



# CONTEXT

A FORUM FOR LITERARY ARTS AND CULTURE

No. 8  
Online Edition

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## READINGS

### Reading Ben Marcus

[Christine Hume](#)

Reading Ben Marcus's work is not a matter of standing safely outside it; instead, readers must accept the dangers of entering into a new language world. This world turns on destabilizing the usual fix of what gets "inside" and what stays "outside" ourselves, our families, and our cultures. Marcus's new projects, as far as they can be glimpsed in pieces recently published in journals and magazines, extend his first novel's radical collapsing of interior and exterior spaces. His obsession with orality is a good case in point. By understanding the mouth as a kind of halfway house for food and language, we maintain a moral and methodological sense of inside and outside, precisely the dichotomy Ben Marcus refuses to keep. Witness the following from "Literary Enhancement Through Food Intake: A Dietary Guideline for Reading" and "Technology of Silence," in which Marcus implicates the container's role in what it contains:

Monthly, I cast a hot mold of my inner mouth, to catalog the changes to my palate, which helps me discern my purpose as a person and divine my next move in this world. The goal is to dilate the mouth cavity so that it can store more wind and inhale or alter the excess language in a room--since language is made, changed and destroyed by air and man-made wind--although I would emphasize that I am not a word eater.

and

The first plaster casting is taken of the inside of Bob Riddle's mouth, including the cavity that extends down his windpipe ending at his lungs. When the casting is removed and hardens, it resembles a roughly shaped sphere (the inside of the mouth) with a ridged handle attached and is considered a primary shape around which his body has grown, a hardened form of the white space at Riddle's center, a sculpture of his nothingness. Riddle calls it, incorrectly and rather pretentiously, his soul, given that it represents his "language cave," and argues that his shape is the primary object by which a person can be understood, and possibly controlled.

Typical of Marcus's writing, these passages dwell on the transition of language (and elsewhere food) from production to consumption. Here the inside of a mouth (or "language cave") is rendered into an object external to the body, a gesture that captures the essence of Marcus's method--presenting subjective stories as objective bits of information. His insistence on removing language from its somatic grounding has the paradoxical effect of proving the impossibility of such a removal. In his self-yeasting worlds, language, like food, enters us and changes us chemically, physiologically.

However much Marcus's prescriptions make the alchemical function of language explicit, they also do everything they can to safeguard against it. On the surface, readerly response is exactly what the work argues against; self-inflicted deafness, silence, and paralysis (what Marcus calls "strategic exits from consciousness" and "unwanted feelings") are what the narrators of Marcus's stories strive, with elaborate technical and procedural ritual, to attain. His narrators hold onto rational intellect so tightly that we sense their fear of succumbing to a rush of freewheeling emotions. This

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play between detachment and emotion creates haunting effects, particularly since, more often than not, Marcus's "unwanted feelings" are tied to recollections of family members--father, mother, wife, son--figures that appear to serve as part of the narrative structure. As readers, we must straddle identification with and alienation from the families of Marcus's work. Their extremes of earnestness and self-mockery short-circuit our confidence about how to "take" them. The open-ended flickering of two opposite possibilities of readerly reception--ironic and straight, funny and sad--compete and lock in deliberate ambiguity, refusing us the normal delineations we use to stake out identity. And since the family unit is defined by inclusion and exclusion, the reader's position with respect to both family and language is equally ambiguous.

Marcus began this project with his first book *The Age of Wire and String*, which carries through the promise of its epigraph, "Every word was once an animal." In *The Age*, Marcus's words breed, evolve and interact with us. They are highly taxonomized and form deranged systems of inclusion and exclusion. Instead of Latin binomials, we get Carl, a kind of artificial food; Jennifer, the inability to see; Albert, a nightly light killer. The unmanageable profusion of tags for people, places, and kinships, distinguishes scientific expertise from other modes of knowledge and authority. Yet Marcus's use of nomenclature focuses on the process of naming itself in order to question the juggernaut of classification and its *raison d'etre*, domestication. All the familiar landmarks have been replaced and all the familiar ground has been reimagined into Archimboldo-like assemblages. As in the Baroque court painter's portraits, Marcus's work is an encyclopedic museum of a world saturated in longing and mourning, and is cast in highly formal rhetorical structures. For example:

Intercourse with resuscitated wife for particular number of days, superstitious act designed to insure safe operation of household machinery. Electricity mourns the absence of the energy form (wife) within the household's walls by stalling its flow to the outlets. As such, an improvised friction needs to take the place of electricity, to goad the natural currents back to their proper levels. . . . Days flip past in chunks of fake light, and the intercourse is placed in the back of the mind. But it is always there, that moving into a static-ridden corpse that once spoke familiar messages in the morning when the sun was new.

His composites stun us with their elusive mix of referentiality and tangentiality, realism and the fantastic; his glossaries awaken private and hidden etymologies. The interconnection of all things in Archimboldo's kaleidoscopic interlockings of fruit or flowers begs to be read allegorically, though it in fact benefits from putting aside the search for allegorical significance, and looking for actual transformations. When a fire iron becomes an ear in Archimboldo's work, we do not cease to see the fire iron; we feel the emotional weight of that replacement--a face both familiar and strange. Marcus too sneaks pathos in through the awkwardness, the neurotic discomfort, of his linguistic displacements.

Or consider Marcus's treatment of "coughing"--a "device for transporting people or goods from one level to another"--a term which here enacts metaphor itself. Defined in the section titled "Exporting the Inner Man," coughing is a method by which one both transforms and discovers oneself. And again the mouth is a transition site where, as Bachelard says, "outside and inside form a dialectic of division, the obvious geometry of which blinds us as soon as we bring it into play in metaphorical domains. It has the sharpness of the dialectics of *yes* and *no*, which decides everything." The result of this dialectical movement is a synthesis of subjective and objective modes of communication.

\* \* \*

Marcus's writings do not seem invented so much as developed out of their own specialized discourse and inner laws. They transform the world into language, a kind of hieroglyphics bent on inexhaustible exploration. What Foucault says of Borges's "certain Chinese encyclopedia" also holds true for Marcus's catalogue of fantastic and familiar cultural artifacts: "Where else could they be juxtaposed except the non-place of language?" In his novel, Marcus's encyclopedia defines terms for each of its eight conceptual rubrics--Sleep, God, Food, The House, Animal, Weather, Persons, The Society--thus providing a pseudo-scientific organization to numismatic collections, something akin to Renaissance museums (the *Wunderkammer* or *Kunstammer*). The Renaissance museum structured the material world and its interconnections in the fashion of a scholastic encyclopedia. *The Age of Wire and String* likewise conjures prolific systems of thought with links to the reality that produced it; it teases and flirts

with allegory, but ultimately refuses it. Stuffed with signs meant to frustrate the semiotician, definitions sabotage themselves and overburden themselves with meaning, thus making for a lot of free-floating resistance to the very idea of a system.

Instead, the titular wire and string trope creates a web of relationships along the line of the ancient doctrine of correspondences. In Marcus's novel the web is sustained not by what it captures and holds, but instead by its own structuring act. This elaborate act transcends its individual parts and operations, forcing the reader to throw away the map after reading it (evoking the end of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*) and "look elsewhere for instruction." The writer and the text, being and non-being exchange hostilities and swap clarities. Look again:

BEN MARCUS, THE 1. False map scroll, caul or parchment. It is comprised of the first skin. In ancient times, it hung from a pole, where wind and birds inscribed its surface. Every year, it was lowered and the engravings and dents that the wind had introduced were studied. It can be large, although often it is tiny and illegible. Members wring it dry. It is a fitful chart in darkness. When properly decoded (an act in which the rule of opposite perception applies), it indicated only that we should destroy it and look elsewhere for instruction. In four, a chaplain donned the Ben Marcus and drowned in Green River. 2. The garment that is too heavy to allow movement. These cloths are designed as prison structures for bodies, dogs, persons, members. 3. Figure from which the antiperson is derived; or, simply, the antiperson. It must refer uselessly and endlessly and always to weather, food, birds, or cloth, and is produced of an even ratio of skin and hair, with declension of the latter in proportion to expansion of the former. It has been represented in other figures such as Malcolm and Laramie, although aspects of it have been co-opted for uses in John. Other members claim to inhabit its form and are refused entry to the house. The victuals of the antiperson derive from itself, explaining why it is often represented as a partial or incomplete body or system--meaning it is often missing things: a knee, the mouth, shoes, a heart.

The effect here is much the same as the documentary collages of, say, Susan Howe, who creates a field of interaction between family and national history and myth, or the templated collages of Rosmarie Waldrop, whose music-making arguments are outrageously absurd as they oscillate inferentially between induction and deduction. Composition by juxtaposition presents phenomena without commingling them, preserving their particularities and displaying their proximities. The name "Ben Marcus" incites discursive energy, and its exhibition attaches heterogeneity to what it ostensibly attempts to isolate, clarify, and sanitize so that a new order may prevail. Marcus's spooked new order demands the inevitability of connections even as it seeks to undo them. As the above excerpt makes clear, the connections between things are consistently manifest, even if "explaining why" is next to impossible. The book sets itself against harmonic universalizing; at the same time what makes it moving, at least in part, is the futile but necessary search for hermetic structural supervision, its manic need to explain. It's berserk with the desperate desire to compartmentalize, to fashion genealogies and mythologies of "the Age." The "often missing things" allow a gestalt of as yet ignored or unidentified sensual and emotional experience to saturate the writing.

With Marcus our hearts and minds squabble over what we are inhabiting. The author's name is a blitz of double-edged self-reference and self-effacement in the above "definition," and it becomes a strange figure--by way of both the objectifying voice and the insistence on self-reference--that repeats and slips the straightjacket of context. Marcus loads well-known (scientific, religious, and historic) authoritative discourse with surprising content, but does not do so in order to expose the inherent subjectivity in all scientific modes, rather he coerces the subjective to reveal its objectivity.

In other words, his achievement is building a new objectivity through subjectivity. We tend to think of objectivity as synonymous with impartiality or a-perspectivity, yet Marcus's work exposes the false correspondence between repression of emotions and the ontological bedrock. Likewise, we usually consider subjectivity conflatable with authenticity, though it too is culturally engineered, a fact Marcus makes plain by dissolving the opposition between subject and object. His writings discover a space between culture as it is imagined from outside and culture as it is lived from within. Even the author and the text play figure-ground games, turning vast and intimate simultaneously. Marcus rejects the relief of taking sides. His work continues to present a double vision, one touched by both calamity and glee, and whose self-consciously public language underscores its highly personal timbre. His art is not the exercise of argument, but the experience of a new wholly perspectival objectivity that makes a

winning case for foregrounding aesthetic pleasure, the joy generated intensely and precisely.

### **Selected Works by Ben Marcus**

*[The Age of Wire and String](#)*. Dalkey Archive Press, \$11.95.

*The Father Costume*. Forthcoming from Artspace Books.

*Notable American Women*. Forthcoming from Vintage.

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