

ROYAL COLLEGE OF SURGEONS/ POET IN THE CITY

Interview with **Mario Petrucci** (questions posed by Kate Wakeling)

- Can you tell me a bit about your experiences of working with the archive at the Royal College of Surgeons? e.g. did you find yourself working methodically through the collection's items or moving more sporadically?; what were you looking for when sifting through the archive - or was it more a matter of absorbing some of its contents then letting things settle etc.?; were there any particular surprises or challenges? ... and please do add in anything else that springs to mind when you reflect on this encounter.

I suppose one could go in 'cold' and thereby stumble across fragments of gem scattered amongst the seams and folds of a sizeable archive like this (I did this in one or two archive departments at the Imperial War Museum when I was resident there 1999 onwards). But, in this project, there was the matter of time... only a few days could be allocated to research and composition, so I had to be the (writerly) gnat riding the great shoulders of the archive's own (and largely established) sense of itself. So, I began with summaries and samples that the archivist and library provided me with. I also spent some time online, at home, looking at how the archive presented itself to the world. Such organisations nowadays, at some level, have to market themselves to the general public and to educational outlets vigorously ('outreach'): in all likelihood, they've already completed seriously concerted efforts to showcase their most interesting and provocative content. By all means, use that. Since one might have virtually no prior knowledge of the archive one is entering, a very simple resource of this kind can generate a great many strands of idea: at the Royal College of Surgeons, a fairly slim guidebook for the Hunterian Museum hit, for me, several bullseyes. Beyond and above all this material initiation into the archive content, the one indispensable resource is the archivist herself. Gaining a rapport with the archivist, and ensuring that they gain a rapid sense of who and what you are as a writer, is crucial. At the RCS, Louise King and I got off to a terrific start and it was undoubtedly her sensitivity, expertise and personal enthusiasms that were at the heart of the selection process there. Naturally, one or two of her suggestions weren't to my palate; but it was a relatively easy matter to have a taste of those (just in case) and move on. Enthusiasms can be infectious, but not always! Finally, I did also embark on my own explorations of the archive, following my instincts and the meanderings of chance associations and spontaneous questions, just so that serendipity could strike if it was fated to do so, and to ensure that not everything that emerged in the writing was too intimately related to what the archive already knew about itself. I have to say, previous experience is helpful here, especially in terms of 'knowing yourself' as a writer: it's possible, I believe, to gain - through experience and self-understanding - an uncanny knack of knowing where the 'pay dirt' will be, often on the vaguest hint. There's also room in this more discursive mode to ponder the very experience of being at the archive, including the more personal impacts and significances of its nature and content. The fact that something akin to an uneasy love affair burgeoned between me and the RCS (I wonder, can archive materials require one's attention?) resulted in the closing poem of my commission there.

- We'd be very keen to use extracts from one or two of your poems as 'case studies'... I wondered about 'Resurrection Man' and 'Pathological Haiku'. Can you tell me a little bit more about these two poems' creation - particularly how the poems (and their writing process) linked with the archive (e.g. it'd be great to hear more about how you came upon the collage technique for 'Resurrection Man')...

The cut-up methodology of 'Resurrection Man' is something I'm very familiar with, not only in theory (its origins in literary history) and practice (I've used it many times in my writing), but also through my creative writing teaching (i.e., when transferring the skill to mentees and students, or redeveloping and reinventing my own variants of the relevant techniques in order to develop 'process-oriented' teaching/writing exercises). Along with the Haiku idea for 'Pathological Haiku', this demonstrates how one's wider writing life can come to bear on specific commissions. But the inexperienced writer shouldn't worry about all that: you have to start somewhere, and commissions can be a great spur to self-teaching; they certainly have been, for me. By the way, using 'cut-up' approaches on someone like Naples (the subject of 'Resurrection Man') is a way of preserving the original energy and timbre of his voice whilst allowing you (and fate, to some extent) to determine what he says. It's an exercising of editorial (and perhaps aleatory) power, a way of speaking through someone else's consciousness, almost like a ventriloquist and his (live!) dummy engaged in a strange and oscillating dialogue... I love the uncanniness, and the outrageous (or very subtle) wit, that a cut-up approach can generate. It's almost as though there are contradictory meanings buried in the original, a 'subconscious' lurking in the source text, that can be brought to the surface by these methods.

- I love (and entirely agree with!) what your introduction says about the idea of poetry as ‘textual music’, where poems are often best loosed from the expectation that they are about linear progressions of sense and are instead entrusted to the ear (and other kinds of perception). Are there any approaches you’d suggest to encourage other writers to explore this approach (particularly in the context of writing that draws on an historical archive)?

This is really about the 'field' of composition one chooses and develops in oneself as a writer, rather than any methodological tool one might occasionally apply to a particular project (though I wouldn't rule that latter possibility out, altogether, as a 'temporary' mode of writing). For me, the entire poetic sensibility of the writer has to be directed at this issue, I suspect, and for some time, in order for the writer to find their place in it, to become confident and open with it. The deeper problem here is that the notion of musicality, of language itself, being at the forefront of what we might say about something - and as a potentially deeper vehicle for meaning than overt content alone - isn't really at the core of contemporary writing practice, or is only present in much of it in a somewhat simplistic manner, or in deference to that content ('content' being what most contemporary poetry concerns itself with). Among many things, the contemporary writer has to get acquainted with global verse across the ages, and particularly the modernist project on the Continent and in the States, to get a full sense of how the British can sometimes underuse and undervalue 'musicality' in poetry. I run a course for the Poetry School, and as a freelancer in schools and at literary festivals, that delves into these concerns, but it's tough to condense all of that into a few lines for this! If I had to say one thing, it would be this: to listen to words, to their conversations with one another, beyond their literal, logical content or prose-like meanings. I might also add that it's all about where your own consciousness and awareness is as a writer... what are you preoccupied with, and have you explored these less obvious realms? Have you jumped out of the groove to read the books and poems of people who have looked at the world - and, yes, the world's history, including its archived knowledge - inventively, intuitively, *through* language, in these other kinds of way?

- Lastly, is there anything else you’d suggest to enthusiastic but perhaps less confident/less experienced writers about the idea of using an archive as a springboard for poetry and other creative writing?

Trust your instincts. Don't try to 'perform' for the archive, for the commissioner, for the world of critics and readers. It'll turn your writing to wood. You might get sweet wood; but it'll be wood nonetheless. Be true to your own (sometimes lonely) "impulse of delight"; and, if there isn't any strong impulse forthcoming, just wait, keep listening, and let the material speak for itself. Accept the null result, the moments of boredom, insecurity, anxiety, the occasional overwhelmings. Take risks, let the darkness have its say. Work with it all, embrace it all, take it all in on its own terms, argue with it, grapple with it; then let it go, get yourself and any career aspirations out of the way. It's just you and the poem; you and the archive. Perhaps, think of 'you' *as* the poem, *as* the archive? As far as you can, allow yourself to be pure language, purely speaking itself. But be practical too. Plan and scheme for efficiency; meet the requirements and deadlines ahead of schedule; be exact, check everything you've done (yes, actually check it using a new lens of perception rather than quickly looking at it again with the same eyes you did the first time). But always do all the practical stuff in service to the mystery, the unchainable creature, you hope will strike. What are you yearning for in this commission? Ask yourself that question privately, honestly: are you really *yearning* for anything at all? Is it just a job? If you can, migrate to a place of desire and connection that feels true. Don't worry if none of this happens. It's another step on the long journey of being a writer. Learn from the failures. Beckett: Fail again; fail better. Most of all, be fully present, so you can be fully absent; be fully absent, so you can be most fully present.

Mario Petrucci *January 2015*

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