LUIGI FONTANELLA

Alfredo de Palchi: Between Essay and Hi(s)tory

(…) dette mi fuor di mia vita futura
parole gravi, avvegna ch'io mi senta
ben tetragono ai colpi di ventura…
DANTE, *Paradiso XVII, 22-24*

Younger than springtime, am I?
a ottanta
la mia giovinezza che ha il florido
colore del cadavere ripristinato

[at eighty
my youth has the flourishing
color of the recovering corpse]

ALFREDO DE PALCHI

It is a source of great joy for me, in my capacity as editor and scholar of poetry, to introduce this collection of poems by Alfredo de Palchi, who is certainly one of our major contemporary Italian poets.

This introduction intends to bear witness and, at the same time, to discuss some of De Palchi's work, which I have had occasion to review a number of times (permit me to direct the reader to a chapter devoted entirely to De Palchi in the book *La parola transfuga: Scrittori italiani in America* (Firenze, Cadmo, 2003), and in English translation, *Migrating Words: Italian Writers in the United States* (New York: Bordighera Press, 2012).

I must also say that writing about this close friend and poet with whom I have worked so much over the past decades to promote Italian poetry in America—he as publisher of the journal *Chelsea* (Chelsea Editions) and I as publisher of the journal *Gradiva* (Gradiva Publications)—presents me with some difficulty. Indeed, it is not easy to separate my friend Alfredo de Palchi from De Palchi the publisher and storyteller; a delightful interlocutor in endless discussions about poetry, he is also my partner in crime in many "adventures," at times even tragicomical, regarding its less than magnificent and progressive fate (a story about this later). After having already dedicated more than a few critical pages to this poet-friend, the difficulty I face is consistent not only with having to separate poet from friend, but also the man from the artist, the uninhibited partner of "playful stories" from the serious professional, from the uncompromising, provocative non-conformist who was and who still is Alfredo de Palchi.

After more than twenty years of silence following the publication of his collection *Sessioni con l'analista* [*Sessions with My Analyst*] (Introduction and translation by I.L Salomon, New York, October House, 1970), Alfredo De Palchi published a collection of poems he had written during the 1940s—poems that had been miraculously saved by his mother Inez—titled *The Scorpion's Dark Dance / La buia danza di scorpione* (Riverside, California, Xenos Books, 1993). In the introduction, Sonia Raiziss

happily notes: “With Alfredo de Palchi the poet is the man. What he has known, what he has lived, is what he writes. He’s one of the most instinctive, shall I say ‘natural,’ poets I know. His feelings become his words, his words originate from what life has dealt him; they swirl, leap, and sing from the fire within—born of sharp stings and shooting spontaneously through his flesh.”

These words remain forever engraved like a coat of arms, provided that Raiziss’ reference to the “naturalness” of De Palchi’s poetry also presupposes the intense work of revision and polishing. These words also unequivocally define the profound *Stimmung* of this poet both during the late 1940s when he wrote his angry poems (in prison) and in the years that followed.

In remarking about the twenty years between the two aforementioned books, I used the word *silence*. Let me clarify that this period of silence refers only to the publication of poems in volume form. In fact, Alfredo was extremely active during this period, producing many critical translations and creative works.

I must also note two important early texts—the first under the title *Gentile animale braccato* [*Gentle Animal Wounded*], with an introduction by Luciano Erba in *Almanacco dello Specchio* (no. 11 Milan, Mondadori, 1983), and then another group of texts titled *Mutazioni* [*Mutations*] published in the pamphlet *Premio Città of San Vito al Tagliamento* (Udine, Campanotto, 1988, with commentary by Andrea Zanzotto).

In addition, it is essential to remember the enormous work De Palchi has done, along with Sonia Raiziss, in both translation and publication. Much of this work was developed and published in *Chelsea*, which was, in the international arena, undoubtedly one of the most durable and exciting literary periodicals in America (first number 1958, last edition 2007), culminating in contributions to a number of anthologies whose publishers include Bantam Books (*The World's Love Poetry*, 1960), Modern Library (*Anthology of Medieval Lyrics*, 1962) New Directions (*Selected Poems of Eugenio Montale*, 1965), and the more extensive work *Modern European Poetry* (New York, Bantam Books, 1966).

Modern European Poetry, an extremely impressive text edited by the poet, translator, critic, and biographer of Borges, Willis Barnstone, is divided into various sections. The section dedicated to Italian poets was edited by De Palchi and Sonia Raiziss, co-editor of *Chelsea* (along with Ursule Molinaro, from 1960 to 1994, the year of Sonia's death). With the departure of Richard Foster, who co-edited *Chelsea* from 1994 until 2002, De Palchi became the sole editor. In 2007, after fifty years of life, this glorious journal ceased to be. Meanwhile, the publishing company Chelsea Editions, founded in 2002 and directed by De Palchi, is still active and open to Italian and European poetry. (Poets published in these volumes include Sbarbaro, Betocchi, Gatto, la Spaziani, De Angelis, Jaccottet, Jourdan, and many others.)

Last but not least, I must add an undertaking—marginal only in appearance, certainly not in fact—on which De Palchian criticism has always been silent, that is, with the exception of a nod by Vittorio Sereni in his memorable critical "Nota" published in *Questo e altro* (no.1, 1962). This work, together with that of Glauco Cambon (in *La Fiera Letteraria*, February 5, 1961), can be considered the critical "baptism" of Alfred's poetry, constituting, at the same time, the first exegetical foundation of his poetry.

I am referring in particular to his interesting work as a cultural 'ambassador' for radio as well his work as a correspondent for several journals: *La Fiera Letteraria*, *Antipiugiù*, *Il Sestante Letterario*, and some other minor journals, which the author himself can no longer remember.

Regarding his work as a radio "reporter" from New York—covering theater, music, art, and poetry—I refer to his reportage (in fact, "Reportage" is the title of one of the most vibrant sections of the 1967 Mondadori collection *Sessioni con l'analista* [*Sessions with My Analyst*]) for Switzerland's Radio Monteceneri, with the poet Giorgio Orelli acting as his interlocutor. Incidentally, the history of this station is interesting. It was founded in 1925 as the national station of Mount Ceneri, where the antenna was placed, but its official transmissions began in 1933. The radio station had the task of

addressing the public in the valleys of the Canton Ticino and Vallate dei Cantoni dei Grigioni in the third national language—Italian, of course. From the very beginning, the station played a key role in bringing together the Italian-speaking minority of the Helvetic Confederation. Radioceneri continued its activities until 2008, when it ceased broadcasting entirely.

It is a shame that there is no documentation of De Palchi's work in this area. It would be invaluable for our understanding of his cultural preferences and personal tastes during an important phase of his initial experience as an expatriate in America. I recall, in passing, that Alfredo moved to the United States with his wife, Sonia Raiziss, in 1956 after having spent his youth in Italy, rather tragically shuttled from one prison to another, the victim of slander, abuses, and blatant injustices. This period was followed by approximately five years living in Paris (1951 – 1956) where he met Sonia Raiziss and where he experienced many ups and downs that proved to be a great challenge, especially in terms of his cultural growth. In short, his odyssey, at least until he reached the threshold of thirty years of age, was full of remarkable twists and adventures, which I have already described elsewhere.

As to his work as collaborator and/or correspondent for several Italian magazines, it is worthwhile mentioning the circumstances that brought about his collaboration with *La Fiera Letteraria*, undoubtedly one of the most important literary journals of our century. We are at the end of 1950. Alfredo has been locked up for several years in the penitentiary of Procida, the victim of slanderous accusations. He is charged in the December 1944 murder of a partisan named Aurelio Veronese, aka "*Il biondino*" ["The Blonde"]; in fact, a certain Carella, who was a Fascist and head of the railway militia, had committed the murder. Although De Palchi had nothing to do with this crime, he was accused and tried. As I have said elsewhere (I refer to my book *La parola transfuga*, pp. 178-183 or *Migrating Words*, pp. 162-163), in the winter of 1944, provoked by other more experienced affiliates and by an insipient (illusory) enthusiasm, he temporarily enlisted in the Black Brigades, at that time under the leadership of Valerio Valleri, one of the most combative leaders of the Italian Social Republic. It was

an act of political ingenuousness for which seventeen-year-old De Palchi paid dearly, and which, a posteriori, in the light of historical reality, he certainly shared with more than just a few other stray youths of the time. I am thinking of another Italian expatriate writer in America, Giose Rimanelli—virtually De Palchi's contemporary—and his emblematic novel *Tiro al piccione* [*Shooting Pigeons*] (1953).

His case, which had the air of a witch-hunt, was hastily tried in Verona in June 1945. And although De Palchi was completely innocent of the trumped-up charges, he was condemned to a life sentence in prison (the public prosecutor had pleaded for the death penalty!). The trial was a farce, but it cost him a number of years in prison, first in Venice, then at Regina Coeli in Rome, then at Poggio Reale in Naples, then in the penitentiary in Procida (1946-1950), and finally in Civitavecchia (1950-1951).

It was an extremely difficult experience that had to have been devastating for our poet and would forever leave its mark on his poetry; indeed, this experience lives in his very first poems. (The excruciating and cutting verses, along with *La buia danza di scorpione* and the narrative poem *Un ricordo del 1945*, had profoundly affected Bartolo Cattafi, who immediately presented them to Sereni, paving the way for the subsequent publication of *Sessioni con l'analista*). The experience also reappears along with many names and surnames in the recent collection *Le déluge*, placed at the end of his last book, the extremely intense *Foemina Tellus* (2010), which I will discuss later.

It was an agonizing experience that would leave a profound mark on him, but it also provided him with the stoic energy to resist, react, read, study, reflect, grow, and, last but not least, write his poetry as a real *homme revoltè*. I believe that anyone preparing to tackle a serious reading of De Palchi's poems cannot disregard this terrible biographical experience; as I have said, the poetry that emerged from that period, indeed, all of De Palchi's poetry since that time, is soaked in it. Assessing this cruel experience at a distance of more than half a century, it even seems like a mockery,

particularly when we remember that the Nazi-Fascist Junio Valerio Borghese, one of the undisputed leaders of the republican revolt, was tried for war crimes—also in Verona between 1946 and 1947 (the trial ended on February 17, 1947—and managed to escape with only four years in Procida, *in the same penitentiary where De Palchi was held*. Of course, the accusations against De Palchi were eventually dropped when he was found to be completely innocent of all charges against him. I am referring to the final review of the trial, which occurred in 1955 at the Court of Assizes of Venice wherein De Palchi, represented by lawyers De Marsico e Arturo Sorgato, was cleared of all charges and fully acquitted.

But back to our poet and his first contact with *La Fiera Letteraria*, a magazine that he became aware of during his years in prison, thanks to his friendship with another poet, Ennio Contini, who was also imprisoned in Procida for political reasons. Contini became Alfredo's "teacher friend," his very first guide; he recognized his poetic potential and, in a sense, challenged him to move seriously in the direction of literature. When I asked Alfredo specifically about the actual beginning of his poetic apprenticeship, Alfredo confided that—apart from Contini's encouragement—he had made a sort of bet with himself that he could challenge the state of terrible isolation in which he found himself with creative writing, that he could eventually emulate his teacher, and perhaps, as always happens in these cases, surpass him!

However, even at a distance of so many years, our poet has not forgotten to officially recognize Contini's edifying role in his education. In the Commentary accompanying his 1967 Mondadori edition, he writes: "I thank Ennio Contini for having put a pen in my hand and for having *compelled me to write*."

Contini was born in Oristano (Cagliari) in 1914. His family and he moved to Liguria when he was still young, but he had already been active in various publications and collaborations with major national journals. Between the 1940s and 1960s, he was a well-regarded writer. After his imprisonment in Procida, he continued to write, collaborating as a film critic for *Il Messaggero*, and he published

various collections of poetry. Among these volumes include *Schegge d'anima* [Splinters of the Soul] (Carpena, 1962), with a foreword by Adriano Grande. Grande was one of a group of noted authors who animated the Ligurian artistic literary "workshop" during this period of the 1940s; these notables also included Giovanni Descalzo, Renzo Laurano (pseudonym of Luigi Acquasciati, a poet who enjoyed Sereni's esteem and who I think should be republished), and Valerio Volpini.

This cultural activity also involved literary luminaries such as Montale, Descalso, and Laurano, whose writings appeared, along with those of Contini himself, in the journal *Il Gallo*. This little-researched period of twentieth-century Italian poetry, in which my friend-maestro De Palchi would have his own role and enjoy a certain reputation, is both interesting and worth exploring. Bearing testimony to his involvement, among others things, we can peruse the rich epistolary correspondence, which I saw some years ago at the home of Contini's daughter Anna—letters to and from Giorgio Caproni, Enrico Falqui, Bartolo Pento, Libero De Libero, Angelo Barile, Adriano Grande, Bonaventura Tecchi, Renzo Laurano, and even Ezra Pound, recalling only a few of the names. One of Contini's books, *L'alleluia* (1952), translated by Mary de Rachewiltz, also included the first decade of Pound's *Cantos*.

At this point in this story-essay, I must not fail to relate the emotional reunion that took place between De Palchi and Contini in May 2006, more than half a century since their previous encounter: Summer 1953; place: the terrace of the Pincio in Rome. There is a group photo that shows this penultimate meeting, which was published in *Gradiva* (No. 30, Fall 2006, p. 73): in the photo, Alfredo and Sonia Raiziss are sitting in the front, while Ennio Contini and his wife are standing behind them leaning on the balustrade of the terrace.

Alfredo and I were in Genoa for the Annual Congress of Italian Studies of the AAIS (American Association of Italian Studies) between May 25 and May 27, 2006. We were there to read and comment on our poetry in a session I had organized; I had also invited Vico Faggi, a poet and

playwright whom I respect and with whom I had been in correspondence for a while (*Gradiva* had published his poetry, and this reading was a good opportunity to get to know him personally).

Alfredo had long expressed the desire—should we find ourselves in Genoa—to take a trip to Ferrania, the inland district of Savona, where his old "teacher friend" lived. We called to make an appointment. His daughter Anna answered and told us that her father was seriously ill due to a stroke he had suffered a few weeks earlier. Anna knew about the longtime fervent friendship between her father and Alfredo, and told us that the following day (Saturday, May 27) Contini would at her home in Genoa to dine with her! So we made an appointment for that Saturday afternoon.

We arrived at the home of Contini-Rapallo on a somber and gray afternoon under a leaden sky with its annoying sharp drizzle. My friend Alfredo was visibly moved, despite his usual ability to control his feelings. Anna brought us into the living room that doubled as a dining room. There, sitting down at the table in a dim light that enveloped the entire space, I saw an elderly gentleman, motionless, his head reclining on his right shoulder. It was Ennio Contini, who hadn't moved so much as a millimeter upon our arrival. Alfredo went to him, murmuring some phrases to him. He sat down next to him, staring at him, absorbed… in who knows what thought.

After the initial social niceties with his daughter, the conversation languished because of her obvious embarrassment. There was little to say, for her father's situation was all too evident to all of us. She told us that the stroke had left her father unable to speak; he also had difficulty eating and swallowing liquids, for he seemed to have lost control of his neck muscles. I tried to liven up the discussion by asking Anna if she could show me some books he had published. Meanwhile, Alfredo had taken the hand of his "teacher friend" and held it for the entire time; every now and then he would murmur a few words in his ear. (I will say then that Contini had recognized him and that he "answered" as best he could, tactilely, with the slight movement of the fingers.) An eerie silence dominated the room; outside, the rain had become dense and impetuous, never ceasing its battering against the

window shutters.

Anna returned to the living room with some books and a huge container: “One of my father’s various collections,” she said, “in which he has saved his correspondence with Italian poets and intellectuals.”

I leafed through the books, reading a few verses here and there, and I took a look at a number of letters. I wondered how it was possible that no one had given more attention to the poetry of this man who once had rich contacts with authors such as Caproni, Tecchi, De Libero, Falqui, and even Ezra Pound. Is this the fate of so many Italian poets? Was it possible that in the very region where Contini had lived his entire life, no one had had anything to do with this poet who more or less brought honor to their land? Or, more likely, was Contini was still paying, after more than half a century, for a youthful political ingenuousness that would place him in the ranks of militant fascists? (Not unlike Giose Rimanelli and De Palchi, still hated by some ambitious journalists or misguided “cultural workers” of the Veronese upcountry.) I tried to make a few comments to Anna about the various materials she had shown me; Alfredo proposed publishing English translations of his friend’s poems in some American magazine.

Finally we said goodbye; Contini had not moved from his chair. For the entire visit, he had remained with his arms resting on the table, his face drooping onto his right shoulder.

Six months after our visit, Ennio Contini died (November 14, 2006) at the respectable age of 92 years, and today his poetry has definitely fallen into oblivion.

* * *

Please excuse the long but necessary parentheses about Contini.

I now return to De Palchi and *La Fiera Letteraria*, a magazine that he read for the first time

while he was prison at Procida, thanks to Contini who had given it to him. He was about 22 years old, and his cellmate had already read his first poems and was a staunch admirer. During this time, Alfredo read many books by Dante (enamored with his *Rime Petrose*), Jacopone, and Cavalcanti. He read the poets of nineteenth and twentieth century modernity—Leopardi, Carducci, Pascoli, D'Annunzio, Campana, Govoni, Sbarbaro, Ungaretti, Montale, the beloved Cardarelli, and Quasimodo, the symbolist and post-symbolist poets (Baudelaire, Verlaine, Rimbaud, Nerval), and then the futurists and surrealists, etc. And he never forgot the outlaw father of all French poetry, François Villon, repeatedly beaten in prison, who De Palchi would always consider his ideal "blood relative"; indeed, the verses of Villon and De Palchi share the sentiments of sarcasm, melancholy, insolence, resentment, and mockery.

As an assiduous reader of *Fiera*, De Palchi was able to stay up-to-date on the state of Italian literature during the late forties and early fifties. At this juncture in his life, De Palchi managed to bring about a crucial event that would lead to a meeting between him and Alfredo Vincenzo Cardarelli, editor of the magazine (co-editor, Diego Fabbri). During the last years of the forties, he read and reread Cardarelli with growing admiration, in the volume *Poesie*, edited by Giansiro Ferrata (Mondadori, 1942). Among other things, it must be remembered that this is the book that launched the series of texts titled *Lo Specchio*. At last, in August 1950, this "reverence," coupled with desperation, pushed the young Alfredo boldly to write a personal letter to Cardarelli, addressed generically to the Editor of *Fiera Letteraria*.

In his touchingly naive letter (Alfredo was 23 years old), the future author of *Sessioni con l'analista* related his own existential distress and, at the same time, expressed his personal psychological kinship with the poet-Cardarelli in the context of the contemporary lyrical output of those years, with particular reference to Ungaretti and Quasimodo. The letter, incorporated in an editorial by Diego Fabbri, who commented about its content and implications, had the honor of being published on the first page of *Fiera* (# 34, Sunday, September 3, 1950). A great satisfaction for a

budding poet, furthermore, one who was detained in a prison, isolated from any literary contact except for his fellow poet imprisoned with him.

It is, in fact, a document of primary importance because it somehow formalizes De Palchi's entrance into the Italian literary scene.

Thanks to the tenacious cooperation Annalisa Macchia, whom I thank publically, I was able to obtain this issue of *Fiera Letteraria*, held at the Marucelliana Library of Florence. I am also grateful to the Library's director, Dr. Monica Maria Angeli.

Here, it is also worth including Fabbri's writings, significantly titled—on the same wavelength of the our poet's letter—*Consolazioni della poesia* [Consolations of Poetry], referring contextually back to De Palchi's letter.

The editorial was inspired by a variously (and vainly) heated discussion that occupied the pages of the *Fiera* for a time—*Is there a precise definition of poetry? What is its function*? Fabbri considered the debate pointless and, to some degree, even harmful to true poetry:

> (…). Our literary environment, which is usually too careless and lazy to engage in critical debates, suddenly wakes up and becomes an earnestly susceptible and bitterly polemic.
> (...). For years I have been most sensitive to what has always been, and should once again be, the profound function of poetry; yet I agree that we should point out the substantial emptiness, the lack of human texture beyond prettiness of form; I also agree that we should denounce its growing unpopularity, and ultimately, its progressive futility (...). We begin by admitting with increasing frequency that poetry no longer performs, by several decades, that selfless comforting task of gathering the many around the bard, to be transformed, to come away from it almost levitating within its religious and poetic consolation. Therefore, if every shade of humanity is so thoroughly expelled from it, if every human echo is scattered from it, can we still call it poetry?

Starting from this premise, Fabbri appeals to the ancient but ever-present sense of what poetry can provoke, that is, a reawakening in the hearts of people. "Certainly," Fabbri analyzes, "this criterion,

although not really critical, would at least put the issue on a completely different foundation from that of the current aesthetics: a solid foundation unconcerned with the effect poetry produces on the reader."

Fabbri arrives at these conclusions after having read the letter De Palchi wrote to *Fiera*, which he cites in its entirety immediately following his own reflections. I am retrieving this document both to enrich—having already lost in the mists of time the original—our poet's doxographic background and because it is, in fact, Alfredo's first officially public writing, albeit written in the form of a letter, using also the classic second-person-plural "you," still in use in Italy between the forties and fifties, and still in use in certain areas of Campania and of our South.

Dear Poet Vincenzo Cardarelli,
Permit me this audacity; permit me, one who is nothing more than a boy sentenced by the Corte d'Assise Straordinaria to thirty years in prison for collaborating with the German invader (and I was eighteen the day of the sentence!); permit me to express my unconditional esteem and to say that I am a friend (a distant friend, a lonely friend of pain); after having noticed [that while] all the schools of Italian poetry aim for the popular and farcical rhetoric of suffering, in you [there is] so acute a sincerity and a suffering so profound, yet humble and well spoken, even with a half smile. Permit me to give myself permission—as I am nothing but a layman—to consider you the purest and most honest poet of our time. This will make you smile, perhaps bitterly. But I do not want you to think of me as a young flatterer. Do not mortify me. I write to you, I do not know why; or perhaps I am writing because my eyes fill with tears when I read "Adolescente": *"Surely someone will pluck your flower, / mouth of spring water..." or it could be, "The memories, these shadows too long / of our body brief / this train of death / that we leave living." But above all, your solitude (and of another, I remember that of Dino Campana) where it reflects my young image as orphan and prisoner. I do not know nor can I tell you anything different; and so I write this letter to tell you that you are a great poet and to say* corraggio! [Courage!] *In this way perhaps your hand will tap me on the shoulder in friendship and say to me* take courage*!*
Most affectionately, Alfredo De Palchi.

And Diego Fabbri comments:

> (…) That poetry should tap the reader on his shoulder to tell him to *take courage* might seem, and let's hope it is, an anti-aesthetic and rhetorical criterion for many rhetoricians and aesthetes of our poetry. For me it is the first requirement that all poetry must obey; indeed, it is the outgrowth and very task of poetry; it is its *raison d'etre*. (...). We would need, then, to find out as people (and only later as critics) to what extent poetry is a gift of consolation to those who seek consolation. Since we have arrived at such a point of bewilderment and uselessness, it is wise, by now, to be willing to risk our own literature—saving it in its present form would surely mean its irredeemable loss; instead, losing it might mean that we can begin to find it again and, in so doing, we can save it.

Fabbri's editorial, together with De Palchi's vibrant letter, aroused some curiosity in Italian literary circles, as demonstrated by other papers/letters from intellectuals and simple readers published in *Fiera* following September 3, 1950.

The following year, in early spring of 1951, De Palchi was released from prison for once and for all (his long incarceration in Procida had been followed by a brief stay in the prison of Civitavecchia), and he had the good fortune to meet his beloved Cardarelli personally. The meeting took place during a brief stop in Rome during his journey to Vercelli, where he would be issued a passport to reach his mother in Paris. In fact, Inez had moved to the French capital 1946; the following year, she married Carlo Giop, who would adopt the young Alfredo.

During the brief stop in Rome, he met the friend of a woman with whom he had corresponded—Nicla Palmisano, a cultured and lonely personality who dedicated herself to a kind of utopian, solipsistic purity. Palmisano had greatly appreciated the letter De Palchi had written to *La Fiera Letteraria*, and they had (and would continue to have) an intense personal and literary correspondence, which is unfortunately lost. When Alfredo was released from prison, the two decided to meet in person. However, at the last minute, Palmisano's friend arrived at the appointment in place of Nicla; as I mentioned, Palmisano lived a very secluded, monastic, and reclusive life at home and was very jealous of her privacy. Alfredo (or "Elfrid," as Nicla, a devotee of Ibsen and Strindberg, used to

address him in letters) still remembers with affection that intense and extravagant correspondence with this woman he had never met, who preached and demanded from her Elfrid absolute purity; and, at the same time, he feel profound sorrow for its interruption during the 1960s.

Nicla Palmisano's friend, whose name Alfred cannot remember, invited our budding poet to a reception at an elegant Roman home. Here, De Palchi, as well as various intellectuals and artists (including musicians Nino Rota and Luigi Nono), made the acquaintance of Cardarelli. Alfredo still vividly remembers the arrival of his beloved poet in that luxurious Roman house, all wrapped up in a coat (the mythical Cardarellian coat!), which he wore throughout the entire party. At some point, our young poet overcame his shyness and introduced himself to the author whose work he had read and admired so much, mentioning, among other things, that he was the author of that "famous" letter sent to him seven months earlier at *La Fiera Letteraria*.

Thus began a fine friendship that strengthened over the years until Cardarelli's death (1959) with letters and postcards De Palchi sent to him from Paris, then Barcelona, then New York City. It would be interesting to find out if the Cardarelli's archives include traces of De Palchi's correspondence. (So far, published texts of Cardarelli's correspondence, edited by Bruno Blasi, contain only a tiny portion of letters sent by the poet, but not those of his correspondents.)

In any case, this meeting in Rome led to De Palchi's collaboration with *La Fiera Letteraria*, first via Cardarelli, and then via Elio Filippo Accrocca e Pietro Cimatti. Accrocca wrote a note of introduction to a group of young Italian poets whose first work would be published in the journal in question (these were texts, later rejected, that Alfredo had sent to *Fiera* from Paris between 1953-1955). The second, Pietro Cimatti, as managing editor of *Fiera* from 1959 to 1964, would publish Alfredo's small contributions sent from New York.

Overall, this was quite an interesting chapter in Alfredo's life that should be more thoroughly researched, verifying exactly which of Alfredo's work was published in this magazine. All this would

require would be a systematic examination of back issues from the early fifties to early sixties—a task that I plan to undertake in the future.

The fact is that during the Fifties and early Sixties, *Fiera* published De Palchi's poems, reviews (there is one "written with all the passion and anger of his youth" about his former prison mate Ennio Contini in the 1962 publication of *Schegge d'anima* [Splinters of the Soul]), and short articles about various cultural, artistic, theatrical, and literary events in New York City. These were sporadic writings, mostly short and occasional, very "minor" according to the author; however, I repeat, they would be worth recovering.

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I would now like to relate a few rather piquant episodes related to my friendship with Alfredo, for they that speak volumes about his irreverent, ironic, and unconventional character. I choose, among many, some variously amusing, mostly occurring during the same period (2006-2008).

We are on the train taking us from Genoa to Pisa, where we have to change trains for Florence. It is the morning of May 28, 2006. Also traveling with us is Giose Rimanelli, another Italian writer who, like Alfredo, has lived in the United States for decades and with whom he shared more than a few tragic experiences in the period immediately following World War II in Italy (a young, unsophisticated militancy in the republican ranks, the witch-hunt climate of those years, the violent ostracism of the Italian left, etc., all of which I have already related elsewhere). The three of us had just come from a language conference of Italian literature and culture, which had been held in Genoa, co-organized by the two major associations of Italian Studies in America: the AATI (American Association Teachers of Italian) and the AAIS (American Association of Italian Studies). The guest of honor at the conference (May 25-27, 2006) had been Edoardo Sanguineti, who gave a great final speech (in this regard I would

refer the reader to my recent account of Sanguineti in *Gradiva*, no. 39-40, 2011). In Genoa, Alfredo and I gave a poetry reading together with Vico Faggi and some other poets.

The day before the opening of the Genoa conference, we had been at the Libreria Bicros in Turin where we presented De Palchi's book *Paradigma* along with Franco Pappalardo La Rosa and Roberto Bertoldo, editor of *Hebenon*, organizer of the presentation as well as energetic advocate of De Palchi since I had introduced our poet to him eight years before. In front of us, an overflowing crowd ... eleven people in all (!), including a sparkling Sandro Montalto, the poets Emma Pretti e Valeria Rossella.

The presentation was interesting, but the feedback from the audience was weak; in fact, the audience was dumb as a fish before, during, and after the event. A rock tossed into a pond? The evening was saved thanks to a very enjoyable dinner and a talkative Alfredo who was in great form. Once back at the hotel (Hotel Astoria), we commented that the evening had been a complete disaster; but to Alfredo, it was neither hot nor cold. And in the hotel lobby, we livened things up with some salacious jokes, stimulated by a few shots of Pernod. And perhaps the Pernod provoked my telling my friends about a similar situation concerning the Spatula brothers (Adriano and Mauritius), who went into a bar one evening during a trip to France (I cannot remember where, but I think it was in Provence). They had a huge craving for *pastis*—a typical anise-flavored alcoholic beverage, very similar to Pernod). But the rigid bartender said, "*Dommage, nous n'avons pas de pastis*." Adriano, dismayed, muttered *che pastis*!, provoking immediate and lively laughter from his brother, who jumped at Adrian's pun. The two brothers continued to chuckle and were soon possessed by uncontrollable giggling in front of the increasingly dumbfounded bartender. Even we had to laugh, and our laughter became absurd, brash, and surreal—all the more surreal because we here we were, at midnight, in the shadows of a completely deserted hotel lobby, with the night clerk sitting behind his desk casting glances of contempt in our direction.

Let's get back to the train trip. Alfredo has always maintained—partly as a joke and partly as a firm conviction—that he will live to be 120 years old. Some time ago, during a conversation with his friend Felice Nalin, who is about 30 years younger than he, Felice wanting to make a little joke or perhaps as a *captatio benevolentiae*, that is, fishing for a compliment, said to Alfredo, "I'll die before you do." Alfredo's reply left his friend speechless: "I hope so! I'm not ready."

That morning on the train, I happened upon a full-page article in the *Corriere della Sera* that described the latest advanced scientific research, according to which, or thanks to which, people in the near future will be able to lengthen their lives by at least twenty years, reaching well over one hundred years of age. I showed the story to Alfredo, who rejoiced and repeated aloud, as if talking to himself, "I told you so; I told you so!"

Two days later (May 30, 2006), Alfredo was our guest in Florence. In the afternoon, we anticipated introducing *Paradigma* at Caffé Giubbe Rosse with presenters Massimo Mori and Mariella Bettarini. We spent the morning philosophizing and chitchatting about this and that. As lunch hour approached, there were some books on the table as well as some of Alfredo's paperwork and the flyer from the book presentation in the Libreria Bicros in Turin. Alfredo began to draw a picture of a small flask on the flyer. (I must remind readers that the Italian word for "flask" is *fiasco*.) It would be nice if I could reproduce the sketch of this *fiasco* (and I could do so if I were more adept with scanners and computers). Alfredo captioned the sketch, which he had drawn alongside the announcement for our presentation at Libreria Bicros, with the concise and bitter words: THE FIASCO IS PERFECT (however, the word *fiasco* is not written; rather, it is substituted by the drawing of the *fiasco*). I said to Alfredo: "Can you imagine if we were to introduce you today at Giubbe Rosse with an actual *fiasco* next to your book?" Alfredo immediately took my joking suggestion seriously. Said and done. I went down the street (we're in Via Guelpha) and around the corner to Signora Samanta's shop *VINO E OLIO*. There I bought a little bottle of Chianti and brought it back to Alfredo. We imagined the whole

scene as we ate our meal and drained this excellent little *fiasco* of wine. (What was the use of taking a full bottle to Giubbe Rosse?)

And everything went exactly like that—a Florentine audience only slightly larger than the one in Turin's Bicros, this empty metaphysical *fiasco* on the table next to Alfredo, who remained entirely impassive for the duration of the presentation of *Paradigma*; on the right of our poet, a somewhat perplexed Mariella Bettarini; on the left, Massimo Mori, who didn't lose his aplomb even for a moment. Obviously, audience members were puzzled by this naked *fiasco* dominating the table in front of them.

While listening to the presentation, I couldn't resist thinking about another situation bordering on the surreal that Alfredo had recounted one evening. I cannot fail to tell it here. It happened about forty years ago at the end of 1968. Glauco Cambon (Alfredo's first reviewer; see his commentary in *La Fiera Letteraria*, February 5, 1961) had invited Alfredo to Storrs, where he worked at the University of Connecticut, to present *Sessioni con l'analista / Sessions with My Analyst* to students and teachers of Italian at this famous university. Cambon was a full-fledged admirer of De Palchi's poetry and, in January of that year, he had written a nice review in *Books Abroad* (January 1968). Alfredo accepted the invitation; and in the spring of that year, he arrived with a friend, a toy poodle, and a bottle of wine in Storrs, which was teeming with student protests. Cambon introduced our poet to his students, and in discussing *Sessions with My Analyst*, he framed the book in the Italian cultural climate of those years. Alfredo listened quietly, occasionally pouring a drink. The little dog was running here and there among the desks and the students.

After the speech, Cambon gave the floor to Alfredo. Our poet, who has always been reticent and quarrelsome, was suddenly overtaken by a verbal block—a kind of pathological fear of speaking in public. In short, he could not manage to utter a word, as if he were paralyzed. Long minutes passed in complete silence, broken only by the little dog scurrying around the classroom. Cambon looked questioningly at his friend, who was in a complete daze. A few more interminable moments of silence

followed, and then Alfredo suddenly blurted out: “Enough! I have talked too much. Ask me some questions, and I will answer you!” Some took this as a sort of genuine challenge; some smiled; someone asked him a question about futurism. Another asked him about his American experience and how it had affected his poetry. The ice was broken. At last, Alfredo melted and slowly began to respond to the questions in his usual sharp and witty manner. Regarding Alfredo’s American experience, Cambon asked him to read some sample text. I include here among his New York poems one written in real time and very much appreciated by Cambon.

Hanno sparato al negro
in un negozio di erbivendoli,
frizzante la testa di crespo
poggia in una cassetta
di pomodori

Ha rubato soldi dalla cassa –
borbotta la calca ed io intuisco
nella tasca di chiunque
l’indice lesto sul grilletto.

Scrollo le spalle che mi fanno male
pensando al cozzo nelle sue e alla faccia
di scarnati pomodori
- È sangue? -
- Eh, è un nigger -
osserva un bagonghi.

They shot a black man
in a fruit store,
his tingling crinkled head
lands in a crate
of tomatoes

.- He grabbed some money from the till -
the crowd grumbles and I sense
some guy's trigger-happy
finger in his pocket.

I shrug my shoulders, hurting at the thought
of the crash in his own and at the sight of his face
tinged with busted tomatoes

....- Is that blood? -
....- Eh, he's just a nigger –
says a dwarf clown.

(translation by Sonia Raiziss)

The text is truly as exemplary as it is pointed; in a few short incisive words, De Palchi underscores, like a dry razor, as very few poets have been able to do (his dryness of voice brings to mind William Carlos Williams), a scathing slice of New York life with all the racist implications of hypocritical respectability. That final epithet, *bagonghi* [dwarf clown] is perfection both linguistically (the nickname was used for the first time by the dwarf Andrea Bernabè in the Zavatta Circus, the oldest Italian circus) and figuratively. It was 1959. Alfredo was living on the West Side, just steps from Broadway, where, between 105th and 106th Streets, there was (and perhaps still is) a grocery store where he helped the person at the scene described in this poem.

A few weeks later, De Palchi received a call from Cornell University asking him to repeat that presentation/performance that had been such a surprising success at Storrs, despite the fact (or perhaps because of the fact) that the original performance was typical of him. Our poet politely declined.

I was thinking about all this while Mariella Bettarini intelligently explained Alfredo's book to the audience in the Giubbe Rosse (meanwhile, the epic *fiasco* continued its solitary domination over the table).

Another episode that underscores Alfredo's irreverent and adventurous spirit occurred that very evening. We had dined at Tozzo di Pane. Irene Marchegiani was with us and so was our dear friend Fabio Badialetti. The evening was still very warm after we finished dinner and took a short walk down Via Guelfa. Fabio had his scooter parked nearby. Alfredo made a beeline for the scooter and murmured, "Beautiful bike; I've never been on a motor scooter." And Fabio immediately replied, "Do you want to go for a ride?" And there he was—our youthful octogenarian, without a helmet, riding behind Fabio

through the streets of Florence. They returned fifteen minutes later, Alfredo, bubbly and happy after his spin on the motorbike.

I remember another episode that illustrates Alfredo's life as risk-taker and gambler. In this case, the event was critical, but Alfredo faced it with his usual irony, irreverence, and mocking attitude. November 8, 2008. Alfredo had been hospitalized at New York Presbyterian Hospital-Weill Cornell Medical Center for rather delicate heart surgery. I visited my friend a couple of days after the operation and found him in a cramped room, lying on the bed, immobilized by a series of wires, tubes, drips, and machines of various kinds. He could barely move his head, but he looked very much alive. He spoke with difficulty and with a very hoarse voice. At one point, while in this state that would destroy an elephant, he said with a faint voice: "Eh ... do I look like Frankenstein?"

* * *

De Palchi's most recent book is titled *Foemina Tellus* (Novi Ligure: Joker, 2010). I must say at once, without any disrespect to the editor at Joker who published it, that the collection deserved better publishing fate.

The book is a small "tetralogy" –I use this definition thinking of De Palchi's passion for Wagner—whose parts are respectively titled: *Contro la mia morte* I [Against My Death I], *Foemina Tellus*, *Contro la mia morte* II, [Against My Death II], and *Le déluge* [The Deluge]. The book includes a Foreword by Sandro Montalto and a commentary that I had originally written for several texts intended for the *Almanacco dello Specchio* 2008 (Mondadori). Here, I insert that commentary within a deeper reading of the entire book, which is dedicated to the poet's wife, Rita, and their daughter, Luce.

I begin with the biographical note on the back cover of the book: Alfredo de Palchi is born each morning into his lapidary, surly bluntness and almost Landolfian flavor. The provocative vividness of this psycho-biographical "announcement" immediately delineates the *humus* of our poet and presents

readers with a kind of daring and controversial epigraph for the entire corpus of poetry contained in this book, especially regarding the first and the third sections, which mockingly speak against Death. In short, the poems collected in these two sections mean to work as an antidote to our fleeting existence and to act as a vital bastion that is both extreme and amaranthine.

In both sections (*Contro la mia morte I* e *Contro la mia morte II*), De Palchi does not hesitate to address this Madonna fitted with her black robe and scythe, this Grim Reaper, as Gioachino Belli would define her, "eager to tear us from limb to limb," directly with the familiar "you" [*tu*].

Demonstrating, among other things, the functional compactness of this book, *Contro la mia morte I* and *Contro la mia morte II* each consists of twenty texts and so does *Foemina Tellus*, the section between these texts.

As I was saying, the *humus*, or earthiness, of our poet alludes above all to the dual meaning of the term: on the one hand, the atmosphere and the psychological and socio-cultural clutter out of which our Poet's dry poems were born; and on the other hand, that particular complex of organic substances created by the decomposition and decay of plant and animal residue, which also coincides with and promotes the (re)emergence of new organisms. It is no coincidence that these recent De Palchian poems often use terms such as *concimaia* [manure], *radici* [roots], *palude* [marsh], *miasma* [miasma], *lezzo* [stench], *marcio* [rotten], *melma* [mud], *carcassa* [casing], *spurga* [bleeds], *semenze* [seeds], *verminai* [vermin], *disgregazione* [disintegration], etc., etc.

But beware, these terms do not allude only to the disintegration of bodies, to the fatal crumbling of our physical existence; instead, they intend to affirm irreducibly the happy and ferocious life, the Lucretian ability to transform oneself into the infinite magma of what is, what exists, and what is constantly metamorphosing. In one of the most tense and intense lyrics, De Palchi writes:

Tra questa palude
di fiumi
che scorrono detriti e veleno

e la sinergia dell'oceano
l'acqua spiove dagli alberi in autunno
e mi sciacqua la morte
che *si sconta vivendo* nelle fogne
dall'alba
all'orizzonte del tramonto
perch'io viva nel decesso la sua vita. (p. 19)

Between this swamp
of rivers
flowing debris and poison
and synergy of the ocean
water pours from the trees in autumn
and death washes over me
which *is atoned for by living* in the sewers
from dawn
to the horizon of sunset
so that I live in the death of its life. (p. 19)

And to further corroborate the double-meaning of *humus* as soil in which organisms continuously decompose and transform, he says in other memorable verses: "(...) *nel centro della concimaia che mi marcisce / per germogliare un'altra mia nascita / imprevedibile*" ["(…) in the center of the compost heap I decay / to sprout another of my births / unexpected"]. These firm and decisive lines highlight the fertile corpus in which De Palchi's thoughts move. In short, an exhilarating jumble in which he seems to feel an almost a biblical inspiration—a centripetal and centrifugal chaos, at the same time, in which motifs and aspects of the past are interwoven (e.g., childhood symbolized by the Adige) and the eternal, conflicting but thriving oscillation between Eros and Thanatos closely and mutually intersect. Again addressing Death, he says: " (…) *sei lercia sei l'orrore / eppure ti corteggio / ti vedo ti vesto di beltà lunare / ossessionata bionda spiga / rossa di labbra gonfie / o mora succulenta di more / infine in un rettangolo di verde*" (p. 32). ["(...) you are the filthy horror / yet I court you / I see you dressed in lunar beauty / obsessed blonde spike / red swollen lips / or brunette succulent with blackberries / at last in a rectangle of green"] (p. 32).

This dwelling on the Woman-Earth, the *figure* (as Auerbach suggested in regard to Dante's *Commedia*), is consequential—real and imaginary, a cosmic and ancestral symbol recalling the Man-

Christ. (In regard to this, read the condensed and bitter poem on page 52.)

De Palchi the poet strips himself of every useless frill—as if to emphasize his cyclical state of death / rebirth *ab ovo* [from the beginning, the origin, the egg]—before Creation, its Beauty, and its Decay. He who is Created is destined to remain incomprehensible in his evolution, decay, and constant changing. But what remains forever is the writer's Word—tense, uncompromising, vital, relentless; it will serve as a witness and document the relentless consumption, almost wishing—like Baudelaire—to indicate a "salvation" or a stellar utopia within the flesh of language.

Indeed, perhaps nothing remains for the poet other than to document the unraveling of what carelessly revolves around him—places, circumstances, fleeting moments, gestures, and faces flashing. The poet's words become the beating of wings that quickly "stone" the façades of buildings and structures familiar to him. This seems to be the fate of the "human beast"; this is the story is that unblocks his last gasps; but this is also the eternal identification of the sex-regenerating female womb that "*ingoia crescite e pianeti*" ["swallows growth and planets"] without interruption. The poet must then fly with the words—significantly, "flight," "flying," and similar words are recurrent style choices in *Foemina Tellus*, as if to express a great (Da Vincian) desire, almost a yearning, that he, the poet, be kidnapped in flight, to re-identify himself, stripped of limbs and arts, in another creature, pure as a sheet in the wind.

In the final analysis, this is the central desire of the poet that emerges in this section: Exterminating Angel or Messenger of Total Rottenness on one side and Angel Purifier on the other, a Rimbaudian aspiration to Beauty (symbol of Eternal Youth) and the purity of a New Beginning, categories stubbornly pursued through the *expiatory* word of everyday pestilence.

Hence that "religious" breath mentioned earlier: the verses are openly offered to those who read them as *sacrificial* expressions to Evil, when only real Poetry, stripped of all tinsel, as is De Palchi's poetry, is able to face Evil and defeat it. The outcast Death, "*birichina famelica di novizi*" ["ravenous

prankster of novices"], will then also be the leveler of everything and everyone, when everyone and everything will be nothing more than a heap of dust. I quote these verses in this regard:

(…) per la nobile salma in doppio petto
usi il cordoglio
che non c'è per quella in stracci

solo alla chiusa del terreno
l'eguaglianza è

nella polvere. (p. 73)

(...) For the noble corpse in double-breasted
you extend condolences
that don't exist for the one in rags

only upon the sealing of the earth
equality is

in the dust. (p. 73)

In effect, throughout the entire second section, the discourse against Death becomes even more forceful, and its rejection even more drastic and biting. But Death and Woman, crossbred with Love and Eros, are inevitably destined to rule the world. One is reminded of Leopardi's famous heartbreaking incipit: "*Fratelli, a un tempo stesso, Amore e Morte / Ingenerò la sorte. / Cose quaggiù sì belle / Altre il mondo non ha, non han le stelle*. " (*Amore e Morte*) ["At the same moment Fate / Gave life to Love and death, twin brothers. Up / In heaven, down on earth, / No fairer things than these had ever birth" (translation by Joseph Tusiani in his book *Leopardi's Canti*, Brindisi: Schena Publisher, 1998, pp. 100-101).]

Foemina Tellus concludes with the section titled *Le Déluge* ["The Deluge"]: these texts are like twelve missiles fired back in time against those who helped make youth even more bitter and cruel than those troubled and turbulent post-war years could ever have done. And here let us give the word directly to the author:

La voce di questa breve silloge dà concretezza all'aldilà (se l'aldilà, con il suo inferno, esiste) e senza timori prorompe in accuse definitive verso il mio paese di nascita, i suoi piccoli uomini grondanti malvagità, e le vicende grandi e piccole che hanno fatto la mia storia.
Dopo oltre sessant'anni di angherie e di ingiustizie politoco-legali e politico-letterarie, il rigurgito mi è venuto spontaneo: un testo al giorno, dodici testi del mio lascito. Senza rancore, senza cattiveria, ma con una continua sete di giustizia.
The voice of this short anthology gives concreteness to the afterlife (if the afterlife, with its hell, exists), and without fear it erupts in outright accusations against my country of birth, her young men dripping with malice, and large events and small that have made my story.
After over sixty years of political-legal and political-literary oppression and injustice, the upsurge came to me spontaneously: a text a day, twelve texts of my legacy. Without rancor, without malice, but with a constant thirst for justice.

Twelve missiles, twelve violent stones hurled *à rebours* that do not need any explanatory comments, so strong and direct is Alfredo's final *j'accuse* toward those little men, beggars, and lice of history, cynically devoted to accumulation, "errors subordinate to the horrors" that he suffered—a bastard and social outcast—during his adolescence.

Here then a parade of these shady characters, one by one—bumpkins, cowboys, and torturers, humpbacks and tramps, slobs and boors, politicians and turncoats, in a sort of tragic final ballet in which each one seems to be fiendishly biting his own tail. Into the company of these vile and despicable characters, the poet does not hesitate to include his father, John Sandrini, who never had the courage or dignity to recognize his own son; indeed, he was "supported with admiration" by the rude rabble of his country.

In this section, the tone of De Palchi's poetry becomes decisively dark and hammering; there are no half measures. No further exegesis is needed because he boldly gives us the names and surnames of these boorish thugs in a swirl of sad events. Although the wounds have now healed, the old scars are still visible today. This is the final legacy of Alfredo de Palchi.

Thus, like a clasp that ideally closes both my writing and the existential belt of our poet, this final fiery core of *Foemina Tellus*, still screaming "*sete di giustizia*" ["thirst for justice"], thematically and effectively reconnects to De Palchi's earliest poems—those miraculously saved by his mother, which I mentioned at the beginning of this essay-story. These openly polemical poems (which could well be called "civil poetry") exude anger, sarcasm, ridicule, doltishness, and the heartbreaking isolation of the young future poet that Alfredo was becoming *during the precise period when he was writing in the penitentiary at Procida*.

The fate of De Palchi the Poet concludes, therefore, at least for now, with a significant return to his origins, with one important difference—namely, today after more than sixty years, he does not hesitate to name places, circumstances, and characters of his troubled adolescence, but maintaining—yesterday like today—his dignity, his courage, his non-corrosive pride as a Poet who is as true as he is controversial, and, like Dante, *ben tetragono ai colpi di ventura*. ["…steadfast against the blows of chance."]