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## Michael Benedikt's Concept Of Surrealism In Contemporary Poetry : A Study

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**Abstract:** *The prose poem makes considerable use of that most psychologically 'inward' poetic device of all: metaphor. Metaphor, of course, is one of the wildest qualities of both the human psyche and poetry. The extraordinary combinations of events which are assembled to make up our dreams represent the mind's extraordinary capacity to generate metaphor.*

**Key Words :** Conscious, Metaphor, Psyche, Surrealism, Unconscious.

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The Surrealist movement of the 1920s and 1930s, which was founded in France but which soon became an International, global movement, was perhaps the wildest outgrowth of this emphasis on a psychologically-based art. Surrealism went even further than Baudelaire had – even going so far as to declare open warfare against any ingredient in art that wasn't the product of spontaneity what Baudelaire termed 'the promptings of the unconscious'. Despite their purportedly anti-artistic stance, Surrealist (and semi-Surrealist) poets around the world have written many marvellous prose-poems. Benedikt defines The Prose Poem: "A form of poetry self-consciously written in prose, yet characterized by the conscious, intense use, of virtually all the devices of verse poetry – except for strict meter; rhyme; and the line-break".<sup>1</sup>

Benedikt interviews telling that the prose poem makes considerable use of that most psychologically 'inward' poetic device of all: metaphor. Metaphor, of course, is one of the wildest qualities of both the human psyche and poetry. The extraordinary combinations of events which are assembled to make up our dreams represent the mind's extraordinary capacity to generate metaphor.

One of Benedikt's major themes is the relationship between matter and spirit, the bringing together of the external world (matter, body) with the internal (spirit, mind). To achieve this process of merger, Benedikt begins by allowing his imagination the freedom to make whatever correspondences it will, however irrational, among objects in the natural world. As a result, the key

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to his work is metaphor, usually visual – stemming from his interest in visual arts – and usually developed by a surreal logic. His technique, both in verse and in prose poems, is to begin with metaphor and let the metaphor develop its own progression. For example, in "The Wings of the Nose" the wings' logically take off:

The wings of the nose  
I sense them fluttering  
Making a passenger  
Out of the whole olfactory system  
While the brain flies along just for fun  
Where are you going, O wildest of widely wandering wings  
Where are you taking us, my Sweetie and Me?

(The Wings of the Nose) <sup>2</sup>

The essence of the surrealism that figures so large in Benedikt's early poetry lies in surprises and leaps in the logic of human consciousness because they represent his effort to unite the worlds of inner and outer reality, and of imagination and fact. In his introduction to the "The Poetry of Surrealism, which he edited, Benedikt traces the influence of French surrealism on a diverse group of American poets ranging from 'Beats' like Allen Ginsberg, Gregory Corso, and Lawrence Ferlinghetti to the New York School of Frank O'Hara, Kenneth Koch to poets such as James Wright and Robert Bly. Writing in 1970, Benedikt defined the 'major theme' of his own work as 'probably the relationship of matter and spirit, sometimes the sensual and the pure'. For him, poetry is 'a way of knowing': "It is not so much 'knowledge' of the world in the final, conventional sense- valuable as that surely is- but knowledge of the world in process; and also, of course, of self-knowledge in process".<sup>3</sup>

The process frees the poet to explore consciousness and his experience of the word randomly and fluidly with what Lewis Gallo, in "Benedikt: A Profile," describes as 'rational irrationalism'. Benedikt's metaphors make connections which at first appear illogical, and which work as a kind of dialectic, bringing together opposites or contradictions in the process. In this sense Benedikt reflects another literary stream- the English romantic poets, especially Wordsworth and Coleridge, whose influences he acknowledges, and who were also concerned with dealing with the interplay of inner and outer, subjective and objective, realities. Benedikt remarks, "Surrealism is no longer the central issue with me. I simply feel, with surrealism, and many other movements in contemporary thought..... that it's a question of relating your mind to what's out there and responding to it and then hoping that what's out there will respond to your mind, so that seeming contradictions cease. It's a matter of having a loving dialogue, not a monologue, with the world".<sup>4</sup>

Early psychology shaped surrealism, and psychological surrealism has been welcomed into the academic world as domestic surrealism or Deep Image. In the poetry of Benedikt we find that symbols and their psychological interpretation can establish a unity behind a surreal poem separate from story or form. A reading focusing on establishing relationships between the objects or persons in a surrealist poem, and therefore, the relationship of a poem to mythic structures, such as journeys, can lead to an understanding of a surreal poem. Surrealism's grounding in psychological or dream reality separates it from other movements. Benedikt in his poem "Your Life is Your Own Life....." deals with self-directed people, and distinguishes them from people who are 'other directed'. And whose thinking even, is so controlled by circumstance that there's some question as to whether they are doing much thinking or are capable of thinking independently, at all. The poem is quoted in full with a view to understanding Benedikt's vision and technique:

Your Life is your own Life & Not just a compendium of debts:

No, never just a mosaic of owing, whether real or imagined

- A life like the latter would be no life

surely, but only an excuse for not living.

& for existing as if continuously inside someone else's skin:

Nor can anyone develop "A Life of One's Own" in the

opposite way, I think

& by looking at the world with ever merely of creditor, or predator,

i.e. like someone who thinks that the balance of the world is out there

just simply to owe him or her living.

For our Lives are surely our own Lives, are they not:

& Not just a compendium of debts.

In his introduction to "The Prose Poem: An International Anthology", Benedikt links the development of the prose poem with surrealism's emphasis on the unconscious and traces the form back to its French origins in Baudelaire. More liberating even than free verse, the prose poem legitimizes the free fluid expression of the human consciousness. Yet, as Benedikt uses the form, it has a design of its own. Benedikt remarks: "In the prose poem I'd take a single metaphorical statement and develop that metaphor slowly, logically: that's where my feeling about the unconscious as being, metaphorically speaking, 'mole-like'- both all-pervasive in its workings, and gradual in its developments-probably comes from".<sup>5</sup>

We find surrealism in the poetry of Michael Benedikt characterized by dreamlike juxtaposition of images, the invitation of chance into composition, and the suspension of many types of intentional discussion of themes, Benedikt comments. "There are many ways to imagine the poet:

warbling his native woodnotes wild, legislating unknown to the rest of us, speaking in the language that men do know, giving to airy nothing a local habitation and a name, making things that are palpable and mure".<sup>6</sup> Michael Benedikt typifies the poet as the eternal outsider, the poet against the world.

Benedikt has translated a great deal of surrealist poetry and edited "The Poetry of Surrealism". No wonder, the very objects in many of his poems recall the interiors of early twentieth-century Europe: umbrella stands, mirrors, bowler hats. It is just that he has not always been able to resist using the same things that are familiar to us from that earlier work and so his poems necessarily partake of the earlier poetry's peculiar historical feel. Michael Benedikt comments, "Major theme is probably the relationship of matter and spirit: sometimes the sensual and the 'pure'. General sources and influence are – the French symbolists and surrealists until about 1968: most recently, the English romantic poets. Stylistically, I am interested in the treatment of 'difficult' subjects with clarity, since their reality is very clear. I am probably as much influenced by contemporary painting, film, and theatre as I am by any movement in poetry. I have become interested in the possibilities of the poem in prose as well as verse".<sup>7</sup>

In an interview with Dennis Stone, Michael Benedikt remarks: "The prose poem is an established form practiced internationally. In the USA and in the English-speaking world in general, it's still a somewhat embattled literary form".<sup>8</sup> It is generally agreed that it was the 19<sup>th</sup> century French Symbolist poet Charles Baudelaire (1821-1867), the founder of modern French poetry, who began the modern trend towards prose poem-writing and who was, and still is, the prose poet who has had the most influence. Baudelaire was the first prose poet who was fully conscious of the fact that he was working in a new, modern medium whose ground-rules had yet to be established, and whose boundaries were yet to be explored – both in terms of form and subjectmatter. And we find the same characteristic features in the prose poem of Benedikt. Benedikt's diction, like Baudelaire's, follows the contours of the human psyche, which doesn't, of course, naturally think in strict forms like sonnets and villanelles. The Prose Poem, which avoids by degree (but not by kind) various strictly formal devices of rhymed verse, and which emphasizes and approach more naturally consistent with the inward of 'associational' turnings of the human psyche – the mind's fondness for dream-like creations of metaphor in particular – seems an ideal vehicle for such sophisticated, psychologically realistic, esthetic aspirations.

**Conclusion:** What emerges from a deep study of the thematic and the stylistic features of Michael Benedikt's poetry is that he is a serious, important and contemporary poet of America. Over the years he has demonstrated flexibility of technique and consistency of poetic aims, and he has never failed – in surrealist verse, prose poems, or realistic verse – to exert a pressure that legitimately helps to

extend the scope of poetry. As anthologist and poet Benedikt has been instrumental in making the propose poem a valid and accepted form and in bringing surrealist technique back into American poetry. His influence and popularity, evident by his appearance in over twenty five anthologies, are unquestionable. Even though he is not associated with 'Deep Imagism' in strict sense of the term, in Michael Benedikt too, it is the unconscious which ignites his poetic imagination. His work described by critics as an example of 'irrational rationalism' is rich with metaphors which at first appear illogical but a close reading suggests that they are a highly serious form of play in which easily recognizable chunk of human and non-human reality are reordered in enchanting and luminous fantasies. His poetry is indeed mental poetry, poetry of ideas rather than emotion, in the form of surreal adventures that are interesting even if they are sometimes confusing. Moreover, his experiment with technique also establishes his position as a major voice of the time.

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