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## **Commentaries: The Canary Islands** Morton Marcus

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## Morton Marcus

### THE CANARY ISLANDS

“What islands are those?” I asked the first mate.

We had passed several treeless, rolling islands, wind-ruffled yellow under the pale blue sky, each without houses or any sign of human habitation.

“The Canaries,” he replied, unshaven, his black sweater grimy at collar and cuff.

“All that wheat,” I said. “Who plants it?”

“Those are the canaries,” he said again. “Hundreds of thousands of them fly here several times a year and bunch together on the swells.”

I had taken passage on the only ship available during the hellish war, a Yugoslav tanker, all rust and shuddering metal. I never knew its cargo: the crew sneered whenever I approached.

“You can’t be serious,” I said to the first mate, still staring at the island. He didn’t reply, but spit on the deck near my shoes, and lumbered away.

I leaned on the railing, peering at the landfalls. They certainly could have been birds, birds who sought refuge from the world’s murderousness, flying from everywhere on the planet at appointed times to huddle together and be revitalized.

The next day they were gone, and I didn’t ask about them again. But I still imagine them, those temporary islands, suddenly coming apart in the night, separating into hundreds of thousands of wings scattering to the seven continents, where they fall like pieces of moonlight on the houses of the sleepers, silent, unseen, neither substance nor shadow, yet more than a possibility, a presence, really, that periodically departs from our lives but always returns.

## COMMENTARY

A friend who is also a successful novelist, recently wrote me a troubled letter, responding to “The Canary Islands.” His questions showed the novelist’s allegiance to the methods and manners, as well as the mind-set, of the prose fiction writer, an allegiance that was made clear when he prefaced his comments by saying that “as a novelist” he “kept going off in habitual directions” as he read the poem.

At first, he said, he assumed that I was talking about the real Canary Islands, and even though he could grudgingly accept the islands being composed of birds, he had more difficulty with the idea that canaries gather together in floating colonies, since that was just not true. So I was writing about “symbolic or fantasy canaries,” right? But what were they symbolic of? And if they were “a presence that departs from our lives but always returns,” what could that presence be? And what about the narrator’s part in the piece? What is “that hellish war,” and what is the reason for his leaving it? Why does the crew sneer at the narrator when he asks about the cargo, and why don’t they tell him what it is? Why does the first mate spit near the narrator’s shoes? Why are they all so contemptuous: what has the narrator done to them?

These are good questions, but they’re to be asked of another genre. They are the concerns of the practitioner of realistic fiction, who constantly questions which scenes to develop and which not, and who is obsessed with ferreting out the reasons behind every detail and character action.

Such questions do not apply to “The Canary Islands,” which, because it is symbolic and essentially absurdist, does not seek to explain the world in the same way the realistic novel does, but in its metaphorical approach assumes that events and actions are ultimately unexplainable—that life is a mystery and that the rational questions we ask about it are, in the end, unanswerable. Therefore, details are presented not only to enrich the atmosphere of the piece but to prod readers into pursuing their own sense, symbolically speaking, of what the cargo is, why the crew is hostile to the narrator, and to elaborate on the implications hopefully resonating from each detail.

And what about this nameless narrator? Should readers consider him a rounded fictional character? Since he is a first-person narrator, can they trust him? And how much of what he says may be a phantom of his imagination? One of the few traits the narrator exhibits is an understandable desire to get away from that “hellish war,” a hostile event that is reflected in the actions of the ship’s crew. The crew and

the war are part and parcel of a general antagonism that the narrator opposes, or, more accurately, to which he is placed in opposition. Antagonists and protagonist: it's as simple as that; and the protagonist, I hope, emerges as an Everyman confronting an archetypal situation. Out of this predicament, the narrator envisions the canaries as a revitalizing impulse he needs to believe in which will result in the tenuous re-establishment of peace and harmony. That is what the canaries' "presence" represents to him.

The canaries, then, are metaphorical, and metaphor, not cause-and-effect motivation, is the center of the piece. In fact, this poem works like many of my others: an image or metaphor presents itself in my imagination and I pursue its meaning. The idea behind the pursuit is that no metaphor or image 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.

The prose poem has many alluring features, but what makes it unique to me is the tension that holds it together in an excited force field, so to speak, created by the attempt to combine the antithetical elements of narrative prose intentions and poetic techniques. This tension has much to do with the narrative's impulse to expand on one side and poetry's compulsion to condense on the other. This force field occurs where prose and poetry meet—where the narrative faces the lyrical head on.

"The Canary Islands," from *When People Could Fly*, Hanging Loose Press, 1997.