BY MICHAEL BENEDIKT

POEMS
Changes: A Chapbook, New Fresco (Detroit), 1961
The Body, Wesleyan University Press (Middletown, Conn.), 1968
Sky, Wesleyan University Press, 1970
Mole Notes, Wesleyan University Press, 1971
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The Badminton at Great Barrington; or, Gustav Mahler & the Chattanooga Choo-Choo,
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PLAYS
The Vaseline Photographer, first produced in New York City, 1965
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EDITED COLLECTIONS
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(And co-translator) The Prose Poem: An International Anthology, Dell, 1976
TIME IS A TOY

The Selected Poems of Michael Benedikt

Edited by John Gallaher & Laura Boss
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THE ARTILLERY PORTRAIT
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*Revised by Michael Benedict after original book publication
THE BENEDIKT SUITCASE

John Gallaher

I graduated high school in 1983, and by that time had already started collecting anthologies and all the inexpensive and free books I could. Several of the anthologies I had (Contemporary American Poets, edited by Donald Hall; The Young American Poets, edited by Paul Carroll; The Major Young Poets, edited by Al Lee, etc.) included work from Michael Benedikt, who also was the editor of two anthologies that were fundamentally important to me (and many others I’ve talked with over the years): The Poetry of Surrealism and The Prose Poem: An International Anthology. As time went on, and I found more and more anthologies and books, I lost track of Benedikt, only to discover him again a couple years ago as I was moving my office and came across my stash of poetry anthologies from the 1970s. Not to lose him again, I went looking for more of his work, only to find he had died a few years earlier and had published no more books after 1980, and what he had published was long out of print.

With help and encouragement from Don Share, I was able to get in touch with Laura Boss, who owns the rights to his work and had saved his archives from going to a dumpster. She quickly signed on to bringing Benedikt’s work back into print, thus beginning what has become the wonderful, if amazingly time-consuming, project of putting this book together.

Michael Benedikt never stopped revising his work, even after publication. For the work selected from his five published books, I’ve made the decision to stick to the versions from those books, with a few exceptions (which are noted in the table of contents), though the grammar of some poems has been edited for consistency. For his unpublished books, I’ve stuck as closely as I could to what seemed to be the final versions of the manuscript before he moved on to
other work, though sometimes those lines blurred (especially in the later work of *Transitions* and *OF*).

The difficulty in working with Benedikt’s unpublished work is that various drafts of many of his poems exist, sometimes dated, sometimes not, and his editing notes are often in faint pencil on yellowed or poorly photocopied paper. Also, he would often retype sections and paste them over the older versions, but, over time, some of these pasted-on sections have fallen off. From what I’ve been able to find, what follows, then, is as close to what would have been his chronological publication history, if he had published the work he intended to publish, when he completed (or abandoned) it.

While Benedikt was writing his first two published books, *The Body* (1968) and *Sky* (1970), he was also writing the prose poems of *Universe*. It appears that an early version of *The Body* included a number of these prose poems, but, on Robert Bly’s advice, Benedikt excluded them from the final version of either of those books. After the publication of *Mole Notes* (1971), Benedikt was sending *Universe* out to potential publishers, as well as *Night Cries*, which ended up being his fourth book published, in 1976, leaving *Universe* unpublished (which he never attempted to publish again). By that time, he also had another manuscript of prose poems, *Persephone’s Telephone*, that he continued to work on (as far as I can tell) for another couple of years without ever seeking a publisher.

In the mid-70s, Benedikt was exceptionally prolific. As an author, he had published four books in eight years, while also editing two large anthologies (on Surrealism and the prose poem that I mentioned earlier), serving as poetry editor of *The Paris Review* (1975–78), and teaching at Boston University (1977–80). As busy as this time was for him professionally, it was difficult for him personally. All his life he had difficulty leaving the house, and change was difficult for him. His divorce in 1977 was, therefore, quite traumatic for him, as was his move (at the same time) to Boston after a lifetime in New York.

Also during this time, Benedikt had a folder he was calling “Puffton Poems (Poems from Amherst),” which appears to be where he was keeping poems he was working on, and it’s unclear if he ever intended it as a proper manuscript (though many of the poems in it were published in journals and anthologies at the time). It’s in this folder that the first version of “OF POETRY, MY FRIEND” appears, though he continued to go back and work on it, in 1997 and then again in 2007, but possibly other times as well. Some of the poems from this folder/manuscript were published in *Benedikt: A Profile* (1977).
Benedikt had *The Badminton at Great Barrington* largely drafted by 1977, and he had also begun writing what was intended to be a two-volume work titled *Family Blessings / Family Curses*, which consumed him for the next ten years, and was the beginning of his obsessive revising and inability to finish poems (and manuscripts), which kept him from ever seriously seeking book publication again. The first volume, subtitled “Departures & Arrivals”—which was to be a chronicle of his time in Boston, while dealing with his divorce, teaching at Boston University, and attempting to establish new relationships, as well as his life with, and the death of, his cat—was finally completed in 1988. Because of the length of these poems (he called them his “little epics”), I’ve had to excerpt from two of them, due to space limitations, while including the full text of three others, to present something of its general arc. The projected book contained fourteen poems, along with a lengthy prose preface. The poems included in this volume (“LIKE MANY OTHER NECESSARILY PERIPATETIC AMERICANS . . .”, “FOR GERALD FENICHEL . . .”, “TO PEGGY GABSON . . .”, “DON HALL & JANE KENYON . . .”, and “XMAS ON BAY STATE ROAD . . .”) are poems one, four, five, eleven, and fourteen.

There are mentions of a second volume in his foreword to *Family Blessings / Family Curses*, and at one point he seems to be indicating that this second volume is either written or drafted, but no such volume exists with that name, though, from indications of its contents, it appears that Benedikt’s next manuscript, *Transitions*, is (at least to some extent) a version of what the second volume was to have included (including the poem “OF FRIENDSHIP VS. CONFLICT OF INTEREST . . .” which he later included with his poems for *OF*:). *Transitions* seems to have been more abandoned than completed, sometime around the middle of the 1990s, when Benedikt moved away from writing about his personal history to writing the more subject-oriented poems of *OF:*, which he continued to draft and work on until the time of his death in 2007, including the incomplete “OF GARTER BELTS . . .” that he was working on mostly from 1988 to 1992, and which I’ve pieced together from various drafts to include here.

Finally, the poem “TIME,” which closes this book, was published in the June 1964 issue of *Poetry*, and never included in a book or a manuscript folder. Benedikt mentioned the poem in an interview included in *Benedikt: A Profile*, saying it was going to be included in an anthology (though I could find no verification if that happened). At that time he also said that, along with “TIME,” there were dozens of other poems from the ’60s that he intended to collect at
some point. I’ve decided to include this poem as an afterword to stand for these uncollected, and mostly lost, poems.

There were hints throughout the ’70s that Michael Benedikt might disappear from ‘the poetry scene.’ He admitted a great sympathy of shared subterranean endeavor with his character of Mole from Mole Notes, for instance, and in his 1968 note in The Young American Poets anthology, writes: “A condition in which all possibilities are open, offering the widest range of choice, including the choice of not choosing at all—not writing, I mean—strikes me as a real spiritual condition. . . . I want my own poetry, increasingly, to contain a maximum of spiritual information” (87). A decade later he echoed this again in an interview published in Benedikt: A Profile: “It’s essential to the writing experience that I have to not write; and not to worry about it, either. I’ve learned after all these years that my mind is moving on, doing what it can, even in the absence of my pencil” (25–26). And if not for the actions of Laura Boss, to save as many poems as she could find after his death, more than half of the poems in this volume would be lost forever.

As well, this book wouldn’t be possible if it weren’t for the help and encouragement of many people, including Don Share and Robert Archambeau, and without those who helped me get the poems typed out: Teresa Cole, Karlee Liberty, Emily Reeb, Samantha Wood, John Wallace, Riley Bean, and Michelle Barbieri. Miles and miles of thanks to my co-editor, Laura Boss, who has trusted me with these papers, and to the wonderful people at The University of Akron Press, including Tom Bacher, Mary Biddinger, and Amy Freels, for believing in this project and for taking it on.

Currently, the papers Boss sent are residing in an old, off-white with gray trim suitcase with slightly rusting clasps that someone down the block from me put out by the curb one morning. I like the fact that these poems, rescued from the trash, are now in this suitcase, also rescued from the trash. It’s been a great experience for me putting this book together. I hope you like it as much as I do.

References
OF MICHAEL

Laura Boss

I met Michael Benedikt at the New York Book Fair in 1984. He was wearing a yellow and blue striped rugby shirt that I discovered over time he would almost always wear. He stopped at my table where I had copies of my poetry magazine, Lips, and began to talk to me in a way that was serious and flirtatious at the same time. The next day my phone rang and it was Michael. He asked if I’d drive into Manhattan to his Upper West Side apartment. I said yes and drove in to see him and would drive him around for the next twenty-three years, even though he told me David Ignatow had taught him to drive and that he had a driver’s license. Michael said he was nervous about driving. After that first weekend, I often spent four days a week at Michael’s apartment. At night, once I was asleep, Michael would write. He chain smoked and usually had a drink next to him and would usually sing along to Bob Dylan records while writing. He had a smoky voice, not so different from Bob Dylan’s. Several years later, he also sang along to Bruce Springsteen cassettes. And often, around 4 a.m., he’d wake me and we’d dance together.

Michael often sat with a stub of a number 2 yellow pencil and revised poems—some that had already been published. He often worked at his computer on several manuscripts at the same time.

About a week after I met him, Michael said he wanted to visit his mother on Long Island who was up for the summer and staying at the brick beach bungalow where Michael had spent his childhood and teen summers. Michael was an only child, and his mother came up each summer from Florida to see him. When we got to Point Lookout, Michael told me he usually saw his mother once a year. Michael, though he loved his mother, also had a bit of a streak of
rebellion when it came to her and bristled at her breakfast schedule. I remember his mother saying to him, “If you lose this girl, I’ll never speak to you again.” In retrospect, I realize her remark could have been the catalyst to his breaking up with me, but that he must have cared for me a lot more than his desire to rebel against his mother’s directives.

Michael had that rare trait of being able to be emotionally intimate as well as physically intimate. Life with him was never boring on any level, and although I know it’s often said about interesting people, Michael had a fresh, original way of perceiving things. He was one of those individuals who was more interesting talking about the weather than someone else who might be talking about the big bang theory, although Michael could talk about that too. In fact, when he was in middle school, he wrote a science paper that had so impressed his teachers that they sent him to various other New York City schools to deliver it.

Michael had gotten into the prestigious Stuyvesant High School, but chose not to go, he told me, because he felt it was too long a trip from his Bronx apartment in the High Bridge section where he lived with his parents. It was a long trip by subway, but most students would have grabbed the chance to go to Stuyvesant no matter how long the subway trip. One story from his youth that resonated with me was about him playing baseball. When he was young, he would watch his team’s baseball game from his open apartment window. When it was his turn to bat, he would go outside, take his turn, and then go back in.

Michael didn’t want to travel much. He would, in the early years, shop in the neighborhood. His big trips were to his dentist downtown and sometimes to poetry readings if either he or I was reading. Sometimes, though rarely, we’d go to museums like the Museum of Modern Art, and several times Michael took me to a birthday dinner at Mamasita’s above the museum, which had a glamorous view of the city lights and minimalist decor. Michael knew it was my favorite city restaurant. But mostly we went to Hunan Balcony a block away from his apartment. And even more often, Michael had the food delivered. Michael would run around his apartment with a Dust Buster, vacuuming often, and Windexing his computer screen and French windows. Yet he was a major pack rat, with empty prescription bottles and boxes that VCRs or electric fans (etc.) had come in. He watched TV on a tiny screen on the table in his bedroom and watched a lot of PBS, but also watched ER and Friends sometimes. Michael and I only went to one movie in all our years together. It was a film about Bob Dylan and playing a block away.
Michael enjoyed music—from classical to rock. He often had WQXR on the radio. He had fond memories, he told me, of collaborating with his friend Michael Small, who wrote music for movies. Michael received an invitation to a reception at Lincoln Center for the director of a film that included one of the songs on which he and Michael Small had collaborated. I really wanted to go, but Michael didn’t want to. Michael went out less and less it seemed each year, and when he chose to go out he was very selective. We did end up going to some wonderful parties, museums, and poetry readings.

Michael, before I knew him, had been poetry editor of the Paris Review, so we went to several parties at George Plimpton’s townhouse (He later had a chance to return to editing, but he turned down the editorship of Poetry because he didn’t want to move to Chicago.) I remember the way Plimpton had so many people over (many, like me, guests of those invited), and yet he left all these fascinating and valuable collectors items out— I loved the concept that assumed everyone would be trustworthy. Another Paris Review party to which Michael took me was one that Jackie Kennedy attended. Other parties to which Michael would always go were my mother’s Thanksgiving bash at Mayfair Farms in New Jersey and some of my friends’ holiday festivities. On our first Christmas Eve, we went to his friend Betty Kray’s apartment and had dinner with Betty, her husband, Vladimir, and another friend of Betty’s. Betty, who later would go on to found Poets House along with Stanley Kunitz, had been responsible for Michael hosting the 92nd Street Y Poetry Readings years before. Michael was fond of and admired Betty and felt very sad when she developed cancer, but visiting her was too difficult for him. One interesting aspect of Michael is that once he was outside his apartment and we were at a party or reading, he was sociable and charming, and usually one of the last to want to leave.

Until Michael got sick, we often spent weeks in the summer at Point Lookout once his mother died. And Michael would spend hours in the garden planting impatiens and marigolds and generally taking care of things. Sometimes, if I had workshops or family issues in New Jersey, I would go to my apartment there and then return to drive Michael back to the city or stay with him near the ocean. Michael was an intense gardener and gave that garden the same focus and concentration he gave his poems. Michael also spent time one year at Maspeth (his father’s childhood home, left to Michael by his unmarried father’s sister who had lived there) and got into a painting and repair project that eventually caused him serious problems with his West 98th Street landlord. Apparently, there was
a tenant’s law that said you could not spend more than a certain amount of time not living in your Manhattan apartment. In my opinion, the grief and hundreds of letters Michael spent writing to protest this, including court visits we did when possible, took a tremendous toll on Michael and his physical and mental energy. Michael even put up a website about his apartment problems.

And although there are many things Michael did not want to do, there were things Michael did chose to do. One thing for which Michael did not hesitate to travel was a reading at the Library of Congress. Gwendolyn Brooks, who didn’t know him but knew his work, and as the equivalent of Poet Laureate, invited Michael to read. The huge honorarium was a definite incentive. Michael and I flew to Washington, D.C., and Brooks could not have been more welcoming.

Once his mother died, he had no further contact with his first cousins (who were his closest relatives) for sixteen years. Michael, in his last few years, virtually cut himself off from everyone. He rarely went down for his mail, and the letter carrier stopped delivering mail when there was no room left in the mailbox. Michael rarely answered the phone. I had always kept my New Jersey apartment on the Palisades above the Hudson River with its view of the New York skyline where I could see the outline of Michael’s apartment more often than I was seeing him, although I still accompanied him to doctor’s appointments, and he had my name listed as his emergency contact with his doctors. Michael was getting more and more reclusive, eventually even cutting off a visiting social worker who came for a while.

Even so, Michael continued to stay active on the Internet and on e-mail, and continued to work on his poems and website until just a few days before his death. At that time, Michael had a strong presence on the Internet. Michael was quick to figure out how to build a web page, and was proud of his technological skills and that Bob Holman had called him “The Poet Laureate of the Internet.”

Michael often spoke about those poets he cared about but had cut himself off from, such as Robert Bly, James Tate, Charles Simic, Louis Simpson, Richard Howard, Eric Jong (whose poem to him he had framed on the kitchen wall), and William Matthews.

On the last day of his life, Michael was feeling really weak. He was using oxygen with an ‘emergency’ unlit cigarette nearby that I knew he would not touch. I brought in the medicine that had been delivered by the pharmacy.

I begged him to take the pills, but, horrible as he was feeling and as desperately as he needed the medicine, Michael stared at the bottle for several minutes,
carefully reading everything on the label, even reading the possible side effects. After what seemed like an interminable amount of time, Michael opened the bottle and removed one pill and slowly put it in his mouth—taking it with a sip of the water I held out for him. His deliberate focus, even when so sick, was reminiscent of the way he was about everything. He didn’t rush, no matter the circumstances. Even at the end, he wanted me to be certain to take the garbage out to the hall so the superintendent would pick it up. The practical side of Michael was a strong component of everything he did—whether it was writing, editing, or gardening, painting a wall or working on his taxes for six months.

The one major thing I did for Michael after he died was to save his papers and archives that were slated for the dumpster. Finally, the lawyer sent me thirteen boxes of Michael’s archives: poems, photos, manuscripts, and more, which I now own.

And as I’m trying to capture this complex man I loved for decades, I can almost see Michael’s ghost hovering close, taking out his sharpened stub of a yellow pencil and saying, “Laura, you need to go over this again,” and he’s probably right, as usual.
SIX PASSAGES
INTRODUCING MICHAEL BENE DIKT

Robert Archambeau

In the introduction to his 1976 book *The Prose Poem: An International Anthology*, Michael Benedikt defines the prose poem as having six special qualities: an attentiveness to the unconscious; an impression of external reality as something mediated by our inner worlds; a feeling for the fluctuations of consciousness; a commitment to colloquial speech; a sense of humor; and a “hopeful skepticism” (49). Benedikt’s selections in the anthology give this definition a surprising degree of credence, but Benedikt’s list doesn’t just describe the style of the prose poem: it provides the best possible brief definition of the qualities of his own writing, in poetry and prose poetry alike.

1

*The image is a pure creation of the mind. It cannot be born from a comparison but from a juxtaposition of two more or less distant realities. The more the relationship between the two juxtaposed realities is both distant and true, the stronger the image will be. . . .*

—Pierre Reverdy, “The Image”

Benedikt came by his interest in the unconscious through a long, deep, and fruitful engagement with Surrealism. Encouraged by Robert Bly in 1963 to investigate Surrealism, Benedikt became devoted to French Surrealism in particular, and in the early sixties alternated between undertaking translations from the French and writing his own poems, as if deliberately seeking the guidance of the Surrealist tradition. Indeed, by the time Benedikt’s anthology *The Poetry of Surrealism* appeared in 1974, he had become one of the leading American
experts on Surrealist writing. So central had Surrealism become to his sense of what was most valuable in literature that, in his introduction to the anthology, he recruited his immediate influences (New York School poets like Frank O’Hara, John Ashbery, and Kenneth Koch) and his favorite poets from the English Romantic school (Wordsworth and Coleridge) to the Surrealist camp. Benedikt eventually became wary of being too closely identified with Surrealism, though, claiming in 1977 that Surrealism was no longer central to his work. But, as the poems in the present volume attest, from the earliest to the latest work, his poetry frequently alternates or fuses passages of dream reality with empirical reality, following the proto-Surrealist Pierre Reverdy’s description of the process by which strong images are born via the juxtaposition of distant realities.

2

*Modernity in the broadest sense, as it has asserted itself historically, is reflected in the irreconcilable opposition between sets of values corresponding to (1) the objectified, socially measurable time of capitalist civilization... and (2) the personal, subjective, imaginative durée, the private time created by the unfolding of the “self.”*

—Matei Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity*

A confirmed agoraphobe, Benedikt was always more than ordinarily attuned to the boundaries between the public world of objective events and the world of private experience. In an interview with Naomi Shihab, Benedikt spoke of how the problem of communication for the poet had to do with “bringing the internal world and the external world together,” linking or “playing off or perhaps testing the language of travel folders, the language of banking, of instruction manuals” against another world altogether, the world of “internal, ‘personal,’ or psychological things” (9). This, he goes on to say, is “not only an aesthetic imperative but a moral imperative” (11). We get a sense, from this comment, of just how seriously Benedikt took the fusing of dream and external realities. There are moments in his work, though, when the moral imperative to connect the inner and the outer seems almost too great for him to bear.

Consider *Mole Notes*, the most sustained and most powerfully imagined work in Benedikt’s oeuvre. This sequence of prose poems represents something approaching a total retreat from the external world. Here, the world out there is dangerous, and the tunneling Mole retreats in pessimism to a world of the
literal and psychological underground. One understands the urge to retreat, especially given the events of 1971, the year in which *Mole Notes* appeared: the Weather Underground bombing of the Capitol building; the conviction of both Charles Manson and of the American lieutenant found guilty in the Mai Lai massacre; the arrest of 12,000 antiwar protestors; the Pentagon Papers bringing to light corruption and cynicism at the highest levels; genocide in Bangladesh; the prison riots at Attica; and the continuing specter of nuclear annihilation looming over the entire planet. If, as Benedikt claimed in his interview with Shihab, *Mole Notes* and his next book, *Night Cries*, represented a “black pessimism” (26), it was pessimism well grounded in events.

It was also a pessimism that faded, and the poems of *The Badminton at Great Barrington; or Gustave Mahler & the Chattanooga Choo-Choo* find Benedikt once again fearlessly exploring the boundary between the subjective and the objective realms, this time giving us a protagonist who, unlike Mole, is excessively drawn to the excitements and allures of the external world.

3

*Their purpose of writing was to portray, not a thought, but a mind thinking, or, in Pascal’s words, la peinture de la pensée. They knew that an idea separated from the act of experiencing is not the idea that was experienced. The ardor of its conception in the mind is a necessary part of its truth….*

—Morris W. Croll, “The Baroque Style in Prose”

In an essay much-loved and quoted by poets as diverse as Elizabeth Bishop and Charles Bernstein, the critic Morris W. Croll described the tenor and technique of baroque prose, which eschewed classical reserve for “the energy and labor of minds seeking the truth, not without dust and heat” (208). Benedikt’s work frequently proceeds in the baroque manner, showing the probings of the conscious mind as well as the interweaving of the rational and the irrational. Not for Benedikt the paring down of an initial prolixity into the austere perfection of the *mot juste* in the manner of, say, the young Ezra Pound when, over the course of a year, he cut the thirty-six lines of an initial draft down to the spare couplet that is “In a Station of the Metro.” Instead, Benedikt shows the mind working to find the right expression. Consider “INVITATION TO PREVIOUSLY UNINVITED GUESTS” from *Mole Notes*, in which the smoke of a rare cigar melting into a room full of guests is described as being