

Thoughts On Prose Poetry

By Morton Marcus, © 2004

Thought on the prose poem #1

The prose poem is composed of two strains that are antithetical to each other, and that tension gives the form its unique power. Prose provides a narrative impetus to the form, but the narrative is short, generally elliptical, and controlled by the strict condensing methods of poetry--figurative language, painstaking word selection, and all the dynamism of rhythm, assonance, and consonance. Prose and poetry exert such pressure on the prose poem that it warps and bends, taking on exaggerated shapes. This could account, in part at least, for the prose poem's predilection for the grotesque in its imitation of forms, genres, and readers' expectations. I'm talking about parody's reversals of the familiar in ideas, images, and expression. This grotesquerie could also account for the prose poem's wild turns of speech, reversals of rational expectations, eruptions of nonsensical and terrifying incidents in apparently ordinary, realistic scenes--the kind of grotesquerie we associate with dreams.

Thoughts on the prose poems #2

A less imaginative but probably more accurate reason for the prose poem's concern with fantasy, myth, and the dark side of the psyche is the time period it first came to prominence in Western culture, the first third- and middle- of the nineteenth century, in the work of Aloysius Bertrand and Charles Baudelaire. Historically, this is considered to be the late Romantic period, and the Romantics looked back to medieval times in their work, summoning up the world of the Romances with their casts not only of knights and damsels, but of demons, villainous dwarfs, and fairy queens, all engaged in the never-ending battle between good and evil. The Romantics were more concerned with intuition, faith, and the marvelous than with reason and its accoutrements, more engrossed with essences than appearances, and more inspired by the miraculous than the ordinary, by the supernatural than the natural--more by the fantastic than the real.