The Scorpion's Dark Dance

an interview with Alfredo de Palchi

ALFREDO DE PALCHI WAS BORN IN VERONA, ITALY, IN 1926 and raised by his anarchistic grandfather. During the Second World War, de Palchi was imprisoned first by the Fascists in 1943 and later by the Communists; he was released in 1951 after suffering years of torture. Undoubtedly, this experience influenced what can only be described as pure metaphysical poetry. Some of his books include ***The Scorpion's Dark Dance***, ***Anonymous Constellation***, and ***Addictive Aversions***, all published by Xenos Books. A collected works, ***Paradigma-Tutte le poesie 1947-2005***, was published in Italy in 2006. For nearly fifty years de Palchi has been involved with the literary magazine ***Chelsea***; he lives and writes in New York City and is the publisher of Chelsea Editions, which publishes modern and contemporary Italian poets.

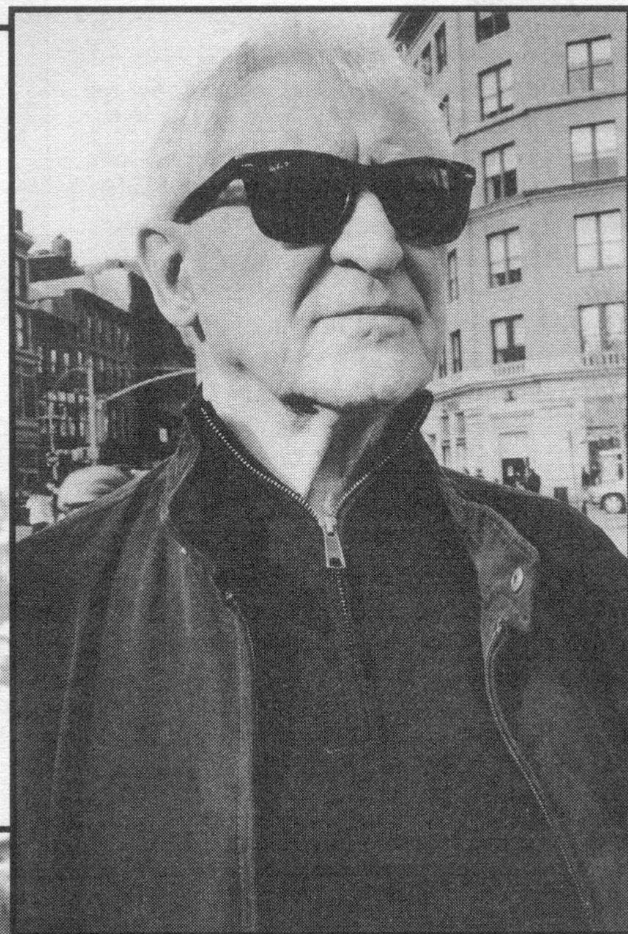

photo by Gerard Malanga

by Louis E. Bourgeois

LOUIS E. BOURGEOIS: Let's start by talking about the importance that Villon and Rimbaud have had in your life and poetry.

ALFREDO DE PALCHI: I discovered them in the late 1940s during my political imprisonment. My first encounter with François Villon came when, not knowing that he even existed, I found a book entitled *Il merlo sulla forca* in the prison's library. The title's meaning literally translated is "The blackbird on the scaffold," but the real meaning is that a criminal, perhaps a murderer, is about to be hanged. I was barely eighteen years old, and I was enthralled. It made me so curious that I wanted to meet the main character of the book under different circumstances. The narration of this particularly romanticized life encouraged my curiosity to discover that the "merlo/blackbird" had really lived in the 15th century, and his name was François Villon.

Being held behind bars myself, I wanted to know and feel what an ancient poet felt toward his contemporaries. Then another political prisoner who was also a poet, Ennio Contini, gave me some information about Villon, and helped me to find an Italian translation of *Le grand testament*. There I found a young man (he was in his early thirties when I saw him on the scaffold) speaking with sarcasm and fun directly to me, even as he was meting out punishment and reward to his friends and enemies. At the same time I became interested in learning French. I don't recall precisely, but I must have found a book or two on grammar; every day I learned a new word, which I pronounced with a heavy accent at the end. I really thought I was learning the spoken language until years later when, much to my surprise, my French in France left people with their mouths open. They didn't understand one word and I didn't understand them either—it became so funny that we laughed together until I finally learned to pronounce French with a discreet accent. In Paris, in 1951, I chased Villon around the bookstores of the Latin Quarter, and I found him waiting for me in three versions of *Le grand testament* that I still possess today. Just as an aside: all my six collections of poetry have a different epitaph from Villon.

I heard of Arthur Rimbaud in the same period as Villon, but read him only in 1951 in Paris. I had been told that he behaved wildly, as an arrogant and demanding teenager of genius discovered by Paul Verlaine, who through the years of Arthur's absence from the literary world never forgot and never abandoned him. Maybe Arthur's writings would have arisen from his gangrenous body anyway, but ultimately the world owes everything to Verlaine. So, when I interviewed him by reading his work in *La Galerie de la Pléiade*, I decided that Arthur was my poet. He had stopped writing at the age that I had started, wild, arrogant, and demanding.

These two dissimilar young men, Villon as the illuminating realistic ferociously sarcastic poet ending the medieval age by initiating modern literature, and Rimbaud as the ultimate youth who revolutionized from his death the world of poetry with his still unsurpassable

lyricism, both taught me to be the poet I am without copying their writings or following their steps steeped in physical violence. But I love them as they were, and I love them in spite of the "crimes" they might have committed. By showing me to act mentally, spiritually, and physically by my own standards, I accomplished what a large percentage of writers without conviction claim to have reached: to live without cowardice or selling out.

LEB: Tell us more about your background as a poet. At what age did you begin to write poetry?

AdP: In a small provincial town of my Venetian region, the country with its fields, trees and brooks were the unwritten poetry; there was also a primer by Angelo Silvio Novaro with some refreshing simple poetry. Then there was my grandfather, an anarchist who every night in bed invented for my ears his own poetry of fabled real life. But I grew up until sixteen years old far way from the poetry of unknown authors that in my mind I believed physically beautiful. Never did I imagine them ugly and going to the lavatory like other mortals. Eventually I got my first shock, but together with my grandfather Carlo, François (I know he was beautiful) and Arthur (see his photos) for me are the only gorgeous poets, dead or alive. Soon after the ugly shock, another kind of ugliness attacked me physically: one interrogation after another, each followed by torture that left my body wounded for over two years. I was barely eighteen, a peaceful follower of my peaceful grandfather. The ugliness hated the beautiful anarchist that I was and I am.

Pushed by my own interior design, I scratched my first verses on the wall of a cell in 1946. I don't know what I scratched on the wall; my suspicion is that they were the beginnings of the collection *La buia danza di scorpione* (*The Scorpion's Dark Dance*) that I composed soon after my twentieth birthday in December, 1946. It seems I had found my intimate voice immediately, still ignorant of the works of Villon and Rimbaud, and of my Italian contemporaries. From 1947 to 1951 I unknowingly wrote poetry in various forms or styles that startled the poet mentioned above, friend and maestro, who suggested that I write in my own way. Because of my ignorance I was unaware of what I was really creating. It took me years to know why. Eventually I discovered that the subject of the poems dictated to me the form and style of my poetry. Good or bad, I can't comment.

LEB: Is there any more you can tell us about your experience as a political prisoner during the 1940s and '50s?

AdP: The American public knows that there was a Second World War and that America won it. Unfortunately it does not know that from September 1943 to the end of April 1945, Italy was at war both with America and Germany, while a civil war was raging at the same time. I have tried to explain these tragic events many times, and the American understanding has been nil. The way I see it, my youth was trapped between the wars of grown-up murderers from each side. So, to avoid misconceptions, I decided sometime ago to forego another historical explanation. Maybe, even without bloody details, the few lines above clearly explain it.

LEB: It has been said that you helped introduce such important Italian poets as Quasimodo, Ungaretti, and Montale to American readers.

AdP: It is an exaggeration and very wrong. Salvatore Quasimodo and Giuseppe Ungaretti were already introduced to the few American readers with a book each, both translated by Allen Mandelbaum, when in the late '50s I helped Sonia Raiziss translate some of Montale's poems for possible publication in magazines. In fact, a few appeared in *Poetry*, 1958, and in the same year texts by Montale and other poets appeared in an issue of *Atlantic Monthly* dedicated to Italian culture. Other small literary journals followed. But it is true that Sonia, with my assistance, translated a few poems of Quasimodo and Ungaretti, and that we as pioneers helped to lay a base for others to translate poets first seen in her translations.

LEB: Has the Italian cinema—I'm thinking specifically of Antonioni and De Sica for some reason—ever had an influence on your literary works?

AdP: Impossible. You must realize that when De Sica and other neorealist filmmakers were directing their films, I was looking out through the bars of a small window of a fortress on an island in the gulf of Naples. While I was composing *The Scorpion's Dark Dance*, for some improbable reasons I was also composing poetry that had a kinetic style. I have been told by a couple of admiring critics that nobody in 1948 wrote the way I was writing, and that in the early '60s, fifteen years later, the so called avant-garde started publishing work somewhat in my style. One long kinetic poem, in

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thirteen sections, appeared in the first issue of a now historic magazine *Questo e Altro*. The news is that the avant-garde pretended not to pay attention to it. So, despite how much I love Antonioni, De Sica, and others, I'm not indebted to them.

LEB: Please describe how the Italian landscape shaped your early poems.

AdP: I see you did your homework for this question: surely you are thinking of *The Scorpion's Dark Dance*. In it there is the landscape of my beginnings and of my poetry. Although I had a poverty-stricken childhood, I was not miserable because I had the love of my mother, my relatives, and my gentle, tender, courageous grandfather, who substituted for the missing father. So, although there are hints of natural violence, my landscape is almost idyllic, with the river Adige as an undercurrent that shaped and tutored me into my poetry.

LEB: Sixty years later, does the war still weigh heavy on your mind, and does it still inform your writing?

AdP: If that were the case I would have stopped writing fifty-five years ago. One cannot go on and on over the same subject, no matter how tragic the situation was. In fact, there is a hint of the war only in the early poems, but connected with imprisonment. Frankly, I would consider any one, including myself, to be a very limited poet if one book after the other contained the same material and in the same style. Those who read my books will find that each is different, like it or not. I have read decent poets who bore me to exhaustion with their fifteen books of total sameness. One should know when to give up. It is better to stop writing at the end of only one original work than to trivialize it with following books different in titles only.

LEB: Is prose writing a strange or difficult process for you?

AdP: I suspect you have read some of my work and you had a feeling that I am not a prose writer, or you thought I have some difficulty. I have it, essentially, because I consider myself a born poet. Fifty years ago I tried to write short stories, and I stopped when I saw that the stories were too autobiographical and rushed to their end. It is a discipline not for me. However, at the same time I was jotting down very short writings I entitled *Memorie scheletriche* (*Skeletal Memoirs*) that in eighty pages, single-spaced, have reached just to my eighteenth year. I have other unpolished pages about my subsequent imprisonment and the years in Paris. The intention of the ensemble is to convey real life in essential flashes until the age of thirty without a note of sentimentalism. I hope to have the chance to arrive at the end of them by working on this project soon after the final exit of *Chelsea*, the literary magazine that I have been connected with for the past fifty years.

LEB: How would you like your poetry to be interpreted? How would you like your legacy to be remembered?

AdP: Your first question is relatively easy to answer: any author likes the idea that his or her work will be correctly interpreted by critics and readers. But often enough the contrary of that wish is the more likely. I didn't follow the standard canons (I didn't know them, and if I did I would have dismissed them anyway) so my poetry is still considered stringent and harsh, except by a few who think it is of high quality, meaningful, and original. Each book is a unity, and in this unity a critic/reader can read more than a single interpretation: scientific, sexual, social, or spiritual. Now François Villon and Arthur Rimbaud are considered by a large number of critics and readers as great masters because they have been told so, but even today, if they were unknown, I assure you they would be crucified. They are originally different, and so am I, originally different. About the legacy, I am not thinking about it, and if one day I wish to think about it, I still have forty years to go. Anyway, it is futile for anybody to think about his or her own legacy. Mediocrities that include politicians and presidents of the United States fret about legacy. But only time will decide.

LEB: Do you consider yourself to be an experimental or avant-garde poet?

AdP: Neither. I never assumed this or that aspect. I respect, if necessary, this or that movement, but I have nothing to say about this or that regarding myself. I am a group of one. Do you believe Villon and Rimbaud were really and fully conscious of their literary revolutions?

LEB: How does your reputation differ in Europe than from the States?

AdP: I cannot brag. As I am writing this I have been informed that my *Paradigma: tutte le poesie 1947–2005* (*Paradigm: Collected Poems 1947–2005*) sold forty copies since its publication and distribution in the spring of 2006. This gives you a measure of my controversial reputation. Am I disappointed, enraged? No. I know my own worth. I do not participate in the mulling and back-biting that goes on in the provincial poetry world of Italy. Remember, I never asked a favor from any one, nor for help either. I never proposed my work to large or small publishers. What happened, happened, and my work was requested by editors, by chance. I am a "chance" that will be discovered during the next forty years. In the States, the situation is even more dismal; it is a rare foreign poet who becomes known here. Somewhere I wrote: *Io e la mia arte non abbiamo fretta* (*My art and I are not in a hurry*).

LEB: Do you ever have a desire to return to your homeland?

AdP: Yes, I would like to move to Paris. It is not my homeland, but there I feel at home. I visit Paris almost every year, before crossing the Alps and landing in either Verona or Venice. I travel there for a month every year just to be in touch mostly with my own language and with a few friends I want to be with. After a month, I need to leave the narrow confinements of any Italian city. Unfortunately I can't depart. Although my wife and my teenage daughter love to be in Paris and in Italy, they have no desire to live permanently in Europe.

LEB: Any last remarks you would like to make to young aspiring literary artists?

AdP: My fifty years experience with *Chelsea* placed me in contact with many obnoxious "pip squeaks." The more artistically weak they were, the more they complained. Democratically, to these untalented writers, I suggest that they should give up writing. I know they know what they do is useless even to themselves, but they have an American dream. To those with talent deserving attention, I suggest to work hard without rushing to print what they may regret later. We don't know what makes great poets, but we know that a serious one works with discipline and without the fear of editing the superfluous drastically. What is the superfluous? Look coldly into the fifteen collections of sameness of a celebrated poet, then into yours, and you see it.

LEB: What would you like your last words to the world to be?

AdP: Here is my old serious project: I don't want to be displayed, I refuse all "celestial" background music. I want my classical chosen pieces, I want a happy cocktail party, and at the moment of exiting into the incinerator, my registered voice choked with laughter will say: *"Nice to have met you but now goodbye."*

I am deadly serious about that. ◆