

‘Attributes of the Real’: an interview with MARIO PETRUCCI

[Stefan Malaimare] This volume* begins with the powerful “Night Flaw”, a rich poem pulsing with life, that shows a suburbia where everybody’s on-line; this seems to have an effect on the environment (as the perceivable surroundings). One poem, “in hay waist-deep was” from *i tulips*, speaks of a possible future. Is “Night Flaw” a poem about our society right now, and our relationship as an industrialised species with what we inhabit?

* *love sends itself flowers*, published online by Contemporary Literature Press (Bucharest, 2014)

[Mario Petrucci] In some ways, yes; but the electrical corona surrounding the lovers in ‘Night Flaw’ is also a *real* city storm. ‘Flaw’, in English, doesn’t mean only an imperfection; it can denote a brief windstorm, a burst of rough weather. So, there’s a violent pun buried in this title. You have that sparking energy of love, an immersion in profound togetherness; and yet, there is the Freudian shadow... for all the fabulous, meteorological excitement of the moment, something is not quite right in this bedroom. The poem unfolds that twinned, and twinning, energy of its title into a sharply contrasted set of associations – something like the over-bright bodies and severe shadows of lovers in the dark momentarily caught in a camera’s flashlight, or those same lovers stutteringly illuminated by a lightning flash. That (perhaps dangerous?) communion inherent between life/love and death/disgust in impassioned human experience is glimpsed here in terms of the unfiltered intensity of the universe in which that experience is contained (or liberated?). This expresses the extreme pungency of life at its root: an overwhelming rush of sensation that we learn (or are mostly conditioned) to filter out from a very young age or (as adults) when we become familiar with the source and flow of a particular passion which loses for us its essential ‘otherness’, thus coagulating, in the process, some vitally dark aspect of our existence into shadowy dregs. Remaining alert and awake to the self, even in our most nocturnally (or narcotically) possessed experiences, is thus a powerful gift to ourselves, and to the darkness in us that engenders those experiences (or at least contributes to them). Notice the eye imagery that the poem carries, the sense (in its poetic space) of the eye being referred to in close-up, almost forensically, the eye being itself seen in its most intimate physicality, a physical power suggested and evoked in its more general and pervasive incarnations through the poem’s ongoing reference to bodily images. William Blake: “the eye altering alters all”.

The selection ends with an enchanting ‘Shrapnel and Sheets’ poem that touches on themes like love and loss, both fabulously expressed by the lover: “I’d.../ Wear out your name/ with soft saying”. Why, though, this twist of order? I feel like there’s more to it, because after “Night Flaw” we encounter poems recalling your homeland and childhood figures. How much thought goes into making such a selection, and what do you want the reader to see first?

I order (or should I say, orchestrate) my books very carefully indeed. With some collections, I’ve spent years on it. I certainly see the ‘macroscopic’ message of a collection – that larger patterning imposed upon, or embraced by, the selection – as having an importance at least commensurable with the local messages through which that larger pattern is developed. This is akin to the overall demeanour, or thrust, of an art film, in which individual scenes (i.e., individual poems) carry a specific and detailed impact. This broader message can also amplify and modulate the signals of the poems which sit within it, a message those poems have themselves collectively generated; thus, there’s a productive dialogue or interaction established, at least potentially, between the building blocks and their wall, if you see what I mean. The poems in a good collection don’t merely add linearly and sequentially; together, they can intermesh and *accrue*. There’s a growth, one might say, that isn’t merely additive but multiplicative. That final poem in the selection here, for instance, comments on everything that precedes it: it offers an opening door rather than a closing one. Exactly what the ordering of this volume achieves, however, over and above its separate poems, is something I’d prefer the reader to decide (or, perhaps better still, to absorb unconsciously).

It's best not to make such things too explicit: if, as James Joyce ventured, a poet's best defence is to live in "silence, exile, and cunning", it may be that the more subtle purposes of a book (particularly in poetry) should follow suit. What should readers see first? I'm not entirely sure. I can only hope that what they'll witness in (or through) my poems (though not necessarily first!) is some universal aspect of themselves.

"Night Flaw" appeared in the 2008 edition of the 'Forward Book of Poetry' as one of the "Highly Commended Poems" of 2007 (some poems in 'Shrapnel and Sheets' appeared as well in 1996/7). Is "Night Flaw" the poem you'd show to a stranger if they wanted an example of your work?

I suppose poets do offer strangers their poems, don't they, via the usual route of books? Now I come to think of it, that's pretty strange, don't you think? Such intimacy sown at random; or perhaps not random at all. And in what sense are we actually strangers? But if this hypothetical 'stranger' sought a sample of some kind, I'd have to ask them what they wanted an example of. What were they hoping this 'example' would point to in terms of an imagined unity of intent or product? Samples can be useful, of course; but there's sometimes a kind of laziness in them. Do we really expect a single glass of water to stand for an entire river system, with all its tributaries and backwaters? Shouldn't the reader explore more extensively than that, and formulate their own sense of what's happening? Couldn't they take a swim rather than a sip? Now, given that I like the idea of an experimental poetry that just about anyone can read, "Night Flaw" would be as good a candidate as any to act as emissary in that regard; but I try not to have favourite children (or employees) and, in any case, as Wallace Stevens told us: "All poetry is experimental poetry".

You are strongly tied to your native Italy, and the family history. These are recurring themes in 'Flowers of Sulphur'. How was family life and what was the climate you grew up in? When did you leave Italy and how well did you adapt in the new country? "Sinistra" seems to portray the childhood of a boy growing in a traditional world with its distinct way of life, a boy preoccupied with the rest of world, and going away.

The poems 'about' Italy frequently explore this very issue of (mal)adaptation. In a way, I never left Italy; in many senses, I was never really there. I have an Italian/European passport, but what does that mean? Perhaps the poems you refer to were concerned with an attempt to 'pickle' my experiences of family, which involved a sense of duty towards posterity for a disappearing way of life: I suppose I wished to preserve something marrow-like that I'd found in the familial body, in the family history, against entropy. You see, I forget most things; my poems don't. I have to say, though, that my more recent work, in the *i tulips* mode, seems far less concerned with any formal preservation of that kind.

Your scientific background is one explanation for your surprising use of language, you also do not shy away from using odd words that I've heard you explain at public readings, and your poems abound in intelligent combinations and puns. Has Italian added to the mixture, or is English the only language feeding your poetry? You've also translated Catullus.

We are a sponge for everything – and far more omnivorous than we sometimes think – so, yes, Italian and Science must surely hover there somewhere, colourful buzzards among my linguistic neurons. As for Catullus, translating him felt like pressing the 'pause' button on the way down to death. What marvellous contrasts! Such tenderness, such buoyant lust; but also scathing wit and irrepressible insult:

"I am amazed at your amazement when, Rufus,
every and each woman on this planet refuses
to settle her pretty white thighs beneath yours.
You may tunnel beneath her virtue with gifts

of shot silk – quarry and knap there all evening
with some glassy jewel. To no avail. All this
because your horns are snagged in the chin-
hairs of that puggish rumour which assures
that day and night in each cave of your armpits
is tethered a goat.”

[Catullus; trans. Mario Petrucci]

I’m captivated by contrast in poetry, not just for its frisson *per se*, but because of all those subtly complex shades of grey that contrasts are able to generate and exemplify.

You’ve talked about Spatial Form before, the idea that looking at a poem’s outline can tell us something about it. It can of course tell you if the form is set in stone or if free verse was used, but it can suggest more. For me, “Breathing” and “One Word” [in *Heavy Water*] give the impression of dialogue, of two narrators. Is Spatial Form something you keep in mind often?

Spatial Form is more than a poem’s outline, treated as a mere shape conjured on the page. The overall outline of the poem is an important ingredient of Spatial Form, yes; but I’m also concerned with that more involved sense of the spatial ‘ghost’ we encounter in the poem at first sight – that detailed interplay between the ink-occupied terrain of the poem and the lapping waters of the unwritten page. We receive this as a kind of Gestalt, an impression which informs us before we begin to read any actual words. After all, can’t we usually tell poetry from prose simply by glancing at it? Moreover, although we often consider the rhythm of a poem or (in English) the natural iambic heartbeat behind speech, we less usually refer (in spite of being such a visually-oriented age) to that more erratic heartbeat of the eye as it scans the poem’s line-breaks and stanza breaks. Then there’s the typographic ‘texture’ of the poem: those subtleties of everything textual, from the patternings of repeated letters to the author’s choice of font. And much more. Spatial Form is indeed a vital element in the *i tulips* sequence, where almost all of the poems have a ‘concrete’ aspect to them: usually, an ebb and flow of (mostly) ‘bevelled tercets’, as I call them. So, I’m keenly alert to Spatial Form – but not self-conscious about it, I think. Having invented the term myself, I can hardly take it *too* seriously!

“Language inspires language”, you write in an article. When does it become literature?

Language is a continuum, as is literature. Each era, every individual reader, must determine the position and nature of that transition between the two, the point of ‘cut-off’ where language stops being literature in some essential way. It will be a blurred transition, of course; a fuzzy cut-off. It will depend on an enormous number of semi-objective and subjective variables. Some poets wish their work to be characterised by an obviously heightened sense of language; others prefer their efforts to actually explore that transitional membrane, using poetry to challenge or stimulate the demotic/popular characteristics and values of their age. I tend to vary my approach with each poem, or set of poems. As for whether or not a particular poem of mine settles within what is generally termed ‘literature’ (whatever that means), whether the language in it *becomes* literature (‘becomes’ operating in more than one sense)... well, maybe that can only happen when the reader decides.

Your studies must mean that you have a deeper understanding of the Chernobyl disaster and its consequences than the average person. You transmit a warning in your poems, and at the same time bring to life the stories of those around Pripyat at the time. Stories of undying love in the face of extreme decay, even of the beloved Other (“Every day I found a new man”). Their accounts were collected in the book ‘Voices from Chernobyl’, and one can’t help but feel, reading them, that the story is being told by the most humane of us all. Perhaps because, in such dire times, they do not lose what’s human. What were you feeling, reading those stories? And did the call of Ludmila Polyanskaya assure you that it was not only all right but also necessary to, as you have said, “take dictation” from those voices?

Do you mind if I quote myself, from another article I've written on the subject?

“Opening *Voices*, I didn't receive instant knowledge – but I was most certainly burned. A key testimony, for me, came from Ludmila Polyanskaya: “Where are our intellectuals? Writers? Philosophers?” she cried. “Why are they silent?” Initially, recalling Seamus Heaney's warning not to “rampage permissively in other people's sadnesses”, I was reluctant to pick up my own pen. Again, from *Voices*, Alexandr Renansky reassured me that art, like “the plasma of an infected person, can serve to inoculate”. One way or another, I began to realise, we were all infected by Chernobyl. It continues to be active, to activate. I resolved, as far as I could, to listen. In fact, composing the long poem *Heavy Water* often felt like taking dictation. Those voices, that prise open your heart even as they shatter it, were profoundly insistent.”

[from: 'Chains of Transformation', in: *Creativity in Language and Literature* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2011)]

Let me add, here, how it is as wonderful as it is harrowing that, in the midst of the kind of psychological agitation and horror that Chernobyl represents, all human emotions – including love – can be amplified rather than quelled. By whatever means, the poetry must attempt to capture that.

Talking about *i tulips* you have said that poetry is fishing rather than taxidermy. Is the writing process a tough experience? Will the constant collaboration between imagination and language (in an attempt to create poems that feel rather than poems that depict) ever prove too exhausting – considering that what is lost physically could be regained spiritually – for the poet?

My current valuation of composition in terms of fishing as opposed to taxidermy – catching something that's still alive rather than stuffing what is already dead – is (and I say this without, in the main, any judgemental implications towards other poets) very much my own. Everything is tough for an artist; and easy at the same time. On the one hand, as I have said myself: There's only so much of yourself you can give to your art – Everything. On the other hand, as a painter I know apparently commented, when asked about the immense speed at which she was able to generate her canvases: Yes, but it took me nearly sixty years to learn where to put the paint (I paraphrase, as I don't recall her exact words). The American poet Jack Spicer used to talk about poetic composition as a form of taking dictation. I tend to compose and complete very quickly now, as opposed to the endless drafting that often transpired in the evolutionary and finishing phases of my former compositional process (that said, I do note a certain overlap between my earlier approach and this more recent burgeoning of poems, i.e., the presence in my older files of a great many precursor poems to *i tulips*). These *i tulips* poems 'feel' and 'enact' rather than 'depict' or 'describe', because that is their primary consciousness, the linguistic awareness from which they emerge, often fully formed. It is the language thinking through itself. Perhaps, if the physicist is the atom's way of thinking about atoms, then the poet is the poem's way of thinking about (and feeling) language. My experience of *i tulips* is that the language generally achieves the poem effortlessly, as in the classroom experiment where a crystal grows from its 'seed' without any need for the teacher's (or observer's) intervention. All the individual crystals thus grown are different, uniquely so; and yet they follow a relatable set of distinctive patterns. That's how I see the *i tulips* sequence: blooms of similar appearance that are (in a variety of ways) deeply individual on closer inspection. The spiritual gains you refer to occur as a matter of course, organically, within that effortless growth; but – actually – nothing physical is sacrificed to this alternative process. Indeed, far from dawdling around in the metaphysical, my hope is that these poems – by avoiding that banal contentment with staying on the material surface for its own sake – begin to reflect and refract the most fundamental attributes of the real.

Mario Petrucci; 29 March 2012