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## Morton Marcus' *When People Could Fly* Peter Johnson

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## BOOK REVIEWS

Morton Marcus. *When People Could Fly*. Hanging Loose Press, 1997. 128 pages. Paper: \$13.00.

At first it might seem strange to suggest that Morton Marcus is an underappreciated writer. He has published more than three hundred and fifty verse and prose poems in little magazines, along with seven books of poetry and one novel; his work has been included in over seventy American and international anthologies; and many articles have been written on his work. He also penned a theater piece, *The Eight Ecstasies of Yaeko Iwasaki: A Legend in Poetry, Dance, and Music*, which had two successful engagements on the West Coast. Moreover, any literary person who has traveled through or lived around the area between Santa Cruz and San Francisco is familiar with his poetry-radio show and with the many reading series he has sponsored or participated in over the years. He's even had his work read on National Public Radio. How more popular and populist can you get? And yet Marcus' name is seldom mentioned when we speak of the work of his near contemporaries, especially those poets who have written prose poetry, such as Robert Bly, James Tate, Russell Edson, and Charles Simic, all of whom, with Marcus, were contributing during the 1970's to that amazing, now-defunct little magazine *kayak*. Simic himself has written that Marcus is "one of the most readable and moving poets of our generation." Fortunately, this year, with Hanging Loose's publication of *When People Could Fly* (a collection of seventy-one of Marcus' prose poems), we have the opportunity to look at his contribution to the genre and to appreciate his sensibility, which, I believe, distinguishes him from most prose poets writing today.

The question of genre is the first problem we face when coming to Morton Marcus' prose poetry. He deliberately decided not to subtitle his book "A Book of Prose Poems," because, as he says, "1) I wanted to break the idea of categorizing; and 2) I think that some of the pieces are clearly prose parables." The paradoxes apparent in discussing any genre are evident in Marcus' comment: to avoid pigeonholing his prose poems into one genre he is forced to pigeonhole them into another. And yet, after reading his collection, we can see how most of the prose poems do not fulfill some of the general expectations we have of prose poetry. Traditionally, one characteristic of the prose poem is that it is fairly brief—a "little picture"—and some of the most startling collections of prose poetry have used the metaphor of the compact, framed painting itself as a formal and thematic structuring device: Aloysius Bertrand's *Gaspard de la nuit*, and even Charles Simic's box-like miniatures, for example. In contrast to the short, lyrical prose poem we have become accustomed to, most of the poems in Marcus's book are fairly long, as if taking place on a canvas stretched across a huge, mythological sky.

But it is difficult, if not impossible, to approach anyone's prose poetry if we are going to adhere to some fixed guidelines for the genre, especially since

so many prose poems celebrate and parody (often at the same time) other genres and subgenres. It is precisely this overlapping of genres which makes the prose poem so subversive, so enjoyable to write and to read. Consequently, for the purpose of this review, instead of commenting on how Marcus' prose poetry does or does not accommodate some preconceived notion of prose poetry, I will focus on the way that he appropriates formal and thematic properties from neighboring genres. Marcus himself admits to "mixing dozens of genres and inventing others—mock-Biblical commentaries, burlesques of classical literature, contemporary fairy and folk tales, creation myths and metaphysical speculations." Considering his statement, it seems best to begin by agreeing to the arbitrariness of genre distinctions while also recognizing their usefulness; as Tzvetan Todorov has written, a genre is often "defined in relation to the genres adjacent to it." And it is precisely through the merging of different genres that, paradoxically, an original work appears. Perhaps, then, Frederich Schlegel was right when he argued that "every poem is a genre in itself."

"This is why I speak to them in parables," Jesus said, "because 'they look but do not see and hear but do not understand.'" Parables often answer questions or provide morals; they are, as Marcus' friend Lawrence Fixel writes, "required to be about something—something which connects with, even though it conflicts with our sense of the world. Thus they challenge our assumptions while, paradoxically, evoking some feeling of universality." Although none of Marcus' prose poetry answers questions (in fact, questions are strewn throughout them), many of the poems "challenge our assumptions" while approaching the "universality" Fixel mentions. Consider "The Stone Flowers," one of the core poems of the collection:

There was a time when stones flowered. I need to believe that. In forests and fields, layers of black rock cracked open after rain, and slick pink petals swarmed into the wet sunlight. And those who saw this weren't astonished because such blossomings happened all the time.

As recently as the nineteenth century, miners reported seeing chunks of coal blossom with blue flowers as tenuous as flames. Some said walls of coal sprouted blue flowers all around them, and with picks at their sides they stood speechless at the wonder of it.

On the beach at night, I've seen the sand shimmer with a green phosphorescence. The next day I imagined the sand was an acre of seeds, and I thought, "That's what this Earth is: seeds."

And when I look up at the stars sometimes, I think that's what this planet is, a seed hurtling with others through space.

When my wife weeps for our son or the death of a relative, I think of all the seeds scattered over the earth like unlit points of light lying gray and dull next to golden specks of mica and the glassed-in worlds of opal with their trapped swirls of celestial flame.

I know that the earth is full of cinders and hard seeds that have never blossomed, and that it makes no difference if pink flowers once surged from layers of black rock, or if one day the planet will crack open and shoot a pink and blue geyser into the night that will unfurl like a celestial flower.

I know that whether times are good or bad, we ride this planet like mites crawling on a pebble.

That is why I am not ashamed to say that flowers once bloomed from stone: I need to believe every possibility. We all do.

Though not a parable in the strict meaning of the word, the spirit of the parable is here. Marcus looks back to a prelapsarian time when we *did* “see,” when we *did* “hear,” a time before parable was necessary, a time when no one thought it odd that stones flowered. And yet this period does not refer to some fixed, historical “past”; it is a continuous present, the *illud tempus* of fairy tales. As Marcus writes in “The Big Broadcast,” it is a period where “Knowledge is sequence, not tense, and in that sense space not time, ticking in our heads.” It is a period where myths get created, revised, or elaborated on, and where rationalism is turned upside down: in “The Sorcerer’s Apprentice” Teiresias sits in the “doorway of his hut, his skirts hiked up, showing his withered inner thighs”; in “The First Game,” a mock-Biblical commentary, Adam and God are naming the animals, laughing, “stagging under the trees, each with an arm around the other’s shoulders”; in “The Great Tree Scare” trees begin wiggling their toes, and many people, appropriately in “many different tongues,” ask, “If you can’t depend on the trees standing still, what can you depend on?”; in “Mathematics” the “number 1 wanders alone in his short-brimmed cap in a sunlit field”; and in “The Man Who Kicked the Universe in the Ass,” a contemporary fairy tale, there is a man who, well, kicked the universe in the ass.

Part of the fun is watching the way characters act in a world where anything can happen; part of the fun is also noting how Marcus makes seemingly unrealistic events “real,” how he brings mythological and pseudo-historical figures to life—though “pseudo” is probably not the best word for any poem in this collection, since one of the messages of “The Stone Flowers” is that the reality of an event is not as important as our belief in it. This message is echoed in many other poems, especially in “The Myth of History” and in “The Story-teller,” the latter about a student relating a story to a teacher about a story-

teller; the tale may not be true, the narrator of the poem confesses, but it doesn't matter because the student has "created a place that exists, as all places do, beyond the wind that will continue after he and I are gone."

And yet these imaginary landscapes become real because Marcus himself believes in them and wishes them into being through language. If we have any doubts that there was a time when stones could flower, Marcus' accumulation of details overwhelms those doubts: "In forests and fields, layers of black rock cracked open after rain, and slick pink petals swarmed wet in the sunlight"; "Some said walls of coal sprouted blue flowers all around them, and with picks at their sides they stood speechless at the wonder of it." We both "see" and "feel" these events, the alliteration creating a sort of onomatopoeia. Marcus has said that the "poet is in love with language; he luxuriates in the sounds and meanings of words. . . . Chant, song, childish rhymes and rhythms of nonsense noises are both starting points for and ways of developing whole poems." Marcus indeed is a very "noisy" poet, many of his poems recalling such "loud" picture books as Maurice Sendak's *In the Night Kitchen* and *Where the Wild Things Are*. This childlike wonder at language makes Marcus easily comparable to a poet like Rimbaud, though the difference between the two rests in their attitudes. Rimbaud, the lovable, soured idealist, also reifies his imaginary landscapes through language-play, his major tropes being metonymy and synecdoche—both meant to reflect the fragmentation he so painfully internalized. In contrast, Marcus is the poet of relatedness, which accounts for his heavy use of similes and metaphors throughout *When People Could Fly*. Marcus recognizes the same inherent paradoxes and injustices as Rimbaud, but he is an optimist; as the end of "The Stone Flowers" suggests, we have no choice but "to believe in every possibility."

In *When People Could Fly* Marcus creates worlds from possibilities. He has written that "the prose poem released me to a place where I've felt at home more than ever before. I can still soar in lyrical outbursts, but I can also engage in my favorite pastime, telling stories." In this sense, Marcus has it both ways: he manipulates the conceits of the parable to "say something," while at the same time asserting the power of the individual, lyric imagination to create through language. He accomplishes this dual purpose in such poems as "The Stone Flowers," "The Kiss," and in many poems which deal with real and imaginary events (is there a difference?) in the lives of his immediate and extended family. In all these prose poems, the general merges with the specific, the "they" with the "I." In "The Kiss," for instance, at the time when the French Revolution is about to collapse and various sides are squabbling, the abbé Antoine Adrien Lamourette suggests that only "brotherly love" can save them and that everyone should pledge to hold love as their "first principle" and "seal the vow with a kiss." Surprisingly, everyone agrees, but the love fest is short-lived; it's only a "gesture." And then the ruminating "I" (Marcus?), an "I" we associate with the philosophical-meditation genre, intrudes, saying that the abbé's proposal and the response to it reminds him that "When I'm most in despair at the hatreds and brutalities of my fellow humans,

I think of him [the abbé] and his kiss, and I imagine that some kind of natural order, neither moral nor religious, is at work in us—a twitch in our cells, a speck in our chromosomes—that tries to guide us back on course; and that even in the most tumultuous human interactions it makes itself known.”

I know of few poets who could get away with this kind of unbridled optimism in a poem. I can almost see Marcus’ first-year, creative-writing instructor nervously scribbling in the margins of “The Kiss,” “Show, Morton, don’t tell.” And yet Marcus pulls off these endings time after time, mostly because of the curious dance in his prose poems of fable, parable, history, pseudo-history, and commentary—all choreographed by some kind, godlike figure rocking and rolling us from one symbolic world to another. Ironically, though, it is probably both Marcus’ optimism and his reliance on parable, metaphor, symbolism and allegory which make him suspect in our present literary climate where poems are praised for their level of unintelligibility or for the absence of authorial intention; where, often, language’s primary purpose is to refer to itself; where fashionable cynicism is “in.” Thus Marcus takes a risk when he says, “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.” He does admit that “loss” is one of the major themes of his or anyone’s poetry, but he goes on to say, “And yet I have a great sense of gaining, of creating and actually making worlds; a sense of joy in the world around me, even in the world moving by me.”

Admittedly, if we were to criticize Marcus’ prose poetry in *When People Could Fly*, we might point to a few places where his symbolism and allegory are a bit heavy-handed, translating too easily into single word-concepts, such as in “The Key to the Air,” where the metaphor in the title is predictably developed, leading to a message about “lying.” Or in the “Woman Who Didn’t Live Right” because, as we find out, she “lived left,” which is a clever idea, but one that showcases Marcus’ inexhaustible wit more than anything else. In short, Marcus is at his best when he balances what he considers his social and spiritual roles (the objective of the parable) with his wacky and playful, subjective-lyric side, as he does masterfully throughout most of this collection. He is at his best when he approaches what Edson calls the “dark, uncomfortable metaphor.”

And as for Marcus’ optimism? Even though I consider myself to be an aficionado of what we might call “The Wise-Guy School of Poetry,” I can appreciate Marcus’ ability to celebrate the relatedness in things, their correspondences. Baudelaire based his prose-poetics on these correspondences, though any possibility of optimism in his work was tempered by his fate to be, with Poe, one of the first, official alienated, modern poets. Perhaps, then, Robert Bly, in terms of method and manner, is Marcus’ closer literary cousin. Like Marcus, Bly relies heavily on metaphor and simile; moreover, the communal “we” we discover at the end of Marcus’ “The Stone Flowers,” and in many other prose poems in *When People Could Fly*, resembles the “we” that unites speaker and object in so many of Bly’s prose poems. Yet, in terms of style,

Marcus' prose poetry differs from Bly's in that Marcus will stretch a metaphor to its breaking point, instead of having, as Bly does, a number of metaphors or similes, like a string of firecrackers, explode one after the other from the spark of one controlling metaphor. Marcus is also more skeptical and ironic than Bly, and, unlike Bly's, his exuberant "I" is everywhere, directing traffic, making philosophical statements and jokes. Marcus is not afraid to intrude. In this sense, his prose poems, as Jack Marshall calls them, are "personal cosmologies."

The last two literary figures who must be mentioned in any discussion of Marcus are Jorge Luis Borges and Franz Kafka, both of whom worked tirelessly in the parable form, and were known for revisiting and revising Biblical or literary landscapes and for celebrating paradox. They also both relied heavily on metaphor, symbolism and allegory. Even many of Marcus' titles betray his links to Borges and Kafka: "The Duke, the Demon, and the Sacred Grove," "The Mussorgsky Question" (about a character in a Dostoyevsky novel who ends up being buried in the same cemetery as Dostoyevsky); "The Story That Had Never Been Written" (which of course is a real story because it symbolizes every other story which has never been written); "The Myth of History"; and "When People Could Fly" (complete with a discussion of historical treatises on the subject).

But although, like Borges and Kafka, Marcus is skeptical of rationalism, his optimism again separates him from these two giants; unlike them, he is more amazed than terrified. Borges himself wrote, "Better are those pure fantasies that do not look for a justification or moral and that seem to have no other substance than obscure terror." Certainly, if Borges had read Marcus' prose-poem-parable, he would have chosen a few for *The Book of Fantasy*, that wonderfully idiosyncratic anthology he co-edited. But he no doubt would have been perplexed by Marcus' unashamed optimism, and he probably would have frowned upon Marcus' social and spiritual agendas. Perhaps one final and telling way to distinguish Marcus' sensibility from Borges' and Kafka's is to say that while Borges' and Kafka's Sisyphus smiles as he rolls his large boulder up the hill and watches it roll back down, Marcus' Sisyphus seems to be laughing out loud, awaiting with both joy and wonder to assume his role in "the story that is always being written."

**Peter Johnson**