

THE PROSE POEM: AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL

Volume 8 | 1999

Commentaries: The Doorway Of Perception Michael Benedikt

© Providence College

The author(s) permits users to copy, distribute, display, and perform this work under the following conditions: (1) the original author(s) must be given proper attribution; (2) this work may not be used for commercial purposes; (3) the users may not alter, transform, or build upon this work; (4) users must make the license terms of this work clearly known for any reuse or distribution of this work. Upon request, as holder of this work's copyright, the author(s) may waive any or all of these conditions.

The Prose Poem: An International Journal is produced by
The Berkeley Electronic Press (bepress)
for the Providence College Digital Commons.
<http://digitalcommons.providence.edu/prosepoems/>

Michael Benedikt

THE DOORWAY OF PERCEPTION

If it was one thing he knew—even standing outside in the yard—it was that the universal problem had to be solved, the Doorway of Perception opened, behind which, despite the extraordinary demands he often made of himself, he still felt trapped in the vestibule of mimicry. So, he knocked on the door. But no one opened it. He tried the knob, but it seemed to be stuck. (He thought he heard a tumbler start to click inside the lock—but then it stopped). He bent down and attempted to pick the lock using the keys from his own apartment door—but of course, that produced absolutely no result whatsoever. Impatiently, he arose, walked back across the yard, and threw all his weight against the door from fifteen feet away! ... but for some reason, that didn't work either. Again and again he tried to break through that damned door, running at it across the yard from still greater and greater distances, but time after time nothing happened—except that the last time he threw his weight against it, the entire building came crashing down around it! And still, the door stood. Slowly, he backed up a dozen yards to the furthest limits of the yard, which was surrounded by a fence; and once again launched himself at the door—but this time he only succeeded in smashing his spinal column! Finally, from his brand new wheelchair, he tried nuclear dynamite. The earth fell down around the door; he realized that the sky was falling—he actually moved both Heaven and Earth! Just before they fell, he managed to peer at eye-level from his wheelchair through the keyhole. But all he saw back there was someone holding up a small hand mirror—the tiny, inexpensive kind they sell at dime stores; and, in the center of the mirror, directly opposite the keyhole and looking directly back at him, was an eye.

COMMENTARY

"The Doorway of Perception" is a poem about the necessity of occasionally getting outside the confines—liberated of course as they probably are—of one's own perceptions. After all, avoiding Solipsism—a universal problem, and obviously a particular challenge for artists in general if they want to communicate beyond a small circle of

friends and admirers—is something that one's own critical faculties as a poet demand of oneself; and also something that even psychologists, who seem to be to be fundamentally indifferent to matters of esthetics, generally recommend as an essential—indeed a *sine qua non*—of good mental health. Since the temptation to be purely private when making utterances in such an off-the-beaten track medium as poetry is so great, trying to avoid Solipsism is I think particularly important for poets if we want to communicate clearly, without relying on an elaborate critical apparatus in order to get a point across. What I'm saying in the poem, in short, is that—self-exacting as many poets try to be—even with the very best will in the world, the task of avoiding Solipsism, and getting outside oneself, isn't very easy. (It's always kind of fun, though, isn't it!)

Incidentally, "The Doorway of Perception" is a poem from my fourth collection of poetry, *Night Cries* (1976), which—speaking of art on a (still, alas!) somewhat off-the-beaten path—is a book of prose poems. *Night Cries* begins with a quotation from Nietzsche: "Sawest ever thy friend asleep? Went thou not dismayed by thy friend looking so? O, my friend, man is something that hath to be surpassed." Most of the poems in *Night Cries* are at pains to explore the ramifications of that simple, but—I for one think—truly immense idea. Quite a few years before, Harold Bloom wrote about this idea; the poem also, I guess, has something to say about "The Anxiety of Influence."