the metier of screenwriter Pat Hobby — which he sent back to New York for publication. Through the years, screenwriters have always found a way to make public the truth about their sullen, highly compensated craft. Billy Wilder put a screenwriter at the dead center of *Sunset Boulevard*, and Humphrey Bogart's homicidal scripter Dix Steele in *In a Lonely Place* (written by Andrew Solt, from the novel by Dorothy Hughes) may be the definitive screenwriter on screen. In Michael Tolkin's *The Player*, the screenwriter is the minor character — second fiddle to the psychopathic studio exec who bumps him off. And in David Freeman's *A Hollywood Education*, the writers are presented as full of themselves, full of shit and every bit as self-deceiving as the directors and producers whose patronage they crave.

What's interesting here is that screenwriters tend to bend over backward to display themselves in unflattering fictive light. And no more so than Bruce Wagner, whose hero Bud Wiggins is a postmodern Pat Hobby — William Holden without the swimming pool, or Dix Steele in *Less Than Zeroland*.

Wagner's *Force Majeure: The Bud Wiggins Stories* (Caldecot Chubb, 1988, \$6.95 paperback, 80 pp.) — christened with the boilerplate clause for "the act of God, earthquake, flood, fire, epidemic . . ." that allows a producer to weasel out of his/her commitments — is a deadbeat

chronicle of a once successful Hollywood screenwriter, still smart enough to be humiliated, not quite smart enough to avoid it. Wiggins is a prince of passivity — but in a sly, Joe Dallesandro-esque way.

In "A Writer's Assignment," Wiggins is bushwhacked by a venal producer, an opportunistic journalist — and, of course, by himself. "The Best Years of Our Lives" finds the chronically underemployed Wiggins being given studio head by one of the five most powerful men in Hollywood. By "The Mawkish Wedding," Wiggins is picking up — and going down — on an 11-year-old girl.

Wagner's carefully flat style, ostentatiously understated, works well, with the exception of some heavy-handed cross-cutting in "Best Years"; and the milieu sometimes seems a bit Freemanesque in its cool observation of Hollywood high- and low-life. The coincidence of initials between the writer and his protagonist raises questions about whether we're reading what used to be called "insufficiently digested autobiographical material." But if Bruce has truly suffered the humiliations of poor Bud, then he has certainly earned the right to write about it.

Cynic-screenwriter Michael O'Donoghue says of Wagner's acutely observed stories, "Bruce Wagner knows Hollywood the way Dante knew hell." *Force Majeure* is no *Divine Comedy*, but fans of casual, sun-dappled amorality will take this book to heart, perhaps as cautionary moral tales, perhaps as a manual of style. One may also take it as a tribute to maverick enterprise: *Force* was published in an edition of 1,000 by producer Caldecot Chubb. It was typeset on a Mac SE and printed at Charlie Chan, and it stands as a handsome addition to the ranks of guerrilla desktop publishing. □

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the newspaper accounts of the man's gangland execution ("the immigrant's dilemma"), and then after these peeks through the prisms of the unconscious and the media, he can at last address the uncle directly. He wonders about "some fly speck in your chromosomes/ that swarms through me"; he makes a connection to the sacrifice of Isaac (the uncle's namesake) in Genesis.

The poem ends on a note of tragic isolation — "you are identified as someone who died young/ and left no son to intercede for him" — and yet the narrator's closeness to the gangster over the last 40 or so lines actually gives the lie to the claim. The lines themselves are the gangster's offspring, and a plea for mercy. Who can better intercede than the poet? Here Marcus has all his moves working superbly, his tricks of perspective no limitation on his humanity.

So the book, in its third and final sections, comes more and more to define Marcus and his place in the family. The third grouping offers a number of role models, other uncles both shady and legit; in general it's the men's chapter, as the second was the one for mother and aunts and other food-makers (murdered Isaac, after all, is at first only a dream confided in a woman). This section lacks the heartbreak of the second — it lacks the mother, an overwrought JAP who was rarely home — but it captures the half-crazy energy of these first-generation sons and the street-corner anti-Semitism that drove them. The best pieces concentrate not on some neighborhood wiseguy or bully but on the maker of these verses: "The Poet at Ten," or "The Poet at Thirty," or "The Last Visit" to a dying grandmother. Here the motif of second sight becomes explicit, as the growing sensibility is brought up short by mirrors, by the grandfather's dentures distorted in a glass, by a family heirloom glinting in a California flea market. To his credit, Marcus doesn't much go in for a seer pose: his "The Poet . . ." titles are, of course, ironic, and he grounds each new memory and its understanding in homely household clumps: a mother's pocketbook, an uncle's shout of "Sha-prise!"

The last section, a single long poem called "It Begins Right Here," takes its best inspiration from a heap of dead, staring fish and a homeless, haunted-eyed teenager. The poet is by now mature, aware of his subject, consciously seeking connection "past continents and oceans." Yet it is the fish and the runaway who measure the search in human terms. Are our lives to be wasted like these fish, hauled from an all-but-dead California bay? "Arrogancy/ and promises were not enough./ For sardines and fishermen,/ it ended where it had begun." Marcus, of course, wishes to begin the dream of connection "right here," to send it "past everything." But then there's this teenager, a runaway girl no more than 18; isn't she a dreamer like him — another immigrant, in fact? "Weren't those our skeletons,/ costumed in their separate skins,/ who wandered here . . . ?" No dream can be acceptable to this poet unless it is palpably embodied: proved flexible enough to move through the cramped inversions offered by the media and the history books, by the lies of loving relatives, by all the self-delusions we try to keep as we face the mirror. He can only imagine a family if it comes clothed in honest fear. This may be a significant new imagining, at least at this length and in this form. And the circumstances of publication, by a house whose energy matches its idealism, may be a metaphor for a vagrant literature seeking a new home. **■**