Essays on the Peripheries

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Thoughts after Reading Michael Franco’s *A Book of Measure*

*The Mind at work, that’s what I want on my pages.*

Michael Franco’s *A Book of Measure, Volume 1* is a contemporary bildungsroman of the poet’s life in late Capitalism, a search for self-knowledge that involves a spiritual awakening through writing, travel, and friendships. Such knowledge is achieved through a slow accumulation of moments in time and space, and a refining of perception, where, like Proust, memory plays a central role: “all I do is remember or prepare to remember. some days I beg sleep to come and rock me with its promise. each day each person ligers like a remnant Dream that in waking has wrapt its transient arms around my abilities.” The book is a map of the inner worlds of the poet, both real and imaginary. It is a collage-work in which the parts of differing realities and experiences, suggest a whole life. The poet charts the geography of both a physical and a psychic space. The process of writing cannot be rushed, failure and indecision are part of the search. Sra. Maria Torres writes, “thus the great cycle of failure would begin each day anew. Even as I attempted to untie the knots and tangles of the previous day’s thoughts I would be presented with new shimmering fragments of information.”
And there are, amidst failures, also moments of illumination, which are often accompanied by a greater sense of one's inclusion in a tradition and not merely a literary tradition. During these moments, there is a greater realization that there is a continuity, even with the different experiences that exist among men and women, as proof of our common humanity. Such a moment causes the poet to pause. The poet writes, “in that moment of hesitation I find my thoughts constantly drawn from their path and at once, I am standing with all of those who have passed here; my thoughts then mingling with what is of course no more than the lingering aroma of theirs … what I see, they saw.” Subjectivity, the feeling that one is the center of the world, gives over to a wider sense of the human community. The poet’s journey is a search for his personal language, a learning how to speak in his own voice, which involves looking, a learning to see, and accessing that which is hidden in ourselves, but which often refuses to come to the surface. It cannot be realized by following a linear path. To assume “a beginning middle and end as constant is a false model of time. a reality yes but not work-a-day or normal shall we say reality.” On the writing process, he writes, “I find my writing to be more like the streets of a town: perpetually winding inviting me to become lost (always at a moment at which I can seemingly least afford to be so). Yet with each occasion, from each event in which I find myself ‘lost,’ the story of my life, the story of a life occurs. this occurrence not unlike a dry field, which after the first rains come seems to spring to life.” In a very real sense, there is nothing to know, no end to the journey, but in searching, even losing our way, which is inevitable, for there is no map of the territory, there is the moment of the poem when a dry field (the silent white of the page) after the rains (I think of tears, of the requisite suffering) results in flowers blooming (the poem). And here imagination is tantamount: “for myself, my sea was the imagination: And from this imagination, having cast the net of myself upon it, I would attempt to haul in any living moment that might carry me forward into the next day. (Which has now become the next
I am thinking of Jung and the collective unconscious here, the wider field of human experience and myth, that resides within us all, this wide sea upon which the poet voyages, accumulating moments, in his “science of here,” which are proof of his existence in a larger community, and that the poet gives voice to in his work. These are special moments in life when we are no longer strangers to ourselves, and these moments are often the result of encounters with others, friends living or dead, the imaginary or real. As we grow in self knowledge and experience, “there is almost no need for metaphysics. everything speaks.” This is the poet as Orpheus. The poet writes, “I had become we.” Here the ego breaks down, “I is an other,” different but the same. The poet writes,

form in form in corporated formal possibilities or tendencies to being or — does this fire carve me for its use — confluence of cells conglomerate structure moving to descry recognition. each part connected to the whole each whole the sum of its parts. each part potentially greater than any conceivable rendering of the whole. meaning then no more no less than looking.

This is a looking out into the world, a being in the wider space that is inclusive, looking as a kind of knowing which is different from acquired knowledge, and more fluid and changeable. He continues, “I was now again no more than two eyes moving up the street. the entire world moving around and in me.” The limits of subjective experience are apparent and transcended, there is a movement toward the outside, the I has become we. These moments where we clearly see our position in relation to others and the world are transitory, but to say this is not to in any way diminish their importance. They linger in memory and change our perception in a fundamental way. The experience is something felt rather than intellectualized. In fact, the poet writes of his being, “possessed by all of the world that I did not see, let alone that which I did not know to exist.” This way of knowing is apophatic; the poet finds a concept like “eternity” limiting
and is here speaking of a transcendence which defies rational explanation. The failures of this search are numerous, the rewards life-altering. And there is Franco’s care and attention to the line, his rhythm, and pacing; his ear attuned to the sounds of the quotidian and the celestial. *A Book of Measure* charts the journey every poet must make, reminding us that the world is filled with marvels if only we would *listen*, and that no challenge must discourage us, despite failure, from moving forward in our search to find our place in the cosmos.

**Works Cited**