

MICHAEL MARSH & THE EGYPTIAN MERCENARY ARMY

BY JOHN PAUL BARRETT



D. BREWER, MICHAEL MARSH AT LIESURE (1981)*

There are people we meet in this life whose personalities stand out so profoundly as to render them unforgettable long after their physical bodies are gone. We tell stories about them, invent myths...and sometimes, when we're alone, we recall parts of conversations we've had with them.

Michael Marsh was one of those persons; not necessarily because he was "larger than life," but perhaps rather more because he was simply larger than his own life, which ended May 22, 1991.

He was a writer and a poet. I met him, introduced by our mutual friend Michael McCusker, in the winter of 1971.

I still think of him as bearlike, and it's hard to picture someone like that as a child — no, not that: a large, longhaired and bearded, grumbling child in a greatcoat.

Marsh lived at the time in a vine covered house in Portland's Goose Hollow, with the artist Michael deWaide. He drank the standard poet's libation, red wine, which he called (more prophetically than any of us knew at the time) "Red Death," in great quantities, mostly at Don Petrie's Reuben's 5 Tavern on SW Jefferson in Portland. When Reuben's had to close for the night we'd all head for Moze's, the whiskey bar down the street.

Michael Marsh's dress and demeanor were such that he would not have looked out of place on a busy street in Minsk, Brussels or Paris in 1932. This is not to say he was in any way stereotypical; however, perhaps archetypal.

He usually spoke in simple declarative sentences, which were likely to contain complex, insightful concepts and observations, delivered more often than not floating in the linguistic equivalent of a beaker of acid, always served up cold from a brilliant, though somewhat nihilistic and irrefutably cynical, poet's mind.

But many of those who knew him — we who had seen the hooded brilliance and even kindness in his eyes — were not fooled by his imposing appearance and brusque, existential manner. We knew the soft, vulnerable side of the man. One lady even called him "Marshmellow" — a term which I've little doubt he abhorred, yet tolerated because of his affection for her (and

perhaps his understanding and forgiveness of the fact that she simply didn't know any better).

His life had as many complications and contradictions as mine. One New Year's Eve we sat in my Clay St. house drinking and smoking the last few hours of 1971 away, when Marsh grumbled, "I've made a New Year's Resolution. I've decided in 1972 I'm going to mellow out." Then he added, "...and I'm not going to take any shit from anybody."

Marsh's black lab once gave birth to a dozen pups. When they were old enough, he took them to a park one Sunday morning. He placed them in a large cardboard box, next to a bucket of water and a hand-lettered sign:

PUPPY DROWNING: NOON

Of course Michael would never have done it, but the story goes that all those cute little puppies found homes before high noon that day.

He surprised me with a gift in 1971. I think it was my birthday. It was a copy of Lawrence Sterne's spoof on over-writing, *The Life & Opinions of Tristram Shandy*, first published in 1759. I consider this book, though near worthless in terms of money, nonetheless to be one of my most valuable possessions; and someday, when I join Marsh in the great realm of the once-was, it will be counted among whatever material things I manage to leave on this plane of existence. I've always felt it was an extremely significant gift — the sort one writer might give to another. I experienced a similar sensation when I was 14 and an 18 year old female friend gave me a copy of *The Problems of Philosophy* by Bertrand Russell. It was a compliment.

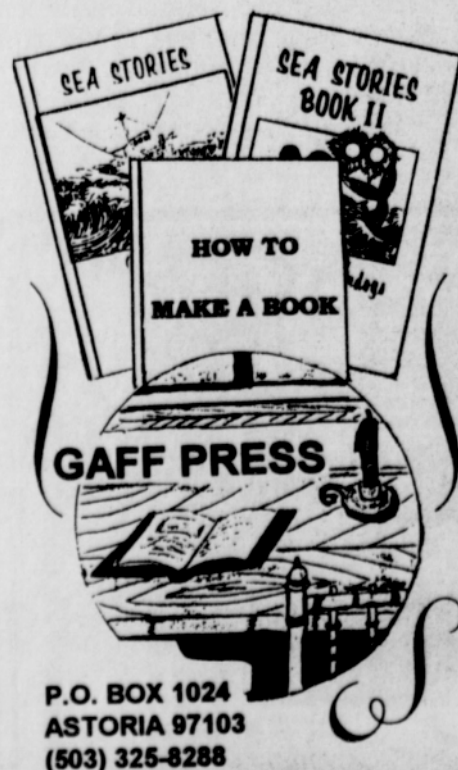
When I met him, Marsh had published some poems, and had himself produced several small books of his own work — long before I had even considered doing the same.

* From *The Gilmore Gazette & Bayfront Funnies*, published in Newport, Oregon, by Michael Marsh and his unindicted co-conspirator, artist/cartoonist, writer/satirist & *bon vi vant* ("A great dancer," admirers claim), Ed Cameron.

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I recall a story of his I read about a man who wrote porno novels and was able to crank them out at two or three per month, earning something like the equivalent of minimum wage at this work. The story was even more fascinating because I had also recently met just such a person in southern California, from where I had just dispersed, where one regularly meets people who do just about anything for money.

Marsh was enthralled by old western and detective paperbacks by authors such as Louis Lamour, Zane Gray, John D. McDonald. He showed me one, apparently from the '40s, but with an enigmatically appropriate name for the '60s and '70s: *The Hash-Knife Outfit*. He loved that title. He also searched these volumes for technique; much more for that, I think, than for the pleasure of reading a well-written tale. I'd done the same. What in the hell made Hemingway so damned enjoyable and easy to read? Don't most worthy writers spend their whole lives trying to perfect their craft, like master woodworkers or artists? Shouldn't they?

Marsh once gave me what he called his "business card." As I recall, it bore only his name and the title *THE INCENSE SALESMAN* — which he was not. I think Marsh liked the language, just the way some groups of words sounded: the hash-knife outfit...the incense salesman — 5-syllable phrases, like haiku lines.

I own two of his books: *Next To Water*, 1982, and *Translations From The Gibberish*, 1985, published by The Incense Salesman, Portland.

*Yes, in this tavern,
sitting here by the ocean.
Another glass of wine.*

—from *Next To Water*

The act of writing is, for me, mostly one of reduction and revision — processes which I hardly use at all in everyday speech. But, like the poet and writer Arthur Honeyman, whose sentences are sparse, boiled down to something very near poetry because of the extra effort required to enunciate through cerebral palsy, Marsh's everyday words were also concentrated; he also thought before he spoke. Thus both poets were similar of speech for different reasons. I understand Art's linguistic imperatives, but it's anyone's guess if Michael Marsh's extraordinary condition was genetic or environmental in origin.

He could be exceedingly funny, with a special off-handed humor born of innate wit and intelligence. The streets of Portland ran with humor in 1971. It was everywhere. People were smiling freely. Marsh's humor was cruel, dark, and deadly accurate. He was, as one of us put it, "Michael Marsh as Michael Marsh." Always on. A grumbling volcano.

When I first walked into Reuben's 5 there was laughter. The first thing that comes to mind about that day is the image of a man standing next to a table, declaring in a loud voice, "I'm real, Goddamnit!" "Who's that?" I asked someone. "Walt Curtis," they said, adding, "He's a poet." as though that explained everything — which it did.**

Michael Marsh's sentient presence is no more, but I have no doubt that if I could speak with him right now he would find some perverse enjoyment in the idea of his being dead — if not the fact of it. I imagine his reaction to this piece of writing would at first be bombastic and indignant — but I'm sure later he would forgive me, perhaps because I don't know any better. I'm absolutely certain that he would eventually garner some pleasure and satisfaction that his personality was strong enough to cause me to remember him so well, and to tell you a little about him. He would enjoy the fact of me, sitting here, writing about him.

Rabelais, Balzac, Ginsburg, Genet, Michael Marsh — a much better writer in my opinion than, say, Ray Carver, for instance — yet virtually unsung, unrecognized, an undiscovered country, rich, lush and dark.

A pen is mightier

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