

Interviews

Mario Petrucci

Poet, educator, songwriter and eco-physicist Mario Petrucci is renowned for combining innovation and linguistic excitement with a profoundly human aspect. He has been a Bridport winner, a prizewinner in the National Poetry Competition, four times winner of the London Writers Competition, and a Royal Literary Fund Fellow. The only poet to have held residencies at the Imperial War Museum and with BBC Radio 3, Petrucci contributes widely to poetry in the public domain (the Royal Society, the Natural History and Dickens Museums, Southwell Workhouse). *Flowers of Sulphur* (Enitharmon, 2007) gained an Arts Council England Writers' Award and a New London Writers Award, while his Arvon-winning *Heavy Water: a poem for Chernobyl* (Enitharmon, 2004) led to an internationally acclaimed film (Seventh Art Productions). "One of the best poets of our times" (*Literati*), Petrucci generates "Poetry on a geological scale... a new track for poets of witness" (*Verse*). *i tulips* (Enitharmon, 2010) promises "a truly ambitious landmark body of work" (*PBS Bulletin*). www.mariopetrucci.com

I'm reading your newest book, *i tulips*: this is something very different for you, in form and in scope. Can you say where it started?

Not so new, perhaps, Angela. Recently, I've been finding prototypic *i tulips* poems - or segments of poems - in some of my earliest writing. I suppose your question might be easier to address if I could be sure your readers knew more or less where I was (in terms of style and approach) pre-*tulips*. And you're touching here on a fascinating world few readers ever see: what motivates and moulds the progression

of the writer behind the tangible evidence of his or her books. I love finding out about that myself, for other writers (it's one of the great rewards of mentoring). So, with all that in mind, I might go on a bit!

Perhaps my first full collection *Shrapnel and Sheets* (Headland, 1996) is as good a place as any to start. You might describe it as a themed collection of strongly wrought, intense poems concerned with childhood and family, bereavement, love, Italy/The War, and science/medical science, along with a mix of political, historical and social phenomena that happened to take me. As with many contemporary collections of poetry, I was moving through my work, more or less, poem by isolated poem, adapting or inventing forms and approaches for each matter in hand. Many of those poems had been thoroughly workshopped, often several times, and put through a stringent peer-assisted redrafting process (usually varying in intensity according to each poem's perceived inadequacies and potential rewards) to get just the right, pared-down and essential effect appropriate to the individual poem in terms of eliminating infelicities and maximising impact.

But there was a problem. Several colleagues pointed out my ongoing tendency to overwrite, to become engrossed in the tumbling of imagery through different registers. Those many workshops (plus several incredibly patient colleagues) acted as compensation, helping me to spot flaws in my design or exposition, to see where my imagistic horses were pulling in too many directions. It was pretty hard work getting it all just so; but I was determined to achieve the optimal poem, however painful the process or partial the results. There were quite a few competition wins, though, and I began to

harbour an image of myself as a writer who, in the long term, would eventually understand his craft and weaknesses to such a degree that he'd produce at a consistently high level and – who knows? – might even become the vehicle for a few great poems.

Privately, though, I was vaguely dissatisfied: there was a kind of exasperation with my own instincts, as though I sensed that the ideal (hugely trained and *made*) writer I hoped to be was one who'd never quite sit well with my marrow. I recall friend and collaborator Martyn Crucefix suggesting (in what was probably a vital moment) that maybe it wasn't just the paring and checking that I needed to pursue; perhaps I should seek a way of working *with* my nature, finding modes of composition that could accommodate the imagistic, verbal rush, that would allow my propensity for a densely imagistic and discursive metaphysics to flower. Not pruning, then, but fertilising. That small spigot of insightful and unexpected advice probably played a part in piquing my desire to access the entire linguistic barrel. It's what every writer has to do: constantly grow away from their own rootstock without altogether losing sight of what the roots taught them. But how was I to do that, emphatically, without becoming wilfully obscure or impenetrably wrapped up in my own contexts, concerns and biography?

Did asking yourself that question result in a turning point for you?

It was a question, perhaps, that I'd always put to myself, in one form or another; but it wasn't until a particular period in 2005, when I'd been reading American modernist poets of the last mid-century, that a radically fresh trajectory finally seemed to resolve in me in terms of confidence and intention. There'd been early flares that something was coming, like electrical 'spikes' in a circuit that's firing up. One of these, a short sequence entitled *Nights*, has only now been published (October 2010) by Flarestack. Around the time I wrote

Nights, I was coming powerfully under the influence of 'Black Mountain' – a term, like many literary labels, so fuzzy and questionable as to be of modest value, perhaps, only when first approaching the subject. One thinks, though, of such poets as Charles Olson, Robert Creeley (how wonderfully idiosyncratically he reads aloud!), maybe Robert Duncan and (by very loose association) Denise Levertov, and, over here, Roy Fisher – poets for whom, put (over-)simply, one perception leads immediately and directly into the next. I found my own 'British' (or is it European?) interpretation of their collective and highly differentiated drive, whilst leaning heavily on Olson's famous linking of thought (via the ear) to the syllable and emotion (via the breath) to the line. I sought an improvised form that carried an organic unity with content and, crucially, a firm emphasis on the opportunities afforded by the line break. I was inspired, too, by the 'Objectivists' – another fraught term, centred on the likes of George Oppen and Louis Zukofsky, but also associated with William Carlos Williams and (arguably) Basil Bunting. Here I gained a sensitivity to poems/ words as actualised objects, became more alert to the significance of small and ordinary words (including the definite/ indefinite article), and squared up to the notion of The World As It Is. There was/ is a usefully strong sense in me, also, of the New York School (Ashbery, O'Hara, etc.), plus a dash of Cummings, and an attraction to the oddly striding, formally tight, extensive confessionism and wrenched syntax of Berryman's *Dream Songs*.

It's tempting, isn't it, for us to stay in our comfort zones? Especially when it has led to some success. Was it difficult for you to push in a new direction, and what did that new direction involve?

Difficult? Yes and No. We often associate change with greater, more intense application; but such shifts as these may have more to do with retuning your sensitivities and sensibilities (not always a complete rewiring job) or with 'getting

out of the way'. It might be about letting the 'work' happen *to* or *in* you. I admit, you might need to focus fairly intently, at times, on your habits of perception and approach, to either quell, overcome, or (less confrontationally) transform them. In this, a fresh reading list (or a freshly *perceived* existing list) can be crucial. Much of my own reorientation in reading and poetic deliberation was spurred and assisted by my long-term friend and co-editor at Perdika Press, Peter Brennan. Peter knows all one needs to know about the modernist heave away from convention, and much of his aesthetic chimed in with and supported my own. His encouragement and guidance (backed by his ongoing attentiveness to my progression as a writer) when I was veering away from what I knew (and knew would be acceptable to the mainstream) was timely, to say the least.

So, I found myself gazing across the Pond. But behind all that (mostly) American energy was my own enduring connection with an accessible 'British' lyricism, though somewhat tempered and pressurised by a psychological and metaphysical richness I admired in, say, Rilke. So, the subjects of these new poems are more pliable, more complex perhaps, than most of *Shrapnel and Sheets*. They don't slip (as much) into that contemporary habit of leading the reader by the hand carefully through the poem, signposting and framing the poem's moments of significance. *i tulips* aims less to talk *about* things than to speak *through* experience, association and sound: language not so much as mere medium for content, but as active participant in thought and feeling; or language as a vehicle, perhaps, but geared towards something 'else' (what all great writing, as far as I'm concerned, must aspire to) outside or beyond experience, behind language. That's a pretty intimidating prospect at first; but eventually it comes to embrace you. It's not a case of dumping your unprocessed notebooks on the public... rather, it's a preparedness to receive poems by a different route. So, poetry can arrive like dictation from another linguistic dimension. I've found this new approach

astonishingly liberating, in ways that I hope will be communicated to the open-minded (and open-eared) reader – not as 'difficulty' or randomness, but as a layeredness authentic to experience, a shifting, challenged coalition (if not unity) of meaning and sound. But always, at the heart of this: humanity, love, felt reality.

One of my first compositions consciously in this new style was partly in imitation of Creeley. It really got things moving for me, as if I'd finally decoded a vitally unlocking portion of my own Rosetta Stone. Since then, there've been over 800 poems in *i tulips* mode, often streamed into subtly recognisable strands of style, subject, manner and tone. But, as I said earlier, there were clear precursors. Most of *Shrapnel and Sheets* sounds like this (taken at random):

“And then the man laid out –
chins like gills, skin
yellow as last year's papers...”
 '*Before Your Time*'

... but you'll find the odd bit of proto-*i tulips* there too:

“*girls with waists like water the rim
of a well smell of night-time harbour...*”
 '*Duende*'

I suppose the acorn really does contain the oak.

So, with over 800 poems behind the *i tulips* project, do you consider them to be separate poems? A single poem? A sequence?

I've only recently begun studying Jack Spicer (of the 'San Francisco Renaissance') and his theories of poetry: most of *i tulips* runs quite close to his idea of the 'serial poem'. This has the book (or, in my case, the poetic project) as its unit, with its sub-unit the poem arrived at by taking a kind of dictation, without looking back or changing what you've done, gone into "not knowing what the hell you're doing" – indeed, "you have to be tricked into it" [Spicer].

In that state of surrender, belief and faith become their own engine. It's almost a kind of perpetual motion, only here the 'impossible' can happen: not the miracles of literature's Old Testament, but those of the New. In this way of thinking and writing, the editing process is often minimal, since the entire poem – line by line, syllable by syllable – evolves through and with the form. It's true that *i tulips* offers an overarching sense of invented form that helps to bind the poems together; but the sequence, for all its recurrences, also gives rise to utter individualism in the poems, not only in terms of the moment in which they came to be, but also by virtue of how they place themselves within that binding energy of the sequence.

What is that linking sense of form in *i tulips*?

It mostly revolves around what I call 'bevelled tercets'. Just a glance at the poems makes clear, I think, what I mean by that. I'm still not sure quite how I arrived at it. Perhaps there was some Platonic ideal hovering somewhere that decided to ground itself through me.

What issues arose in your attempts to ground that ideal?

I realised at some point, and in my own way, that when you strike towards – or into – a new creative mode, you have to find ways and techniques to stay connected to yourself while articulating and exploring the potencies and transcendent potentials of language. You have to remain as steady as you are lissom. That's not to say you really know, cognitively, what you're doing, or can work it all out... the enterprise is more akin to Keats' Negative Capability, or meditation. I suppose what I've learned is that we need each other, but must always be testing and transcending that need. It's like parenting yourself, knowing when to move on from dependency into your own metamorphosis. You still listen, and attend to criticism; but it no longer determines who you are. So, I don't attend workshops anymore, and the workshops

I run are (I hope) about as far as you can get from polishing the next competition entry via rigid workshoppy ideas. I've become far more interested in the deeper, riskier aspects of the writing process. How can we relate and engage in that much bigger (often less well-lit) space? Ultimately, you have to find your own way to yourself. That's what *i tulips* seems to have become for me: a way of being sympathetic not just with a subject, but also with myself. And now that I really think about it, the shorter answer to your question concerning 'where it started' might be to say that it starts again, in the present tense, with every moment.

You said earlier that 'the editing process is often minimal'. I'm guessing that's different from your usual (or 'old') way of working? Can you identify other differences in your writing process between *i tulips* and the earlier work?

I'd stress, I think, the revelatory aspect in *i tulips*, which encompasses more than the deployment of felicitous images and phrases in a poem? Another thought: rather than merely reacting to the desire to write well about a particular something, it's the pressure of the 'Gestalt' – that 'something in general' – that primes and pumps your pen. There's kinship, here, with automatic writing and stream of consciousness – but more ordered, maybe, than those often are. One ordering principle is that I'll often have a 'keying' idea hovering behind the composition – usually a scientific fact or metaphysical insight. So, one writes/ injects *into* the chosen form, with the form moulding the input whilst being itself remoulded (if necessary) by the input pressure. It's certainly a profound 'listening as you go', opposed (if 'opposition' is the right notion here) to the common methodology of iterating your way towards a final draft through various stages of stanzaic quilt-making and the canny orchestration of images whose aim is to make the driving idea clear and calculable. Charles Bernstein says of Louis Zukofsky's poems that they "are not representations of ideas but

enactments of thoughts in motion, articulated as sound”; or, more warmly, that “when we hold them in our hands we see our hands”. There is a “refusal to separate... complexity from clarity”. Even Larkin commented that poets shouldn’t “deal in instant emotion, instant opinion, instant sound and fury” – though I doubt, somehow, he’d approve of the ways in which I interpret his injunction.

That said, each particular process, each *tulip*, is its own story, its own spokesperson. Actually, I shouldn’t be acting here as interpreter – it risks misunderstanding, for a start. Moreover, I’m not really in analytical mode while these poems are being written; there just isn’t the same ‘serialised’ inspection process between drafts to plot out on any ‘process axis’. Like experience itself, the writing of the poem *happens* (not entirely unlike Allan Kaprow’s artworks or the efforts of the Wiener Gruppe), though you may (or may not) reflect on it later to engage in some tinkering. Indeed, there’s a feeling that the untouched poem, or line, however imperfect, may sometimes be the better record of the lived experience it relates? What’s certain is that the *i tulips* poems, overall, have been less interfered with, less ‘prepared’ for the public, than many earlier published pieces were. I see now that previous poems (where redrafting and peer comment were usually core process factors in terms of how they evolved) reflect a different mosaic of experiences to that of a poem ‘happening’ at the end of a pen or through a keyboard: the editorial input in the former case is, I think, a much larger part of what the reader experiences, though it’s often fairly invisible (i.e. not consciously witnessed at the poem’s surface).

For *i tulips*, then, interested readers might discover more of the ‘emergent process’ – and more available, perhaps – in the poems themselves? I certainly hope they’ll be implicated in that process, allowing themselves to be caught up in part-inventing the meaning. Of course, some readers are reluctant to do any such work, or just aren’t prepared to delay

gratification; others might dismiss *i tulips* by association with what they perceive, rightly or wrongly, as wilful obscurity or pointlessly impenetrable ‘difficulty’ on the part of certain authors they’ve previously read. There’s also a strange assumption (I make it too, to an extent) that an invitation to greater reader involvement in a text must be accompanied by less pleasure in the poem as immediately read. But what I’m after is an enrichment of *all* the strata of a poem, not just a frisson in the depths at the expense of the presented surface. As illustration, here are a few lines from *Shrapnel and Sheets* (1996):

*Opened my eyes to my husband’s bed, the room
just one chair, a slow clock. Shutters admitted
slats of first light - water on stucco. The crude
pine headboard wafted its incense. His dark head.*
from ‘*Sheets*’

... and, for contrast, from *i tulips* (2010):

oh ill walk that
negative self down the

road invisible against
asphalt – this old body t-
urned antimatter ganger &

all honest tumour except
for will in its two b-
right halves &

under its rib that un-
stoppable fib-
rillant

muscle

from ‘*one pink heart*’

Does the example help at all? See, for instance, how the rhythm and meaning in the second piece jostle with line breaks and hyphenations, complicating but (also, I hope) enriching the meaning. What I seek are those processes in writing that open up both author and reader to profounder possibilities in language than

one usually finds in the well-turned poem that delivers a series of messages and effects with relative reproducibility and aesthetic/pictorial accuracy. I'm not knocking that (latter) approach *per se*, but suggesting there are other ways to generate a reading experience of immense value, ways that can begin to access certain 'codes' and modes in language that a more conventional poem (whatever that means) may struggle to reach. A beautiful or emphatic poem that presents a tidy unity according to pre-set ideas or etiquettes is fine, if that's what you want from art; I want to be beautiful and emphatic too; but these newer poems also explore a variety of effects and stimulations that will be more difficult for most reading groups or workshops to define or confine. They pursue a plural, layered conception of those encounters we experience in ourselves through language in the midst of lived moments, language that attempts to engage with the imagination *in motion*. I still want the text, though, to be utterly readable, potent in the ear, relevant to heart as well as mind.

So, to return to your question more explicitly, I suppose the essential difference between *i tulips* and what came before involves (to varying degrees) an attempt to *enact* experience rather than to merely comment upon it, combined with the sense that words themselves are at the centre of our experience of words.

Thank you for your time, Mario. There are threads in what you've said that I'd love to follow up, but we're out of space – so, I'll just ask what you see as your next step in these explorations?

In a way, time belongs to us all – so, no need for thanks. And I appreciate your questions! As for *i tulips*, I'm aiming to stop at 1001 poems. I figure, by then, it'll be visible from space. But look at what happened to Pound with his *Cantos* – I think I read somewhere that he thought they'd end at 100...? Meanwhile, the real exploration is life: family, friends, making one's way with integrity. Not being a tourist in

your own consciousness. Keeping the channels of language open will be part of that, I'm pretty sure, wherever I'm taken. In terms of words, I'll keep listening for the goat bells that tinkle through the night, and just do my best to try to glimpse where the craft and the graft require me to be.

this light shows

through you as dusk
where you turn
addressing

addressed
by our window
as though you wore

gauze of being here
more lightly when
i yearn through

you for light
beyond you yet
i learn the firmest

sight can hold onto
tonight is that
shaping &

shaped-by
almost-here
fern-coloured

dress

from *i tulips* (Enitharmon, 2010)

everyone begins as fish &

ends so – spiralling after
egg (that other half of our
chains) & setting gills

in gristled knot that buds
legs as tadpoles do & blow-
hole ears halfway down

the back & low-set eye
alien as featherless chick –
ah we have peered into

that shared ovum whose
blasto-flesh runs its gauntlet
of fowl & fish so fused at

the tail nothing can be told
apart – is this why when i am
late i find in upstairs dark

you – on placenta duvet &
hunched round self as wom-
bed ones are? – as though

i had just returned from
all eternity to catch you
naked out sleepwalking

space without even
navel-twisted purpled
rope to hold you

from *i tulips* (Enitharmon, 2010)

for a newborn son

what pours

from that so-fast
treading there
just under

where rib
might be – your
one tight curd in muscle

throwing itself back &
through & always
back angry

with life
it fills with or
empties hung in

you as a red wasp
in almost too
small

a web?

from *crib* (forthcoming, Enitharmon)

Sheets

(Italy, 1944)

that stripping down – selves mothers heirs
daughters / sons made a bed their blood
coverlets pretended white laid
down to sleep pillows the unborn
who reach through those pink shapes vaguely
curious their feathered arms out
-stretched as just beyond night's glass they
can barely see fall snows piling
white from pitch as though all mothers
do is bonfire sheets the down they
put here as tiny hands or feet

from *the waltz in my blood* (forthcoming, Waterloo Press)