

to reexamine *Waverley*'s formative place in the complex cultural politics of post-Napoleonic Europe.

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INTERVIEWS

Small Press Legends. The Best-Known of the Unknown Writers An Interview with Gerald Locklin

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Gerald Locklin was a Professor of creative writing, 20th-century literature, and literary theory in the Department of English at California State University, Long Beach, from 1965 to 2007. He is now Professor Emeritus, but continues to teach as a part-time lecturer. Once hailed by the late Charles Bukowski as "one of the greatest undiscovered talents of our time," Locklin is also the author of over 155 books, chapbooks, and broadsides of poetry, fiction, and criticism, and he has published over 3,000 poems, stories, articles, reviews, and interviews. His work is frequently performed by Garrison Keillor on his *Writer's Almanac* daily Public Radio program, is archived on his website, and is included

in all three of Mr. Keillor's *Good Poems* anthologies. His writings are archived by the Special Collections of the CSULB library, and he is listed in the usual literary directories.

A comprehensive collection of essays regarding his work, with an extensive and updated bibliography, *Gerald Locklin: A Critical Introduction*, edited by Michael Basinski, curator of the Poetry/Rare Books Collection at the University of Buffalo, is now available from Blazevox Books, Kenmore, New York, 2010.

A novella, *The Dodger's Retirement Party*, was published by R) v Press, now re-named Aortic Books, in 2010, as was a collection of recent short fiction entitled *The Vampires Saved Civilization*, World Parade Books, and a selection of recent poems (in a shared volume, *Modest Aspirations*, with a selection of stories by Beth Wilson) from LummoX Press.

Other recent books and chapbooks include *The Plot of Il Trovatore* and *Two Torch Singers* (Kamini Press, Sweden); *Gerald Locklin: New and Selected Poems*, and *The Cezanne-Pissarro Poems*, both from World Parade Books; New Orleans, Chicago and Points Elsewhere, from R) v Press; *Wedlock Sunday* and *Other Poems* (Liquid Paper Press/*Nerve Cowboy Magazine*); *The Ristorante Godot Poems* (Bottle of Smoke Press), and *The San Antonio, Savannah, and Daytona Beach Poems* (Pitchfork Press).

Abel Debritto: Do you remember the very first time you put your words on paper?

Gerald Locklin: It wouldn't have been the first time that I made up a poem, because when I was three or four years old, my aunt would have me stand up on the bed at bedtime and make up poems, and she would write them down and save them. She made me feel like a real author, a genuine poet, at that very early age, so I grew up assuming that, whatever else I might work at in my life, I would always be, first and foremost, a poet.

My mother taught me to write before I went to kindergarten, which I entered at four and a half years old, so I could've been writing things down at that age, putting words on paper. I know I was writing very young. I wrote things about the family, for instance. They encouraged it: they would buy me notebooks and say, "Go ahead and write a book about our family." My mother was the youngest of fourteen children, and she was the only one to have a child, and I was her only child, so I have many aunts and uncles who were not wealthy, but who treated me practically as if they had been additional parents of mine, the aunts especially. I was the beneficiary of a great deal of "positive reinforcement."

A.D.: Do you recall your first publication ever?

G.L.: There was one literary society in Rochester that I belonged to, and I had a couple of poems in their annual literary magazine. I started college as a freshman at the College of the Holy Cross, in Massachusetts - a very good Jesuit liberal arts college, and I was one of only three first-year students to have a poem in an issue (the last issue of the spring) of their very selective and prestigious literary magazine. The poem was entitled "American Gothic" and was based on a famous painting by the American artist, Grant Wood. That's significant because of the hundreds of art poems I have written in my career—especially in the last twenty-five years.

As to the first ones published in independent little magazines, *Wormwood Review* took one entitled "Johnny Rigoletto," a reinterpretation of the opera, which the legendary editor, Marvin Malone, insisted was the first one of mine that ever saw off-campus print. I was to go on to publish hundreds of poems in that magazine, which I, among many others, considered the greatest American poetry magazine of its era, and Malone the greatest editor. Another poem, entitled "Hart Crane," may have been accepted for publication even a little earlier, but Malone was probably right that the first to actually be published was "Johnny Rigoletto." You'll notice how many *ekphrastic* poems I was publishing very early in my career. That was inevitable because I was also involved in literature, art, and music as I studied for my doctorate in English (1961-64) at the University of Arizona in Tucson. It was a little later, after I started teaching full-time in the California State University system in 1964 - first at Los Angeles for one year and then at Long Beach in 1965, where I still have my office, that I came under the post-modern influences of Edward Field and Charles Bukowski, as well as my

good friends Ron Koertge and Billy Collins and Charles Webb, and authors I read such as Frank O'Hara, Theodore Roethke, and Sylvia Plath.

I was quite arrogant at that time (some would say I still am). For instance, when I was editor of the literary annual at the college from which I received my baccalaureate degree in English, St. John Fisher College, I rewrote the work of my fellow students without even asking permission.

A.D.: Was it *that* awful?

G.L.: Some was pretty bad. I think I improved it. I think the writers may have agreed, because even if they weren't happy about it, they didn't register any formal complaints. I think they were happy just to be in the magazine.

A.D.: Have you ever edited any other magazines?

G.L.: I was poetry editor of the *Chiron Review* from 1988 until about a year ago (2011), when it went into a hiatus, from which I hope it will someday emerge. The Editor-in-Chief was Michael Hathaway, a wonderful editor and a wonderful human being, with whom I always found it an absolute pleasure to work. I think we and the other poetry editor - my son, Zachary Locklin - and the fiction editors - Rafael Zepeda and John Brantingham - turned it into one of the best poetry magazines in America, and possibly the best of them all. But there is my arrogance again.

A.D.: Did any of those early publications in little magazines or college journals have an impact on your career? Did acceptance encourage you to submit further material?

G.L.: Yes, being accepted is tremendously exciting for any young writer, but I wouldn't have stopped anyway, even if I had had to write in total obscurity. Ron Koertge and I were best friends at Arizona, and there were times when we thought we would never get a poem accepted. And after we got poems accepted, we thought we would never get a story accepted. But eventually, of course, the acceptances came and then gained momentum. Success breeds success.

A.D.: Were you ever rejected when you were young?

G.L.: I received plenty of rejection slips when I first started out, because in the old days there were only a few poetry magazines and they tended to be very elitist, in the manner of the Ivy League colleges. Now there are thousands and thousands of literary magazines, but all there were then were *The New Yorker* and the *Atlantic Monthly* and *Poetry* (Chicago) and a handful of other journals that it was very difficult to break into, especially if you were not in the Northeast. So we all tried to get in *The New Yorker*, but *The New Yorker* was publishing guys from Harvard and Columbia. We would get some encouragement from them now and then, but gradually the whole small press and university magazine scene opened up and there were greater opportunities around the country to publish in good magazines that weren't just in New York or Boston. At this same time, creative writing programs at both the undergraduate and graduate level had begun to proliferate all over America. The first anthology to truly represent this was *The Geography of Poets*, edited by Edward Field in a pocket paperback format from Bantam Books in the 1970s. It sold 31,000 copies, but was taken out of print anyway. Paperbacks had to sell 100,000 copies in those days to remain in print. Still, it was the first appearance in a national anthology for many of us, and it took our careers to a much higher level. Charles Stetler and I joined Edward Field to edit the *New Geography of Poets* from the University of Arkansas in 1991. It was a good anthology but much smaller in the number of poets and poems than the first book. A few poets who were left out never really forgave us for that.

Edward Field was and is a New Yorker, but he had given readings around the country to support himself, and he was also an actor. That was how he became aware of the great diaspora of poetry to all regions of the United States. When he put out his anthology, some East Coast editors objected that it was an "anti-New York anthology." Well, it wasn't, it just showed that poetry was not the exclusive possession of Northeast America.

A.D.: After so many years of acceptance and rejection, which are the main highlights - if any - of your career?

G.L.: A lot of them were at the same level, I suppose. The first time that you get a story published, the first time that you get a book published, those are highlights, but I don't look back very often. I celebrate when something good happens, but I don't stop and look back, I'm always looking ahead, I always have future projects, I always have my pocket full of things coming up. So I'm always looking forward for the next thing, and I like having things out there.

A.D.: You said before that you had tried to hit mainstream magazines, such as *The New Yorker*, and I guess that would be a highlight. Have you ever accomplished that?

G.L.: I was never in *The New Yorker*, but I was in a number of big magazines like *The American Scholar*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Western Humanities Review* - which is at the University of Utah- *New Orleans Review*, *Florida Review*, *Beloit Poetry Journal*... I was published in a lot of university magazines.

A.D.: Was that in the early days?

G.L.: Yes, in the 1960s. I think that once I started publishing regularly in the *Wormwood Review* and once I had the first couple of books come out in small presses - especially the one that became *Poop, and Other Poems* in 1972, which became kind of an underground bestseller classic- well, after that I think I became more stereotyped as an underground writer. I can remember sitting at a desk and one of my students was starting a press, called *Mag Press*, and the manuscript for *Poop* had just come back from the University of Wisconsin Press, so I was sitting looking at it and he said, "I'm starting a press, I'd like to publish a book, can I take that home and look at it?" And then he wanted publish it right away!

That point when I made that decision to let him publish it rather than keep trying at the University of Wisconsin or one of the other prestigious universities I think defined me more as an underground writer. I always have one foot in academic life; people don't realize the extent to which I have been in academic anthologies. But I began sending *The Wormwood Review*, for instance, most of my best poems first. I sent them dozens of poems at a time, and they published literally hundreds of my poems- a few things like that moved me away from the academic poetry and defined me as more of an underground writer.

A.D.: So you were involved in academic publications only at the beginning of your career?

G.L.: Not really. For instance, I was in *Literature and Its Writers* [2010]. Not only did I have some poems in it, but Ann Charters asked me to write an introduction to a section of small press poets. In other words, I do get into academic sources all the time. It's happening again now. I have some reputation in Europe, and I have things in *Ambit* and *Tears in the Fence* in England all the time.

A.D.: Do you recall the first time you were published in Europe?

G.L.: Yes, fairly early in Italy, can't recall the magazine...

A.D.: Perhaps it was *Offerta Speciale*, run by Alberto Vitachhio and Carla Bertola?

G.L.: Yes, exactly, those guys. There was some international connection there, so it wasn't as if it never happened. They are still very good people. The first major thing like that was when Maro Verlag put out three of my books in Germany in the mid-1980s. Then those three books were all bought by Bertelsmann, which is a major international publisher. They brought out two of them, but I don't think they brought the third one out because those mass-market paperbacks have to sell thousands of copies.

A Geography of Poets sold 31,000 copies, and yet Bantam Books remaindered it. I'm in all the Garrison Keillor anthologies, which sell very well. People think that I'm really unknown, but I'm not anymore, not at all, and what I say is, I'm probably the best-known of the unknown writers.

A.D.: After going through the highlights of your career, can you think of any moment in your life when you felt you were not cut out to be a writer?

G.L.: No, I don't know what else I would have done. My father could do anything; he was a mechanic. He took me to work with him one time, and that night, after they put me to bed, he said to my mother: "That boy can't do anything at all!"

A.D.: What compelled you to drop academic writing and embrace a more underground style?

G.L.: Well, I learned things about writing from [Charles] Bukowski, but I also learned from him that there was another way to make it as a writer, which was the underground path, the anti-canon if you want. Bukowski is still not really accepted in academic life. He will always be part of the anti-canon, just like Anaïs Nin will be in the anti-canon, Louis-Ferdinand Céline will be in the anti-canon, and I guess [François] Rabelais is probably accepted by now, but even Rabelais is probably too dirty for a lot of universities.

So there will always be that alternative canon. Bukowski showed that you could go through the underground small presses and still build a reputation, and still have a circle of people that knew your work. The French symbolist poets in the mid-19th century were coterie writers, they were writing for a small number of people, but they're well-known today. There was a way to be a real writer. It was just a different path. It wasn't through the universities, it wasn't through the best-selling presses.

A.D.: Do you regret having turned your back to academia in part?

G.L.: When I was starting out it was the only place, I didn't know of any other alternative.

I have never liked the stodginess and pretentiousness of some people in some areas of the literary and academic worlds. I've never been a part of that or had a taste for it as a teacher, or as a writer. I hung around more with students in the bars. I didn't hang around with academics very much. I admire them for what they do. Mainly, the teachers that I drink with were former students of mine.

No, I don't regret at all. Can you finish a book of poems by those places? No. Literarily, I'm very happy with the way things are going right now, very happy with where I am. I'm happy with where my life is taking me. It doesn't mean that there has never been any stress along the way; of course there have been times like that. I've had a literary life, certainly, and it's been a good literary life. It takes a lot of patience, and, yes, there will be those temporary disappointments, every time you get a rejection slip. It doesn't happen as much anymore, but it still happens sometimes. I still will be rejected by some place that I've known for 30 years and that just doesn't happen to like a batch of poems that I sent in.

A.D.: Do you think then that small presses matter in the big picture?

G.L.: They will always have an impact. There will always be those who are disaffected from the mainstream. The mainstream can be pretty tame sometimes. There are a lot of mainstream fiction writers that I love - there's Hemingway - and I love many post-modernist authors such as Philip Roth, who is still alive, and John Updike, both successful award-winning writers. I like them, but, at the same time, there is a reading public, especially of disaffected young people, who look to the little magazines and small presses and discover that they can relate to them, and they can't relate to the official literature. And I don't blame them, because there's so much quid pro quo, they're patting each other's asses, and friends publish each other and a lot of that is going on there in the established presses: the East dominates over the West and older universities over newer universities, there are all kinds of biases.

A.D.: Don't you think the same applies to the small press? Don't you see the same names over and over again?

G.L.: That's because they do find their own circle. But those magazines are respected also and they become respected eventually in the universities. The underground writers often outlive in the long run in the anthologies - the ones who were the major writers or the best-selling writers of their time. That's true even of Hemingway. There were American writers who were in mainstream magazines in the 1920s and 30s and nobody knows their names anymore, they aren't studied anymore. It's happening to me. I have much more recognition now than I did before. Some of that comes from my connection with Bukowski, which is serendipitous - we were good friends and I do admire his work and still enjoy it very much -

some of it came from that, but a lot of the rest was just persistence and continuing to write, write, write and send, send, send. When an opportunity presents itself, I jump at it, I don't just sit around.

A.D.: Bukowski was very prolific and he submitted his work to all kinds of magazines. He didn't care about their ideology or politics. You, too, are a prolific author. Do you care about schools when you submit your work?

G.L.: No, I don't. I consider politics as the least important thing. A hundred years later, nobody cares about what the politics were. Nobody cares what Dostoevsky's politics were - they were fairly right wing- nobody cares about that. No, I'm very much of an aesthetic critic. I think the work exists for itself, the work uses the social causes to make literature. I don't feel the social causes should be using literature for their purposes. Some good writing comes out of that, but how much came out of the Soviet Union? Only a little amount was anti-establishment there, such as *Dr. Zhivago*.

A.D.: Do you think authors can live off their small press publications?

G.L.: They can make more than people think sometimes. People don't understand there are some royalties paid and permissions fees. I file a literary business with my income tax every year and I usually lose a little or make a little on it, but it's not that nobody pays for your work at all. There are places that do pay for your work.

I heard one of Billy Collins' recent books sold 200,000 copies or something. I know him well from the *Wormwood Review* days. He deserves it, he is very talented, very articulate, presents himself wonderfully and is a good storyteller. A raconteur. So he deserves what has come to him, no question about that, but we were shocked when he got Poet Laureate, because they never used to pick people like that. We were glad for him and it opened the doors for a lot of other people to be more accepted with that style of poetry.

A.D.: Most little magazines fold after a few issues, due to financial problems. They know beforehand that breaking even is not easy. Yet, they keep appearing all the time. Which is, in your opinion, the driving force behind the small press?

G.L.: The ones that survive have people who can afford to subsidize them. Even Michael Hathaway is not a wealthy person by any means, but you know that he has to subsidize his magazine out of his pocket to an extent. *Ambit* magazine has been around for two hundred issues or more in London, and it's a good literary magazine. A lot of the people connected with it can afford to put some money into it. And sometimes some of the mags receive government grants, at least for a while.

Let's face it: people blame the rich for everything, but without the rich there's no museums, there's no art galleries; they have the money to support a lot of cultural enterprises.

A.D.: If small press publishers have to subsidize their own magazines, knowing they are going to lose money, why do you think they keep at it?

G.L.: I don't think most writers write primarily for money. No, I don't think most do, not the best writers. I have a good life and my writing certainly helped me, even financially. I didn't do it for that reason, I would've done it anyway, but it certainly helped, it helped me to get free travel all over the world, for instance.

All writers do it because they're good at writing, it's an aptitude. Tennis players play tennis, they don't quit because they don't win every major tournament. It's an aptitude, you keep doing it because you were born to write.

A.D.: What about publishers - and I'm not talking about large small publishers such as City Lights, but really tiny small presses, with a very short lifespan?

G.L.: It's a social life, too. It also is rewarding to them to see the writers that improve after publishing for a while in their magazines. They can also teach for their living. Many do. Marvin Malone was a great teacher and a writer. He was a world-class pharmacologist, but that was his avocation, he couldn't afford to make a living with his little mag, of course. He earned his living first as a pharmacologist at the University of Connecticut, and then at the University of the Pacific in Stockton, California.

A.D.: So would you say it was his passion?

G.L.: Yes, it was his passion. He had a huge collection of magazines and art. I know it sounds idealistic, but people do it for the love of it and they do it for the things that it does for them. Obviously, it gives them the pleasure of doing something well, the pleasure of being respected by people for what you do, of having at least your little bit of fame, perhaps. It's nice to be recognized by some people that you're doing well. There are many reasons, but the main reason is that you were born to be a writer.

A.D.: Over the years, have you looked up to any small press author?

G.L.: Sure, I greatly admire Ron Koertge, Edward Field, Billy Collins, and many others. I also had canonized favorites, such as Dylan Thomas and E. E. Cummings - he spelled his name conventionally, by the way.

A.D.: Do the anthologized authors still influence you or was it just when you were young?

G.L.: They still do because they're rattling around at the back of my brain. Wordsworth, Shakespeare, they're still rattling around, and that's what the young people today don't realize, they don't think it's important to learn those things. The Creative Writing programs rely on literature; it will tend to be more recent literature in general, but you have to know the whole corpus of literature in order to understand what the possibilities are. To a lot of people a poem that's a letter it's not a poem, because it's not a lyric, but Horace was writing epistolary poems back in Roman times. They think it can't just be a dirty, kind of scurrilous thing, but Catullus was writing those.

In general, movements go forward by going backwards. Dylan Thomas went back to Welsh Bardic poetry. T. S. Eliot went back to the metaphysical poets of the 17th century. Pound wanted to go back to the times of the Renaissance. People go back to go forward, because to go forward in some pure sense - it's a wilderness out there, you have no models, and everybody learns from models and they write from models, so you make the future out of the past and the reaction against the present.

A.D.: Did you admire any of your publishers?

G.L.: Malone was a very strong-minded person and he could be very cantankerous and ornery at times, but he was a real father figure for me. I would tell him things I wouldn't tell anybody else. I was afraid to meet him the first time, he meant so much to me personally - my father had died at the age 50 right when I was graduating from high school - so I think I had friends who were surrogate fathers along the way, and Malone was one of them. And when he died suddenly around 1995, that was shocking. I had to start all over again finding places to send those hundreds of poems that I would usually end up sending to him. I knew that the magazine was good enough, that there was permanence about it. I knew it might only be in a few libraries, but it was good to be in a few of those libraries, archived. A lot of writers will say they don't care about posterity, but I think we do, because it's part of the life force. I think most of us want to leave something of ourselves behind us when we die.

A.D.: Besides Malone's *Wormwood Review*, which magazines have been key in your career?

G.L.: There were the university magazines I mentioned before, but in recent years I've been submitting regularly to *Slipstream*, they've been publishing me for 25 years, *Nerve Cowboy*, *Chiron Review*, *Ambit*, *Tears in the Fence*, an online one called *The Ragged Edge*, *Iconoclast*, *Minotaur*, edited by a guy that I've known since the 1960s, Jim Gove. There's *Pearl*, right here on Long Beach - I've appeared in every issue for years.

A.D.: Are most of those magazines print periodicals?

G.L.: Yes. I get dragged online by people. I only learned recently how to get to YouTube, and then I discovered there's a lot of my stuff on YouTube. But I prefer reading a book in my hand, and I don't think that's going to change. Right now, Event Horizon Press, which put out a lot of my books in the 1990s and early 2000s - those are virtually all out of print - wants to get all of my titles back in print as e-books and as library quality trade paperbacks, because the editor figures the mass market for print literature is going to be gone, as you can download e-books for a couple of bucks. He showed me how to get the free app for Kindle books, but I don't want to read at the computer.

A.D.: Do the small press publishers that you know so well believe that the digital age will destroy the print culture?

G.L.: People think that way, and I think it will certainly supplant certain areas, but what happens when the power source goes out? What happens when the oil runs out? People think they can see the future, but in the 1950s I was listening to people like Buckminster Fuller and others like McLuhan, who came down from Canada, and he was talking about the end of the Gutenberg Galaxy in 1958. And this is 2011 and books are still selling like hot cakes, so I'm not sure that the book is obsolete.

A.D.: Do you believe print books, especially hardbacks with artwork, are seen as precious collectibles – not to be touched, not to be read – and the actual reading takes place via digital devices?

G.L.: Those books will be collectibles because there's so few of them. Small presses have the advantage of print-on-demand, so they don't have to build large inventories and then be stuck with a garage full of books nobody wants. But there are artists doing art books as well and those are going to be valuable.

I hear from people all the time who have read my stuff and they're writing to say they enjoyed something, they'd like to stay in contact, I hear from readers all the time. As a writer today you get enough strokes if you've been around long enough, it's not like you don't have any feeling of hopelessness or anything like that.

A.D.: Do you think there's a real audience for online poetry? Do people have time go through thousands and thousands of poems to find something they like?

G.L.: Yes, but people also learn to read fast. The more you read, the more you learn to spot quality when you see it, if the stuff does rise to the top or close to the top. For the same reason, if the things aren't giving you pleasure, you're not going to read them, you're not going to go back to them.

The danger of it, the danger of easy accessibility to the Internet, is that the wheat can get lost in the chaff. However, somehow or other, we don't seem to lose our ability to discriminate between quality and the lack of it entirely.

A.D.: Are you saying that, in the foreseeable future, small presses will be very much alive despite the advent of digital age?

G.L.: A lot of it will go online. Some of us will not bother with it too much because print is still available to us. I mean, I'm going to be able to find enough that I enjoy reading in print for the rest of my life.

A.D.: Would it bother you if a long-running print magazine such as *Chiron Review* went online?

G.L.: It would be ok with me. It's already going online in terms of the manuscript submissions and making those judgments. I have to read a lot of the manuscripts online. [Hathaway] allows submissions to be by snail mail, too, and those he will forward to me. And I do find that, overall, the things that come in by snail mail are superior to those that come in online. Maybe it's because those who like to send their manuscripts by mail, like myself, maybe we're older and more experienced and have more practice writing, we have learned a little bit more about writing than some of the people who are trying to do it online.

There are a lot of talented performer-poets out there. It's going back to an oral culture, it's a pre-literary culture and that doesn't surprise me, there's something pre-literate about the computer. We talk as if we're reading on the computer, but I'm not sure we're really reading when we read things on the computer in the same way that we read something on the page. We used to have accentual poetry in *Beowulf* and the elegiac poets; that's where you find highly accented poetry and that's what you get again now in oral poetry, because accentuation is mnemonic - so is rhyme - it's easier to catch by ear, so oral poetry today resembles historically pre-literate oral poetry very much. A lot of repetition also, so if we miss something the first time it's said, we get it the next time.

It's just like film. Film can't do what literature can do. I love films, but they can't do what literature can do, and oral literature can't do what written literature can do. Still, it

comes down to the ability of the person who's doing it. There are better and worse practitioners in both camps.

A.D.: This is, I'm afraid, the last question: Would you care to comment on the current status of the small press in the United States?

G.L.: It's too big to generalize, that's always been the problem with American literatures: it's many literatures. As far as what's out there, I know a number of very fine young writers, such as Dave Newman, he's writing wonderful things. Then there's *Beside the City of Angels: An Anthology of Long Beach Poetry* that just came out, with a lot of very fine writers from around here.

A.D.: Thanks for your time and your insightful remarks.

G.L.: Thank you. Sorry if I go off on a tangent at times. You get me started and I just can't stop.

Wording a Life with Words
In Conversation with Carla Vaglio

Giuseppina Cortese
Università di Torino



A disciple of Giorgio Melchiori, Carla Vaglio graduated in English literature in 1966 and started out as a lexicographer for the *Grande Dizionario Utet della Lingua Italiana*, an experience which remarkably affected her career as a scholar and critic in English literature with a formidable interest in language. As an Associate Professor and a Full Professor at the University of Turin, retiring in 2012, she led generations of students and doctoral fellows in the discovery of English and Irish literature from a comparative, interdisciplinary and intermedial perspective, with special attention to the language and techniques of cinema, theatre, music, popular literature, journalism and the arts. Author of numerous publications spanning all periods of English literature, she is best-known internationally for her work as a Joycean scholar, a very active member and conference organizer for the James Joyce International Foundation, the James Joyce Italian Foundation and the Associazione Italiana di Anglistica (AIA). She has organized, developed and for many years directed Degree Courses in Modern Languages and Literatures, in Modern Cultures and Literatures, in Translation and Interpreting, and she was the main developer of a bi-national degree. A visiting professor at various European and US institutions, since retirement she has of course continued to be a highly significant voice in criticism and in academic activities.

The interview, published by kind permission of the publishers and of its author, Prof. Giuseppina Cortese, organizer of the 2010 ESSE conference in Torino, is the opening chapter of *James Joyce. Whence, Whither and How. Studies in Honour of Carla Vaglio. Studi in Onore di Carla Vaglio*. Edited by G. Cortese, G. Ferreccio, M.T. Giaveri, T. Prudente. Alessandria: Edizioni dell'Orso.

Giuseppina Cortese: How did you come to privilege literature and how central was/is it for you to other forms of reading / knowing?

Carla Vaglio: My beginnings (as an undergraduate) were in lexicography, working on the Italian Dictionary of Salvatore Battaglia, published by UTET. Then I turned to literature (Italian, French, English literature), eventually coming to consider it as my favorite hunting ground for research and teaching, singling it out from other areas in the humanities (visual arts, cinema, anthropology), on which I was also very keen. Literature I came to see as the most comprehensive and far-reaching domain, capable of including, blending and (re)integrating all discourses, languages, (micro) histories - all the minute facts and events that we encounter in everyday life, the facts and events that official, or authorized history has forgotten to record or has discarded. In other words, to me the relevance of literature lies in its

potential for doing justice, re-attributing significance and the right to speak in its own voice to everything that has always been considered marginal, borderline, insignificant or scandalous and unutterable in the world. As I see it now, in a “retrospective arrangement”, my main concern has been with Literature between Ethics and Aesthetics, with a focus on the social discourse linking the two. In my study of literature as a way of retracing and reconstructing strategies of social discourse, I felt that I constantly had to resort to a comparative approach, sometimes adopting various and even widely divergent perspectives.

Therefore, language for me has been dominant in reading literature - ancient Greek and modern languages, including the ‘special languages’ of the arts. ‘Language’ meaning that we need to combine a pragmatic and stylistic approach with a socio-cultural and historical approach to texts, and we need the archives of material culture: ‘realia’, as precious repositories of intellectual attitudes, habits, social discourses, voices, sounds, otherwise irretrievable. And, of course, translation, especially all that seems to resist translation: formulaic language, slang, dialects, the layering of high and low language, social discourse as the result of an ongoing, impossible and yet unavoidable collective writing or “conglomewriting”, as Paul Muldoon has it.

In my view, though, my determination in studying literature the way I do mostly came from my attachment to the place I come from, Torino: from the intellectual affiliations within this community, from the habit of doing things with a tuned down Joycean “scrupulous meanness”, scientific and down-to-earth at the same time, avoiding all vague or pompous formulations.

G.C.: Torino was at the time of our youth a place where discipline and understatement were paramount - many intellectuals had an ambivalent rejection/attraction to it: getting away, then inevitably answering the call to get back. Your intermezzo years in Britain: nations, their lifeway and institutions, were different enough at the time to justify the label ‘intercultural’ experience.

C.V.: The sense of discipline I got as a student made me feel determined to go out and get the most from any experience that might present itself, so in this spirit I accepted a position in Glasgow, at very short notice. From Scotland, from Glasgow in particular, I developed this perception of borders, and of the need to jump borders to gain a more complete view. I mean inner and outer borders: the reality literature could ideally explore and deal with. I remember that, with this idea in mind, I re-read Tobias Smollett’s *The Expedition of Humphrey Clinker*, a book in which cultural borders are crossed and re-crossed all over again. The crucial modernity of these problems had already been anticipated by Giorgio Melchiori’s book, *The Tightrope Walkers*, in which Smollett (along with Sterne), was rightly featured as a forerunner of the modernists.

It was the difference in the lifeway and institutions of Scotland that first made me aware of the need for a comparative approach, which I came to develop into a method proper. But let me say what I mean by ‘comparative’: not juxtaposing, not only comparing, but actually even ‘confronting’ two or more cultural domains, in a radical spirit, and I literally mean radical in the sense that you reach for the very roots of these domains. For example, I am thinking just now of a relatively frequent combination, ‘literature and cinema’: well, a smattering of the two surely is not enough to approach them from a comparative angle. How can you consider the literary sources of certain films and ignore the cognitive or the technical aspects peculiar to each, and of course, on top of that, their coded languages, and keep on addressing, in your own writing, the non-specialists? You need to address the specialists in distinct fields to do comparative work, to practice the comparative method in its integrity.

After Scotland, Reading was a special place, a special experience in 1968: a sort of omphalos mundi, where joining Gigi Meneghello, Giulio Lepschy and Franco Marengo meant, I soon realised, joining a busy lab where Italian and English, and Italian literature and English literature, generated a literary, cultural, political maieutics so to speak, a give-and-take with constantly high expectations. All of a sudden, I felt the entire domain of literature and of the arts was just there, in front of me: I just had to find the courage to step into it and

try to be up to it in the future. Oxford libraries and London libraries, including that jewel, the library of the Warburg institute, certainly made it all so exciting.

In Reading, the keen eye of Gigi Meneghello was able to detect, I am tempted to say even to reveal, the aspects of ‘manliness’ in my character that would later develop into a sense of responsibility and endurance in everything I did. He even offered me a position as assistant lecturer in Italian there, but I opted instead for studying and teaching English Literature in Italy. To avoid any temptation for me to remain in England, my then fiancé proposed that we get married right in the middle of the academic year: we spent our honeymoon at the guest rooms of Reading University, with my husband waiting for me after classes (weekends in London, though) and eventually going back to Torino to his father’s house, while I went on teaching until June.

My relationships in Reading developed into real, strong and enduring friendships: I couldn’t possibly think of my academic career as not starting from Reading.

G.C.: Your own writing: can you identify the fil rouge, or, more likely, the many threads in the pattern of your own research? And the ways in which the pattern fits the fabric of your own life?

C.V.: The fabric of my life has been dense and intricate, including whatever might occur (in this way making myself thoroughly my own contemporary), and weaving patterns that would meet the actual cognitive and intellectual needs of my time, in the hope of contributing items that would be significant and useful to its archives. My only fil rouge seems to me to be the method that I experimented with: as a great believer in *kairòs*, in felicitous findings (if one is ready to encounter them), in hesitation and in doubt, in this uneasy balance between knowing and not knowing (in fact, most of the time starting from scratch in my own research), I keep storing and contaminating diverse materials and approaches, being certain that, in the end, they would not only connect in a visible pattern, but bare the devices which make them work.

I feel I work with words in their actual complexity, with their connotative halo, in ‘live’ performance and in their entire context, with the sounds, voices, gestures that accompany them, everything but dictionary items, also knowing from experience that the words used in literature lie outside any dictionary.

As an individual interested in food, and far from the idea that a woman’s place is in the kitchen: books can be presented in the same way as recipes ... Identifying the ingredients and their quantities, mixing them up in a repetitive way is certainly not enough to do a good job. What you need is to know the right order and the time when to add the ingredients. Ultimately, I feel this analogy is also a way to suggest a highly rewarding way of practicing literary criticism according to principles of play and pleasure, both, as when you handle recipes, meeting material conditions, and repeating and innovating through new departures.

G.C.: The negotiation we call ‘teaching’. Though I am not keen on espousing a single overarching theory, I believe we all participate in the construction of a palpable reality and of its interpretation: our words construct versions of what we call ‘common sense’. Echoing Bolinger, “words are weapons”: they do not simply reflect a reality out there, they impact on our private lives and they impact on whole societies...

C.V.: My emphasis on ‘social discourse’ in literature stems from how (variably) well-equipped we are to recognise it as collectively negotiated. I always need to try and bring attention to the active and dynamic aspects of language: how language changes, moves, gets twisted, and also how language as a cultural construct shapes and subtly infiltrates an author’s invention of tricks and tools. In this sense, literary works can be shown to originate at the intersection of various planes, perspectives and strategies of presentation, rather than from any preconceived theoretical issues or schemas. In other words, teaching to me is the opposite of dogma: a tentative, even improvised attempt to animate, to ‘make present’ what is absent, still shapeless, perceived as just one of the many possibilities of the author. In the negotiation of sense inherent in any form of tuition, which tries to expand and multiply the potentialities of the critical space to make it capable of including the new, the strange, the multiple forms of the ‘other’, the students’ response is crucial: they activate the intellectual and dialectic process

necessary to ground and authorize the lesson itself, that most rewarding exchange by means of which, in my view, aesthetics meets ethics.

G.C.: So teaching is a most delicate profession... in a wider sense, displaying and suggesting a multiple process of discovery — the excitement lies with opening up worlds of words...

C.V.: A most delicate profession indeed, of ethical, institutional and public import: the way I like to do it is to try and place the author and the reader, especially the student reader, as I just said, on the same ground, both at a loss, both trying to get out of the trap they have set for themselves – the author in creating out of hesitancy and doubt, fumbling for words that do not come, the reader trying to discover the reality ‘beyond’ words. The gist: showing the artist in action, resorting, if possible, to genetic criticism, while finding out how the pleasures and rewards of reading literature are so ‘easy’, within reach, that is. And students always enjoy being led to read what is not yet there, not yet lexicalized, but striving to emerge as a form of inner energy: Homer, for instance, is one of my assets to show modernity by highlighting the cinematic quality of his writing – processes and events unrolling rather than ‘facts’, a ‘state of metamorphosis’ – so the necessity of moving borders and perspectives through experiments in translation and adaptation in order to capture the subterranean movements in texts.

G.C.: Words in their tangible physicality and words as traces of history, the imprinting of civilizations and ways of conceiving of and looking at realia: ways of knowing about and feeling about and perceiving a drop of rain...I speak as a linguist, from the persuasion that languages and their uses speak us as much as we speak them...

C.V.: To take into account, in literary criticism, the ‘tangible physicality of words’, as you have it, naturally stems for me from my former work as a lexicographer, in which the very ‘body’ and the ‘genetic’ quality, the potentialities inherent in the DNA of words are evident in the variations of meaning across time. I feel that literary works, ‘exploding’ the potentialities of language, grammars and stylistic features, including emotively or sensuously laden gestures, magnify their cognitive power, in many ways escaping dictionaries, their static, time-bound, partial definitions.

And that is why I am interested in material culture and in realia: augmented pieces of reality as they are, clusters of heterogeneous images and styles and modes of representation, popular products of craftsmanship likely to become industrial, mass-produced, and cheaply produced replicas later on ... well, I would say yet they do involve ... authentic geologic upheavals of emotion ... subterranean jolts in the stream of thought and words. In this sense, they seem to enhance even further the power to stupefy, to make the reality of the word “rich and strange”: there, for me, lies the core of art. When I want to illustrate these concepts, I always resort to Joyce, to his apparently paradoxical ability to make us feel different silences, full of echoes from the past and of anticipations of the unheard sounds and voices of the future, through synesthetic “seehearing” in “Sirens”, or the “verbivocovisual” modality in *Finnegans Wake*, to quote just two instances. How can this be actually done? We turn to Joyce’s definition of the *Wake* as “the lingerous longerous book of the dark”, for example. There, you have an audio-visual and gestural transcription of the song. The raucous seductive voice of Yvette Guilbert and the famous “Linger longer loo” picture by Toulouse Lautrec, featuring Yvette Guilbert in the act of taking off her long black gloves and making this last, in a lingering that is a perfect example of sinful, “morose delectation”, the time of the entire song: language in action, with its evocative power.

G.C.: Of course, language and texts and everything that is stratified inside and beneath them, as well as in ourselves as individuals and generations of readers/writers, develop and actualize what we call ‘change’. I ask, if I may: in what ways do you find that your approach to English literature has changed over the years?

C.V.: Having dealt with Joyce most of the time, I have become aware of change as the need for a critical language that constantly adjusts to the different strategies in his works. This means by the way that being aware is being ‘wary’: doubt is a most useful critical tool, and so

is the resistance to any easy labeling of his works under the umbrella of genres or theoretical definitions or aesthetic values. As for change in my own approach, though, I could single out my increasing attention to the presence, the incorporation of the reader in the text. This means being aware of the text as oratorically addressing the audience, constantly performing and, with that, opening up different perspectives and adopting various modalities of negotiation of sense. Also, I think I have been increasingly focussing on complex language units rather than single words: phrases, formulaic language, 'strings' in action, performances changing their functions.

G.C.: And what are the gifts that you feel you have acquired, the pluses you can offer your class today? This right now is a politically sensitive question, so let me be provocative and also turn the question the other way: what are the minuses, what are the forms of engagement that you think people like you and me and our generation, with over forty years of teaching, are likely to have lost over the years?

C.V.: Here we come full circle. If I hadn't started out as a lexicographer, learning how to prioritise the word – or, rather, the social life of the word, its semantic trajectory across times and geographies, meaning translations, mistranslations, adaptations, calques, stratifications, duplications, oral and written language, dialects, jargons, slang; if I hadn't realised how instrumental literary authors and artists in general, their strategies in shaping sensibilities and minds are in bringing about an expansion of language and of its functions, I would never have felt legitimated to be an interpreter of literature and a literary critic.

As for the minuses: what I think I have lost over the years is, predictably, the sense that every perspective is still open and accessible, that there is still virgin land to be explored and that it is still up to me to discover it. Knowing that I no longer, or not all the time, have the energy or the patience to do it, I now tend to pass my suggestions on to my students hoping they might accept the legacy.

G.C.: My key words, to attempt a synthesis: language as situated utterances, including silences (plural); ways of knowing that remove the slash between cognition and emotion; humanitas as a rationale so inclusive as not to victimize literature or suffer the current dominance of 'hard science'. In any case, science does not move on in vacuo and in vitro, so history ultimately annihilates the boundary between 'soft' and 'hard' forms of knowing. I venture to say your own pathway into literature and into your favourite author evokes the incipit of the *Wake*, notably the vicus there: to me, almost the node word in a concordance line, between *riverrun* and *recirculation*, the unending flow, the unending quest. Vico rejected the main paradigm for a new science, centred on the whole human being: beyond Pascal's dualisms in the name of history, the integration of micro- into macro-, the time-space dimensions ... in constant 'rearriving' ...

C.V.: In order to face my responsibilities as a literary critic, I always try and 'situate' my critical action and the text in context, taking upon myself the assets as well as the limitations inherent in my position, so as to let the 'voice' of the text resound and the gestures of the text be revealed from the most appropriate angles. In the negotiation of sense, then, a special place is taken by the interrogation of the texts, always allowing them to return the gaze and question me on equal terms, exchanging roles. This also amounts to combining the gazes and the expectations of the 'common' reader, of the critic as well as of the first authorized reader of the text, the author.

I feel that this can only be achieved by entering this flow of 'situated utterances', considering words in their potential aggregations, presenting events in the making, as in a metamorphic live take, letting silences and pauses speak, letting the emotions inherent in the construction of the artistic work emerge as foundational norms of the text as well as fundamental ways of knowing.

This means pointing to and building up, in an unstable narrative, the cultural space in which countless heretical, unorthodox, alternative counter stories can emerge and acquire new life, start to flow, to circulate – being, as in Vico, at each stage prophetically formulated as re-enacting birth and life, history and the development of socially mediated creativity.

My good auspices for my students or readers, then, would be to ensure for them, as much as we possibly can, the privilege of accessing texts in the original. This includes, and you can now at least partly do that online, without leaving your desk, appreciating first editions: the material aspect of books, their graphic presentation, publisher strategies, illustrations, even the quality of the printing paper. In other words, I believe we can legitimately propose a critical approach only after evaluating the strategies in the actual product. My feeling is that only after you have gained a somewhat 'intimate' relationship with the text, can you detect what is ostensibly there and what is looming at the back and projecting into the future. There may be dormant critical issues as well as dormant meanings of words that may be re-functionalized and re-circulated, at the same time recovering their first impact on readers' eyes and minds...

POETRY

James Robertson



James Robertson is a poet, publisher, writer, editor and translator, a cultural activist who was prominent in the 'Yes' campaign for Scottish independence – but he is best known as a prize-winning novelist. His novels are The Fanatic (2000), Joseph Knight (2003, winner of both the Saltire and Scottish Arts Council Book of the Year awards), The Testament of Gideon Mack (2006, longlisted for the Man Booker Prize), And the Land Lay Still (2010, winner of the Saltire Book of the Year award) and The Professor of Truth (2013). His latest novel was inspired

by the bombing of Pan Am flight 103 on 21st December 1998. This atrocity resulted in the deaths of all 243 passengers and 16 crew, as well as 11 inhabitants of the Scottish town of Lockerbie. He has translated several children's books into Scots, including works by A.A. Milne, Roald Dahl, Alexander McCall Smith and Julia Donaldson. Robertson has held writer-in-residence posts, at Brownsbank Cottage (former home of the poet Hugh MacDiarmid) from 1993 to 1995, at the Scottish Parliament (2004), Edinburgh Napier University (2010 -11), and is an Honorary Research Fellow at the University of Glasgow. His most recent book, published in November 2014, is 365, a collection of 365-word stories written every day during 2013. His poetry has been published in Sound-Shadow (1995), Hem and Heid (2009) and in numerous anthologies and pamphlets. He lives in rural Angus, near Dundee.

Mirin

Not much is told of him.
He came from Ireland – Mirin of Benchor –
a blink of light in the long, cold dark.
He may have known Columba, Brendan, Blane, Moluag.
(It was an age of saints.)

They flickered on the sea in currachs
like floating candles, flame and course
set by the hand of God. Wild bays and firths
they settled, stone on stone, constructing shelters,
making paths on which to carry or send the Word.

Brendan sailed seven years in search of the blessed isle
of eternal youth. Mirin's journey brought him
to Strathclyde, to Paessa's clearing in the woods