

Morton Marcus, *Pursuing the Dream Bone*. Florence, MA: Quale Press, 2007.

P. H. Liotta, *The Graveyard of Fallen Monuments*. Florence, MA: Quale Press, 2007.

The concluding sections of my study of the American prose poem, which was published nearly ten years ago, were largely devoted to the two main camps that have allegedly divided the prose poem “scene” in the last quarter century. Until recently, the first camp was dominated by the language-oriented trend represented by poets such as Ron Silliman, Bruce Andrews and Rosmarie Waldrop and which was characterized by a desire to use prose to challenge the transparency and immediacy of the traditional lyric, capitalizing upon a poetical *Beaubourg effect* that sought to unveil the very mechanism of meaning while exposing, foregrounding and desacralizing the writer’s compositional process and emphasizing the role of language as a mediator between self and world. On the other side, there was the more imagistic prose poetry of Russell Edson, Robert Bly, Charles Simic, Maxine Chernoff and a few others, writers whose “fabulist” (and frequently neo-surrealist) poetics bore more affinities with experimental prose writers such as Jorge Luis Borges, Henri Michaux or Julio Cortazar than with any already existing poetic tradition, especially in the United States.

As we will see, one of the great merits of Morton Marcus’s *Pursuing the Dream Bone* and P. H. Liotta’s *The Graveyard of Fallen Monuments* is to demonstrate that such boundaries and distinctions are artificial and arbitrary. While a quick look at a poem by, say, Chernoff or Edson reveals as many meta-poetic, language-centered features as a piece by Charles Bernstein or Bob Perelman, the imagistic and surreal quality of Ron Silliman’s city poems or Lydia Davis’s absurdist fables is so obvious that any attempt to draw a firm line between the two opposite poles between which the American prose poem allegedly oscillates seems doomed to failure. Similarly, Marcus’s and Liotta’s collections, which once again testify to the diversity and richness of Gian Lombardo’s Quale Press catalogue (Lombardo’s own work would also constitute yet another interesting boundary case which would deserve to be investigated in a full-length study of the very recent development of the prose poem in the United States), invite a reading of the prose poem (American or otherwise) that goes beyond the traditional oppositions between discursive and lyrical, narrative and confessional modes as well as the all-too-obvious influences ranging from Baudelaire’s *flâneur* poetics to francophone surrealism or the Cubist poetics of Gertrude Stein. Andrei Codrescu recognizes this fact when he describes Marcus as “the kind of priest-poet who, like Péguy or Jacob, gets to the Light by tearing up the universe in ecstatic dance”. On a superficial level, the pedestrian, modest, mundane character of some of the poems contained in this collection (the titles often speak for themselves: “The Match”, “My Mother Was a Beautiful Woman”, “When She Slept”, “The Tree”, “Cloudy Day”, “In the Repair Shop”, “Growing Old”, “My Day”) would seem to contradict Codrescu’s assessment of the fundamentally spiritual nature of Marcus’s work, which he himself has described as a spiritual orientation “aimed at a Dionysian life force ... pulsating in every living thing and rooted in this world”. Such an approach is perhaps most apparent in poems such as “Meeting Places” or the more Stevensian “Listening to Rain”, in which the speaker bemusedly remarks that he “doesn’t know if he is inside or outside, if he is the house surrounded by rain, or if the storm is inside him”.

But the spiritual nature of Marcus’s prose poetry is obvious even in the shortest and simplest pieces of the volume which, far from resembling mere journal entries, seek to describe a different kind of intimacy that exists at a slight angle from what we often take for granted as the true nature of subjective experience. There is the self-deflating confessionalism of the mock-Pirandellian “Ten Paragraphs in Search of an Author” (“When I was eight I went five days without eating. Another time I stepped heel-to-toe along the roof edge of a five story tenement for over an hour. I’d drive myself like that when I was young, always trying to

discover how far I could go. Luckily, I never found out”). But there is also “Alzheimer’s”, the concluding poem of the collection (and one of a series of poems about growing old scattered throughout the book), a piece which conveys the poet’s sad puzzlement towards a form of consciousness that causes the individual’s gradual estrangement from the speaker as well as from herself (“the easy chair he slept in watching TV, the table she sat at brushing her hair . . . thinking of nothing . . . The crib in the attic, the home without furniture, the vacant lot without a house”) and nonetheless ends with a volcanic eruption that signals the advent of “the world about to be born”. Such a poem recalls Jerome Mazzaro’s apt description of Marcus’s « ethical lyrics » (Marcus’s unusual lyrical range has also been praised by Charles Simic).

Looking back on Marcus’s impressive career as a practitioner of the genre, one would be tempted to consider him as an odd fish in fabulist waters, one who could feature alongside other boundary cases such as Charles Simic, James Tate and Peter Johnson. As I have argued elsewhere, what these writers have in common is a successful attempt to deal with real people and real situations and allow them to drift into a dream-like world which is neither real nor unreal, neither here nor there. Marcus’s collection thus alternates between the whimsical and the solemn, the mundane and the poignant, the imagistic and the philosophical, in a way that does not limit itself to deliberately mixing up different, sometimes antagonistic, stylistic registers but also seeks to apprehend what he describes in “Pursuing the Dreambone” the paradoxical nature of knowledge and non-knowledge, a process envisioned in Henri Michaux’s notion of “nescience” (“Each of my steps carries me farther into myself, yet farther from who I think I am”). It’s not that this book is completely devoid of some of the “mannerisms” that characterized the various “schools” mentioned above. Rather, Marcus’s extensive knowledge of those “trends” (Marcus is a teacher as well as a writer and has taught creative workshops on numerous campuses throughout the nation) is clearly transcended by a voice which remains his own, no matter how convoluted, intertextual and complexifying some of the poems may appear to be.

Unlike Codrescu, if I had to place Marcus on a more international level I would not necessarily think of Ponge or Péguy but, rather, of Belgian-born prose maverick Henri Michaux whom the author cites in an epigraph to the book that points to the necessity to recover “the special way children look at things, rich from not yet knowing, rich in extent, in desert, big from nescience, like a flowing river, a gaze that isn’t bound yet, nourished by the undeciphered” (*Pursuing the Dream Bone* is also dedicated to Marcus’s grandson). It has of course become a truism that the poetic function of language is to defamiliarize the familiar and evoke the brief period of uncritical wonder that characterized Wordsworth’s vision of childhood (Marcus’s superb title poem, “Pursuing the Dream Bone”, deals with similar themes but a more oneiric and solemn fashion). But Marcus’s capacity to unskin the reader’s eyes is truly remarkable and so is his capacity to avoid the risks and dangers of excessive self-consciousness that often lurks beneath any attempt to produce a prose poem that resembles a philosophical (and/or mock-)philosophical fragment (“The Reason Why?”, “The Tree: Postscript”, “Mirror”, “Every Morning”, “Listening to Rain”, “Like the Back of Our Hands”), a *Dinggedicht* (“The Match”, “Fingers”, “The Tree”, “Shoes”, “Passports”) or a parable (“Laughter”, “The Story”, “Pursuing the Dream Bone”). In his recent autobiography (*Striking through the Masks: A Literary Memoir*; Capitola Books, 2008), Marcus devotes an entire chapter to the prose poem and acknowledges his debt to such master of the poetic parable as Michaux and Lawrence Fixel, whose formative influence allowed Marcus to explore the affinities between the prose poem and parable, at a time when he was simultaneously trying to rid himself of the “tyranny of the line” and create a world “composed of funhouse-mirror distortions of reality, dream visions rooted in metaphor and symbol, which for [him] evoke a more resonant picture of the world than everyday realism does”.

P. H. Liotta's *The Graveyard of Fallen Monuments* is an altogether different, though no less deserving, attempt to redefine the prose poem form, especially as regards its capacity to engage with space and history. The book's sense of cultural and historical concreteness, its sheer expansive temporal and spatial breadth and perspective (the poems were written and revised in many different places over a period of 25 years) - which convey the writer's sense of historical and cultural rootlessness reflected in the title of the volume - make this book an unusual contribution to the history of prose and verse poetry.

As the closing notes of the collection make clear, "the graveyard of fallen monuments" is not a metaphor: it refers to an actual "sculpture park" located in Moscow and housing "most of the prominent statues and monuments from the Soviet era". In the capable hands of a poet such as Liotta, this "literalized metaphor" is not entirely unreminiscent of T. S. Eliot's famous assessment of "immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history" or the Joycean suggestion that history is a nightmare from which the contemporary artist is trying to awake.

Liotta's prose and verse are elegant throughout without being contrived or self-conscious. The unusual elongated format of the book (which is 8.25 inches wide, and only 7.25 inches high) is particularly well-suited for the prose sequences contained in the first sections of the book, which also contains sequences of oversized lineated couplets. Although Liotta's "ghazal" as remote from the original form as Kerouac's Western haiku (unlike the opening sequence of long couplets, which comprised a variety of internal rhymes, it does not rhyme and consist of a succession of long lines that seem to stop arbitrarily at the end of each oversized page), they still manage to communicate the complexities of the poet's engagement with the landscapes and cultural and existential dilemmas traversed by the poem. Ironically the mixing of long couplets and prose poems within the collection points back to one of the origins of the American prose poem which, in many ways, started with the long, unrhymed, declamatory line of Walt Whitman and, later, Sherwood Anderson.

From "Blind Minotaur Guided by a Young Girl in the Night" (a beautiful ekphrastic poem based on Picasso's Blind Minotaur etching):

She has the face of a bird; he, the body of a tortured man. They cross, together, a  
dimension of mezzotint, /  
trapped in this black method of art. The only living figures on paper.

She knows the quality of pain that is his, promises to be his muse. She was not born  
with this face with its /  
prominent beak like a gull's and a voice that reminds one of nightingales, the delicate  
crystal of timbre and /  
pitch. Together they flee.

This short review cannot do justice to the diversity of tones and approaches of *The Graveyard of Fallen Monuments*, from Wittgenstein's philosophy of language (one of the most obvious potential weaknesses of this book is that Liotta chooses to start each section of the book with the philosopher's most obvious quotes which have been cited ad nauseam in countless poetry collections) to Picasso's personal reinvention of the myth of the Minotaur ("Blind Minotaurus Guided by a Young Girl in the Night"), and on to Cocteau's rewriting of Orpheus and Escher's impossible, non-Euclidian drawings ("Nothing to admire but this crazy form. One hand deconstructs the other. Stillness and change"). Despite the wealth of philosophical and aesthetic references and allusions, Liotta is equally well-versed in Middle East conflicts ("The Ghazal of Memory"), reminiscences of WWII politics and Hemingway's

China trip (“Hemingway with the Kuomintang Army: June 16<sup>th</sup>, 1941”) and family anxieties which are often alleviated by the author’s self-debunking rhetoric, an aspect of his work which is most apparent in his use of titles (“Tired of Lobster? Why Not Sea Urchin Gonads for a Change of Pace”).

This dense and highly-allusive work remains accessible throughout and is punctuated by memorable lines, the best of which are often formulated in the form of unanswered questions (“What is a life but its runes in absence?”). At a time when contemporary poetry is often accused of being dominated by sterile formal experiments or self-indulgent lyrical outbursts, the key questions for Liotta remains the following ones: “What will we learn? What have we done? ... We serve the nature of what it is we’re worth. Is there *ever* necessary slaughter? Will we deserve the mutilated earth?” (“End of a Century Begun”). It seems to me that too few poets ask themselves such questions, shrinking as they do from a lyric that would accommodate a politically conscious vision of modern society and the expression of subjective and collective anxieties, one which would allow the poet to read the lyric self through the lens of its political and cultural environment. Perhaps it is the ambivalent struggle between lyric self-containedness and epic contingency which has dominated the history and development of the prose poem, in America and elsewhere, which makes such unusual experiments possible, useful, and desirable.

—Michel Delville