

The Venetian Spider Press Interviews: Carlo Parcelli by Shaw Israel Izikson



Based in Maryland and Washington, D.C., poet Carlo Parcelli's book "Isaac Newton's Scalded, Abraham, Prophecies the End of the World, & Other Poems" was recently published by Venetian Spider Press. In this interview Parcelli talks about how science, philosophy and literature have influenced his writing and his mid-life shift in writing styles.

Why did you start writing poetry and who influenced you?

In 1966, to avoid the draft, I went to the University of Maryland and there I met Doctor Rudd Fleming who translated Greek drama with Ezra Pound for 10 years while Pound was incarcerated at St. Elizabeth's Hospital. Rudd was a Joyce scholar. In fact, he was chosen to help crack the Japanese code during World War II because of his 'decoding' of Finnegans Wake. He was a unique and learned genius. Imagine running into someone like Rudd at a state school when you're a semi-literate 18 year old. He'd recite Homer in the original Greek or great swatches of the Wake by heart, or draw Yeats' Vision Cycle on the chalk board from memory. I was in awe of him. And he took a fancy to me and my early work in his classes. It was Rudd who convinced me to write in Ezra Pound's Canto style and to put 'Homage to Pound' in the subtitle of my first book, "Three Antiphonies", a decision I now regret.

Rudd and I did a year's independent study of Pound together which culminated in a long poem, "Ontology of Accident", serving as my Master's Thesis. Rudd, Reed Whittemore and Hugh Kenner comprised my thesis committee. The thesis was through an independent University just forming at the time.

For 30 years I worked in the Canto style. I admired the ambition and pursuit of knowledge required by the Canto style even while loathing Pound's racism and anti-Semitism. Rudd called my work "energized culture", an obvious reference to Pound's "Guide to Kulchur".

Rudd knew Charles Olson who came to Washington to converse with Pound. Olson in a letter to Ed Dorn provides a reading list of books he considers essential. One of the books that he recommends is Alfred North Whitehead's "Process of Reality."

I started to knock off Olson's list and immediately became intrigued by Whitehead's study. It struck me as being connected to reading I was doing in Quantum Mechanics - Planck, Heisenberg, Bohr et al.

At Maryland, through a friend who was a mathematician, I started to hang around the physics graduate students who worked with the cyclotron there. Even though the Philosophy department was heavily skewed toward Logical Positivism, I sat in on classes in Hegel, Kant and the ancient Greeks.

Over a 35 year period, I wrote a dozen long poems in the style of the Cantos examining the sciences and philosophy combining what Pound called melopoeia, phanopoeia, and logopoeia. The poems are highly referential and difficult, often creating a dialectic of cited material that might seem obscure to the casual reader.

And no, nowhere, in these works will you find what I call the 'Personal I', though there are the occasional personae. I find the 'Personal I' too epistemologically xenophobic. Too Culturally and empirically limiting. The 'Personal I' has largely become a Western therapeutic device, imperialist by nature. Never before have we had access to so many poets from around the world. But also poetry has never been so homogeneous reflecting western neuroses rather than providing diversity as intended.

As far as academia is concerned, I don't have the bureaucratic temperament to be an academic any more than academics have the artistic temperament to be poets. The fact that they largely control the dominant means of poetic production simply means a lot of mediocrity will be foisted on an increasingly disinterested public. That's why I'm so grateful to Bill DeVault and Venetian Spider and Debbie Kilday and Colin Haskins at the National Beat Poetry Foundation for greatly expanding my ability to be heard.

Which brings me to a change in poetic style I adopted some ten years ago. I am a founding editor of FlashPoint Magazine (flashpointmag.com), a lit mag devoted to High Modernist poetics in the traditions of Pound, Eliot, Joyce, Tolson, Olson, Cesaire, Cardenal, Zukofsky, Bunting, Duncan, David Jones etc. And we try to add focus on previously side-lined modernists such as the filmmaker Mary Ellen Bute (*Passages from Finnegans Wake*) and artist/poets such as Jessica Dismorr and Morris Cox.

David Jones, a poet and engraver/artist we all admired, was a Welsh-British poet who served in World War I and saw nearly four years of trench action. We decided to do an issue of FlashPoint on Jones' poetry when Georgetown University received a large bequest of Jones' material.

A symposium was held and we published all of the presenters' papers in the magazine. As I was editing the papers, I was also re-reading David Jones. Jones has a collection called "The Sleeping Lord". They contain several poems largely in the voice of a Roman principalis. As I listened to a recording of Jones reading one of them, "The Fatigue", I thought to myself "I want to write in that voice."

That became the 88 monologues that comprise my book "The Gospel According to Simon Kananaios" (Country Valley Press, 2012). The work is High Modernist yet accessible and entertaining at the same time. Audiences respond favorably to them and my subsequent books,

"Newton's Scalded" - Venetian Spider Press, "Canis Ictus in Exsilium (Dog Bite in Exile)" - Country Valley Press, and the forthcoming "Homer's Margites" - Local Gems Press, all utilize this style.

I was once invited to a conference about David Jones at a local college to perform "The Wall." There were two academics who got up on stage and read sections of Jones from "The Sleeping Lord". When you read "The Sleeping Lord" it should have some dynamism, but they read it like professorial zombies.

When I got up and read, I read it as a disgruntled soldier who has been sent thousands of miles from home to fight some imperialist war. I read it from the point of outrage, terror and xenophobia, a clear candidate for PTSD. The next day everyone at the university was talking about it. The academics came out on the side of the academics. But all the kids, the jazz quartet, the janitors loved my version. That's why I'm so much locked into using this voice.

How important is it to cause a stir? Not just during poetry readings, but also with your poetry?

I don't stir things up. All the evil in the world, especially US foreign policy stirs ME up! I don't write with the intent of causing a stir.

The whole notion after the coup in Honduras, the coup in Ukraine, the decimation of Syria, Libya, Iraq...you could go back to the Gulf of Tonkin in the Vietnam War. After we've been through all of these lies! All of these lies and people can't pick up on what's going on in Venezuela? Oh my god. I have my work cut out for me! I've got to write another 10,000 fucking monologues! Most Americans are politically chauvinist idiots.

What to you is "usual poetry"? What's mundane to you?

Our bourgeois culture is naturally mundane. So our movies are corporate fantasies that are designed to allow us an escape from the mundane. But poetry too often relies on the very thing, the mundane, that more 'successful' quasi-artistic forms of entertainment avoid. Poetry needs to be more ambitious with an eye toward generations to come if we survive as a species. AND some of it should be entertaining while supplying 'energized culture' to the reader/listener who desires it.

Talk about your new book: "Isaac Newton's Scalded, Abraham, Prophecies the End of the World, & Other Poems"

The Newton poems harken back to my first 30 years of work. What I did was I just read everything in the field. In philosophy, I began with Giordano Bruno, Immanuel Kant, Georg Hegel, Descartes, The Frankfurt School, Theodor Adorno, and Max Horkheimer.



Horkheimer's "Eclipse of Reason" and the book he co-authored with Adorno, "Dialectic of Enlightenment". Hans Blumenberg. Heisenberg, Bohr, Godel, von Neumann. I also read heavily into phenomenology. Heidegger and Edmund Husserl's "Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology". And hundreds more from poetry to epistemology to quantum.

The 'Scalder' in the title, Abraham, is a visionary who sees how Enlightenment science will eventually be the catalyst for the end of the world. He's a yeoman on Newton's estate at Woolsthorpe and expresses a very low opinion of Newton as well his own apocalyptic fears of the Enlightenment project.

What would you like readers to get out of this book?

I would like them to be entertained. As for the elegies in the book, before I wrote them I began to read about ancient Roman and Greek poets who were very popular in their time, but their work was lost or abandoned.

There's this whole notion of creating something that will endure. Hegel talks about this. This is an intention that is utterly essential when one is laboring over any work of art. It strengthens the work in the now, which one hopes helps posit it in the future.

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