

Speaking Franco:
An Interview with Michael Franco¹

João de Mancelos
(Portuguese Catholic University)

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João de Mancelos: [A Portuguese poet stated that] poetry is a way of chasing reality. Do you agree? What is your concept of poetry?

Michael Franco: No. Poetry is reality. Poetry is a complete engagement into *and* with the world.

I make poetry as others might socialize or set off for a walk through their neighborhood (*all such activity* being equal to me). It is my way of being in the world: I can no more change reality than I could chase my own breath and neither can the poem. A poem chasing reality would be like a man chasing his life: the bystander or reader would be tempted to call out “Hey! Why don’t you stop and *be* what you are?”

I meet the world with sound. Images are held *in* sound. Sound is the D.N.A. of the poem.

In this swirl of activity — by which I simply mean living in and *hearing* the world as a vital practice; in turn living and hearing *this* world as it announces itself to my ear — poetry forms. (And I am always aware that poem in its Greek origins means simply *a thing made*).

Most often I proceed on faith without reason; it is a faith in the absolute fact that nothing has meaning by which I mean that everything has meaning.

Meaning then may arise. But meaning like a friendship occurs within a constant stream of acquaintances and conditions — some interesting, some not — some vital, others not, some lasting, others not.

Meaning — *vital meaning* — for me always lies in the future. The poem is never a demonstration of what I *thought* and thus wanted to present nor is it whatever meaning that the poem creates: it is rather in the act of my continual finding that meaning begins. That meaning occurs at all is testimony to the intensity or charge of the search.

The poem is then a reader, sounding the possibilities as they are met. (In English,

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sounding carries the meaning *to measure*, as the captain of a boat would *sound* the river [from which comes the term mark! i.e., the moment when the water depths would be recorded]]. William Corbett — American poet — writes in the poem, “Springwater”: “We kneel and dip / each one of us the cup”. The reader then as much as the poet, maker, as the would-be poet is, moving around the worlds of the poem.

JM: What do you normally “sing” about in your poems?

MF: I do not “normally sing” about anything. My poems as I begin to compose them are not “about” — they *are*.

The concept of *themes* is, for me, meaningless in that formal way that a theme is conceived of for the university examinations. I *do* find, in re-reading my own work, numerous recurring images and motifs — as one might find recurring images and motifs in Wagner’s *Ring*. I am almost always interested to make note of these. At times they guide my thoughts toward other moments of formation; at other times the awareness that I have ignored a motif or even be repulsed by it will guide me. There are also times when a motif will be a complete mystery to me: “why am I repeating this again[?]” I find myself asking. These motifs can be abstract or actual “things”. For example: the leaves of numerous maple trees which grow up — dense and green returning each spring — higher than the window of my bedroom on the third floor of this house: there is a very particular sound they make and this sound is particular to the season I am living in: in summer, the ocean; in winter, an emptiness that I would be hard-pressed to describe as it is not sound but a presence there accentuated each day by the bare ends of the branches as the light, which we begin to lose as early as 3 p.m. on a mid-winter afternoon, releases them into a clear blue-back January night. Again and again I find these leaves in my work. My question on discovering the presence of such motif is “Why”. Why have they entered the data of the poem at all. Why at that particular point. What have these leaves — not an image, not a symbol, not a metaphoric meaning, but *leaves*, attached now to the twin of my noticing; what have they come to tell me. This combines with the question of “how” do they tell me — what data surrounds them. I have a faith that they are markers along the path. Somehow they will take me somewhere. I follow. Collect the evidence.

Each poem then, each book, is a journey of noticings [*sic*] with their possible resonances and directives. Just as in life there are possible resonances and directives in any encounter. “Each new friend, a guide”, the poet Robin Blaser said.

JM: When did you feel for the first time you were a poet?

MF: I began writing at fifteen, while living in Tucson, Arizona [,] in response to intense boredom in high-school. I spent most of my time in school either writing or trying to get a pass from the teacher to go to the library where I would read H. G. Wells and Edgar Poe. As these

works were not “assigned” to us, it felt very wicked — like I was getting away with a treasure. (I still have this sense when I am really reading in a text). What truly started me — strangely enough given my tastes now — was Tennyson’s *Idylls of the King*. Yet what I wrote was nothing at all like that — it was allegorical-confession, laced with Symbols and Epiphanal moments... such as one can create at 15! I was then lucky enough to find myself moving from Arizona to San Francisco. There, over the next year, I met a small company of poets actively writing and, more importantly, *reading* their poetry aloud on a weekly basis; readings open to any and all. This in return led me to a young teacher — a teacher in that rare Big way — named Fran Claggett who in turn introduced me to the poetry of, and then to the poet, Robert Duncan. It was a vital turning point in my life. A step that would, over the next several years, give me a hint of the wonder and workings of the imagination... It was literally — to paraphrase Duncan — a *first permission* not to simply write or be a poet — I was in fact already being both: it as rather a Permission — a guide saying that I could indeed, in this strange culture in which I live, which I both loathe and deeply love; *be* what I was. This was no small bit of news.

It strikes me that Miss Claggett’s gift that first winter, of a small chap-book by Robert Duncan, titled, *Fragments of a Disordered Devotion*, occurred on my birthday.

I have since come to know life as fragments just as the universe as we know it is fragments. Illusive meaning like secret love has its allure: like the clarity that allows us to see into the workings of any given fragment has in it the resonance of Love.

My me was made up of a series of fragments (my family moved in average every two years — I would leave behind constellations of lives and friends — who, over the years, I became aware — went on quite vigorously without me...). So *that was the permission...* to embrace those fragments, to devote myself, and so to “make up” the story *at last, for myself*.

Ultimately my finding Robert Duncan and later his companion, the artist Jess, directly introduced me to Coimbra, Portugal, Pessoa and my companion in life, whom I met on my first short visit in Coimbra. When I look back I see the poetry and the life entwined.

JM: Being a poet — is that a duty of the soul, a vital feeling or a vocation?

MF: We could enquire of a bird — take the plump and slightly pompous red male cardinal that is currently singing in the maple tree outside the window near my desk, for example — we could ask why he is singing. What would this tell us of the song?

The authority of *why* I find quite useless. The authority of what stands behind it is equally useless. The authority of being in possession of information that no one else can process — is questionable, unless it is being brought into the common reading. *There is no mystery in the obscure equal to that in the familiar.*

Time and history will erase and re-write each of our stories in ways we are all too often

unprepared to imagine: Caeiro at some point in time could lead a young reader to an obscure little known writer named Pessoa: libraries have been burned. In the face of this, what small cell of authority we gain seems paltry. For now, we can make our way together. It is our relating of the story to each other that I find primary. This is why I am answering the questions you have asked: questions from another culture form another set of coordinates. That is to say, this is by no means a diversion or time away from my “real” work. This interview is the work at work between us.

JM: Poetry: creation or re-creation? The world, or the intellectual world?

MF: Does an earth-worm “recreate” the dirt it digests? Does it “think” of the effects on the garden that this de-composition creates? Does the compost from the digestive system create or recreate the garden? In any of this does it matter *what* the worm thought as it took up its duties? What indeed *was* the earth-worms inspiration?

Art, poetry, and the daily living of it are made from such need and this need we find at work here beneath us: to move through, to take in, to digest, to return. An illustration:

Out of deep need

.....
 From my body to other bodies
 Angels and bastards interchangeably
 Who had better sing and tell stories
 before all will be abstracted.
 — Louis Zukofsky “A” 12 [1950]

JM: What are Michael Franco’s pains as a poet and as a man?

MF: Michael Franco is constantly struggling to be Michael Franco. It is a struggle played in the long shadow of movement and flux that is existence. How often the cells know what the body does not. How often the poet knows what the man will not or can not acknowledge. I never cease to be overwhelmed in these thoughts.

On the other hand, the concept of “my pains” is meaningless. Michael Franco gets up each day rather early, spends a few minutes in the garden checking its progress in the short New England growing season, makes a small infusion pot of very thick dark coffee — toasts a bit of home-made *broa* [a type of bread made in Portugal] and sits or attempts to sit down and work... In the afternoons he reads and waits for his wife to come home... In the evening he doesn’t work (he does not teach but works three days in a restaurant — has for nine years which brings in just enough money for expenses and, with care, a trip to Portugal! There is very little accumulation: the house in which he lives is filled with objects and furniture, rugs and lamps found discarded by Harvard students). He cooks. How in any of this can “pain” be measured? I am privileged to

be able to think. To live without regard to trends or demands made upon American academics. But pain? I live in luxury. Ask the people of Bosnia about pain. Or the people exiled from Portugal before your revolution.

As to my daily work and life, I would let Maria Torres sum this up for me with a paragraph that leaps to mind from her *Complete and Fulfilled Works*. A paragraph that so thoroughly described my own daily living that finding it was like those occasions when, in unknowingly passing a mirror the movement that one catches at the edge of consciousness sends a shiver of terror imbedded in the recognition that almost instantly — not unlike a shadow — follows:

Every day I would confront again the mutable and each day I would again attempt a momentary stabilization of all that ran before the wind of my mind; each idea in full sail away from my grasp: thus the great circle of failure would begin each day anew; even as I tried to untie the knots and tangles of the previous day's thoughts I would be presented with new shimmering fragments of information — no more real than quietly startling moments of complete lucidity — thoughts as perfect as a single crystal of snow which would be all but instantly lost in the surrounding accumulation by the slightest hint of warmth.

Abstract

An interview with writer Michael Franco, focusing on his views on poetry: the importance of sound, meaning, recurring images and motifs, influences and daily life.