

# Writings On Writing: Musing From Notebooks And Articles

By Morton Marcus © 2004

## Premises

The great problem that has resulted from living in a consumer society is not just our absorption in material things, but the way that materialism has fostered a self-involvement that threatens to destroy us. We pamper ourselves, coddle our children. Our parents accomplished tasks we find impossible to imagine, but which they knew had to be done. We find excuses for ourselves and our children as to why we and they can't or haven't been able to accomplish the simplest socially responsible acts, like graduating from high school or functioning in the most ordinary situations. We whine about "abuse" and "bi-polar disorder" or "dysfunction" this and that, while the rest of the world silently does our laundry and grows our food, watching and waiting.

Making art is a communal act. To communicate, i.e., with others. To move out of the self. To share. In the same way, the word "art" comes from "artifice" and "artificial," i.e., to make a semblance of experience, yes, for the joy of the self, but with such care (craft) that the joy can be experienced by others, the "community." Ergo: Making art is a communal act.

## Problems In American Literature Today

We've gone too far with the personal lyric. If as a society we are too self-indulgent, in our literature we've become too self-absorbed. The way we pamper and preen ourselves and whine over the slightest trespasses against us, as if they were deformed infants, has, in many ways, deformed us. In pursuit of the personal, we've turned away from our place in the larger worlds of society, the nation, the planet, and history, and we're trapped in the household of our petty self-concerns and domestic relationships.

The immense popularity of the memoir in the last several years is another aspect of this all-pervasive self-absorption. The way out of this dilemma, in both literature and life, is to turn outward into the lives of others, using not ourselves but our imaginations as touchstones, and compassion and empathy as our guides.

The attempt to speak to the human condition must replace our puling about our individual lots. The guideline I've always used in my work is that when speaking about myself, I make sure that my conclusions reflect the concerns of all humanity, or, in other words, that they move from individual to universal concerns.

The mistake many creative writing teachers make is to have their students write only what they know about, thereby charting the course to self-absorption and a literal conception of the world, which is the narrowest pursuit of realism. So right from the start, the imagination is bypassed, ignored, not even acknowledged as a dimension of reality or the creative endeavor.

As readers as well as writers we've become more and more literal, neither understanding or tolerating wild metaphorical leaps of the imagination or metaphorical worlds. If in painting, music, and literature there is not the recognizable, the harmonious, the photographically real, we reject it out of hand.

## Goals, Practices & Pitfalls

I want to "live at that pitch which is near madness," where I can see "angels whipping suns."

I want to "live at that pitch which is near madness," but disciplined by art.

I try to live as much of each day as I can in a state of heightened consciousness. Writing gets me there. It is my form of meditation. It wrenches me out of habitual responses--that part of living "a life of quiet desperation" that Thoreau didn't go into--by forcing me to rise above my daily life, yet it does not allow me to forget it. Rather, it synthesizes my daily life with a larger perspective.

Three postulates: I have to write to feel mentally and physically healthy. Through writing I confront and understand myself in relation to the world. I have to have trust during non-writing periods; I have to believe non-writing periods are gestation periods.

When all is said and done, living is the most important thing. Art is secondary to it. You don't live your life for art's sake. If you happen to make art from some of your experiences, fine. But don't make the mistake of seeking experiences from which to make art.

## **Writing**

What should a poem do?

A successful poem should speak not only to the head and heart but to the reader's cells, where the seeds of the universe's purpose have been embedded since the beginning of time, as if our chromosomes have been laid down like paving stones, one after another, and provide a silent, sure direction for us beyond rational understanding. The successful poem, then, taps each cell with an instinctive kind of knowing that causes it to resonate like a gong, until the millions of cells in the reader's body for an instant become an orchestra that trembles and swells with the music of recognition, a symphony of cosmic plenitude and unity.

How does a poem mean?

What poets come to learn is that language is inadequate to express what they want to say, yet paradoxically they have chosen language as their medium. Maybe that's because they don't want to say anything. They want to evoke everything they can: a mood, an experience, even an idea. It is this realization that makes them start using language to express what cannot be said.

The craft of poetry is such that poets must use words to convey the experience: they don't tell what the poem is about, nor do they preach--they show, allowing (or insisting) that the reader participate in the work at hand.

The poets' language, besides being free of clichés and trite phrases, is grounded in the senses: poets look at the world through their bodies, for they have captured the vision spirit inside their skins. Therefore, they use language in bursts of sense impressions called images.

The image should never be used for ornament. It must always contain vision, always be profound and direct the reader to the overall vision of the poem.

## **What Is The Poet's Function?**

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.

In the poem, the poet allows us to rediscover our spiritual selves. His function is to put us in touch with our feelings, or, in a deeper sense, to reveal to us once again "the primal vision"--the psychic and physical goals of both the human race and life itself, which are indelibly stained on our

chromosomes. In a way, and I don't mean to be presumptuous, poets are like doctors. The poem is their medicine. In this metaphor, the readers' illness is that they do not know, or have forgotten why, they are in this world and where they are going. As doctors of the spirit, the poets in their poems show the answers to the readers' questions, and in doing so they allow the readers to experience the way in which they can once more psychically enter the harmony of the universe.

### **Ideas That Guide Me**

The moment of revelation, whether it be of self-awareness or sudden insight into the true meaning of a situation, is literature's most dramatic moment. But the poignant moment, free from sentimentality, is the most moving in any piece of literature and may be the most powerful.

All of my books are different in style and approach, although the thematic concerns are similar. I pursue the same approach in each book in order to explore the world from a different perspective, much as a painter does in a "phase."

One must always pursue new approaches, not repeat, not remain in a comfortable domestic familiarity, but push onward through the jungle of the self, like an explorer in uncharted territory, intrigued to seek, seek, seek, no matter how dangerous the exploration may be.

All of us incline toward 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 always hovers behind it and at times tosses it over its shoulder. Then the shadow of the comic hovers in the background of the tragic.

My predilections for the comic extend to my favorite authors: Rabelais, Cervantes, Sterne, Swift, Aristophanes, Zhuang Zi (Chuang Tzu), 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, destroying our comfortable expectations and conventional values so we will once again encounter the world in a fresh way, renewed.

When the great Russian short story writer Isaac Babel was a boy, his grandmother told him, "You must know everything." I've lived by those words throughout my adult life. I don't learn things for the sake of learning, but to contemplate them and find their connections to other things: I try to understand how all things touch. That is what the increasingly important poem to me "Big Winds, Glass Mornings, Shadows Cast By Stars" is all about...Poets, all artists, are looking for connections to sew the seemingly unrelated patches of existence into a quilt, a many-colored but cohesive quilt, whose unity will keep us warm in the universe's soul-chilling night--for a while anyway.

To seek connections is to search for unity in diversity in all that word has come to suggest--the diversity of others, say. I'm always astonished and intrigued to see how humans have solved the problems of living in the world and living with each other. That's why I prize ethnicity so much, or I should say all ethnicities. All things touch in the dance of life, the dance under the unwatchful, uncaring blind eye of the universe. But we keep dancing.

### **Aspects Of My Writing**

My poetry and prose are easy to understand and extremely vivid because of their direct language and use of imagery. However, the difficulty for readers is that my poetry does not reflect the world as they ordinarily see it.

In my poetry, reality is used as a facade to reveal scenes chosen from everyday life transformed by fantasy, folklore, and myth into the dreamworld of our alternate reality, which reveals the inner life of things. That is the landscape of my work.

In my poetry, therefore, I am not a realistic writer. Verisimilitude is not my concern. My poetry evokes an inner world reflecting the outer one in metaphor and simile. I guess that makes me an expressionist by definition.

I want to engage the imagination of the reader. More and more, realistic writing has deadened the reader's ability to envision anything beyond the literal, whether it be in the setting and action of a piece or in the imagery. I want to engage the reader's imagination not so he or she will see the world in a "new" way, but rather in a "fresh" way. In other words, I want my art to shatter the habitual ways we perceive of ourselves and the world--the ways society has taught us to see things. When I sit down to write, that is what I am attempting to do for myself. To evoke the world anew is one of the most important aspects of all art, and the starting point for anyone who wishes to achieve heightened consciousness of any kind.

Figurative language, which reflects the figurative depiction of the world, has become increasingly difficult for readers to comprehend. They refuse to indulge in disbelief, in the life of the imagination, in the transforming powers of metaphor and simile.

My logic is the logic of metaphor. I advance not by having one idea lead to another, but by having one image lead to another through similarities, as well as comparisons of shape, size, and other sensuous properties.

An image or a metaphor presents itself in my imagination and I pursue its meaning. The idea behind the pursuit is that no image or metaphor is accidental or random: there is a reason I thought it in the first place, and the attempt to find or, more probably, to catch a glimpse of this reason is the impetus behind the pursuit, no matter how outlandish the original image or metaphor might be.

As I've already said, humor plays an important part in my poetry, since my vision is essentially comic. That vision is, as I've also said, tinged with the tragic and aims to evoke the poignant aspects of the human condition. I hope, thereby, to touch the commonality we all share as human beings, and to elicit the sense of family that makes each of us a relative of the other.

One could say from all this that my poetry reads like funhouse mirror distortions of the everyday world.

But remember, my humor is deadly serious. So beware.

Although many people think my writing is morbid and nihilistic, I am a celebratory writer in the end, as Al Young and Peter Johnson have pointed out, and celebration in serious literature is not in fashion at the moment.

Two criticisms have been continually leveled at my work. The first is that I say too much in my poems--they're not understated enough, don't leave enough out, are too flamboyant and emotional. I refer to this criticism as the Anglo-American WASP syndrome meets the Slavic soul, and leave it at that. The second criticism is that I am always looking at "the big picture," not the everyday world, the mundane. I do look at the everyday world, but I look at it in the context of both history and the cosmic scheme of things--that is, in the end I search for a cosmic connection. I've always met this last criticism with a shrug of the shoulders and a mumbled reply to the effect that "a writer writes about what a writer needs to write about."

What have I left out? — Language: the writer's medium, the poet's be-all and end-all, the ocean in which we find ourselves thrashing about, pulled this way and that, but whose tides we must control.