

EVIDENCE : ALESSANDRO PORCO INTERVIEWS SAMUEL ANDREYEV

AP: Samuel, I do want to introduce readers to the particulars of your biography—notably, your work as a composer and your current residence in Paris—but before that I want to start with the suggestive title of your first book of poetry, *Evidence* (Quattro Books, 2009). Etymologically, the word “evidence,” from the Latin *evidentia*, means “out to see.” That is, a condition of something being clear and present (e.g. it is evident) or “evidence” as the thing that points to or signifies that which is evident elsewhere. Of course, there are other ways in which the term is used. For example, there is the legal sense of “evidence”—a form of proof, situated within a larger story that a lawyer weaves in order to ascertain conviction or acquittal. Evidence is sometimes a bearing witness, i.e. in the form of court testimony, or testimony in a more religious sense. What, then, are you giving evidence to? I’m especially in the abstract opacity of your work and how it accords—or not—with evidence as a condition of clarity.

SA: All of the meanings you mention resonate in some way with the book’s aims. While *Evidence* has a number of areas of investigation, one of the main ones is the surface, and the physical, material reality, of language. On the one hand, you have events, objects and situations—concrete, objective things—and on the other, there is the language we use to communicate our subjective experiences of these things to others. Evidence uses various strategies to de-couple the linguistic surface from the event which generated it, in order to investigate the mysterious space between the two which I find fantastically interesting. While my poems usually have a basis in something concrete, I’m not so interested in the banal details of the event itself—I’m interested in looking at the linguistic residue which remains afterwards. Hence the title.

There is all this absence in the poems, as we cannot directly access or interact with the events, objects or situations in question and are left with an incomplete and unreliable lexical record. Because there is always crucial information missing, the resulting shell of words must be appreciated on its own autonomous aesthetic terms, since it cannot be related with anything approaching reliability to a real event. The qualities of this shell—its assonance, echoes, rhythms, surface texture—these are the qualities which animate the poems.

The sense of strangeness which the poems attempt to convey also comes from a deliberate separation of form and content. Sometimes very familiar content, with lots of emotive associations, is poured into an entirely foreign formal mold; inversely, strange, fantastical content is sometimes related through hackneyed, threadbare forms. There is always something wildly inappropriate about the way content and form are brought together in these poems.

AP: Ok, well, your answer conveniently lets me step back, as promised, to discuss those interesting biographical details that frame your poetic practice. First, you bring up that strategic disconnect between form and content, and you stress those affective features of the poetic event, i.e. assonance, echo, texture, etc. You are an acclaimed composer, and your understanding of form and content seem, perhaps, inflected by a musical background/approach. Is that a fair assessment? Second, John Ashbery has often remarked that his move to Paris conditioned his altered relation to language ergo we get his *The Tennis Court Oath* style. What’s your personal reason for being in Paris and its material-aesthetic outcome, if any, do you think?

SA: It’s interesting you find my approach to the relationship of form and content to be musical, because paradoxically, I’ve never managed to implement musically some of my poetic ideas about form in a way I find convincing. But certainly meaning functions in a very different way in music than in poetry; far from being the universal language it’s often described as, music seems considerably more subjective and its appreciation dependant on cultural conditioning. I always have a sense that the inner core of a piece of music’s deeper signification is something which can perhaps be felt, but never fully appropriated, not even by the composer. Perhaps because of this, my poetry is usually focused on ambiguity and mystery, which is very different from confusion and chaos. Confusion implies a breakdown of an expected order, and tends to block receptivity. Mystery comes from selective, mobile inaccessibility and can create fascination. In order to generate mystery, you need great precision, but also a flexible handling of means. Consequently, my poetry strives for concision. I find that many of the things I am interested in exploring as a poet simply do not function if forced to operate

on a larger scale; the law of diminishing returns quickly starts to apply. This may seem limiting, but in fact it opens up a large number of questions whose resolution I find extremely stimulating.

In any case, there is a strong link between the two areas of my output. I often borrow titles for my pieces from my poems, and certain musical processes which are present in my compositions can be found in my poems as well, a good example being the embedded streams of poems like *Temporal Situation*, in which three poems are all weaving into each other at once, but according to different temporalities. Many of the basic elements of music are present in my poetry, although I think the same could be said of many poets who are not also professional musicians, as I am. For example, on a formal level, my poetry often explores non-linear forms which function through intercutting, juxtaposition, repetition, re-ordering of 'reservoir texts', and so on. At the level of local detail, I tend to use very simple basic constitutive elements, but choose them carefully. All of this is equally true of my music.

To address your second question, I came to Paris in 2003 for a number of reasons. I suppose the first and foremost was that at the time (I was 22) I felt a strong need to put myself voluntarily in a disorienting situation, sensing intuitively that this would help me sharpen and concentrate my artistic goals. I also wanted to study at the famed Paris Conservatoire, which I did. There's no question that living in France and mainly speaking French for almost 9 years now has strongly conditioned my outlook. It has created a distance from my native language which allows me to latch onto peculiarities of speech and syntax which I would otherwise not have noticed.

AP: I'm glad you brought up the poem "Temporal Situation." Using a dynamic mix of light, regular, and bold type, you are able to adduce and visually cue "different temporalities," all from the grammatical and musical surface of the poem. These multi-levels units of meaning either "hover" or "strike...sharply then / decay to nothing" or resonate with the larger structure. You apply this same technique as well in "Every Time It Snows" and "Cones and Waves." Can you talk about the origin of these poems—Steve Venright, for example, did something similar to this years ago in his book *Visitations*. (I know he's been an influence on, and champion of, your work.) In addition, I like to think of these multi-tiered poems as "knots," a term/image that appears a few times in the collection. Perhaps you could discuss the "knot" as a poetic conceit that interests you.

SA: I'll start backwards and work my way to "Temporal Situation". The concept of the knot is an important one in my poetics, as well as in my music. A large part of my thinking depends on the idea of simultaneously evolving layers which follow independent temporalities. These layers can be superimposed, interpolated, or made temporarily to disappear from view, like a stream which runs underground for a while then emerges aboveground a kilometer later. They can also interact and influence each other. So the notion of simultaneous, co-extant streams, which may be quite different from each other, is an important one in my work. The knot is something which implies a temporary coming together of all of these streams, a kind of giant intersection, a concentration of energy coming from different directions. This is something where I can point specifically to music as having been at the origin of a concept I use in my poetry. *Temporal Situation* is a good example of this technique. Basically you have three poems in one. There is the 'main' poem, in regular type, and two shorter ones, respectively in lightface and in bold. The lightface one appears regularly at an interval of once every six words, whereas the bold one appears at irregular intervals throughout the poem. Both are five words long, if read in order: "diagonally / cycling / through / the / elements" and "concealing / an / extremely / fine / grain". The challenge in writing poems like these is that the three embedded poems must work as coherent units if read alone, but also must link up together in a way that produces a satisfying ur-poem. The longer, main poem thus had to be written around the two shorter ones, whose word order was already fixed. It's a bit like a plant growing around and through the roots of a tree. This sounds very technical, but the quality I was after was something organic and flowing.

While I wasn't aware of Steve Venright having specifically used this technique, his work nearly always functions on a number of levels at once, and the deft way in which he juggles many different layers of reality provide his work with an uncommon liveliness.

Besides the knots, there are other recurring images in the poems—for instance, webs, nets, and waves. All of these point to large-scale periodicities or transcendental structures, the nature and ordering of which we can't readily perceive when we're caught up in them; yet they determine everything.

AP: That's really interesting—I would have just assumed that, perhaps, you started with the longer complete poem and, through a form of reflexive reading and discovery, adduced the two embedded poems. But let me turn to a couple of different things, not necessarily related. First, I want to talk more about those “large-scale periodicities”—and aperiodicities, too—now familiar concepts in terms of 20th century music (Schoenberg, Stockhausen, etc.). In poetry, such large-scale periodicity lets us think about rhythm in a new way, beyond weak-strong stresses, for example. But how does it work in your poetry, insofar as *Evidence* is composed of short lyrics? Second, could you discuss poems like “Not Moving,” “En Chantier,” and “Commute,” where the duration of a single word is extended and interrupted by a series of other words.

SA: I'll answer in a roundabout way. “En Chantier” is an example of a poem which could only have come out of living in France, and the linguistic distancing effect this has entailed. My first couple of years here I met regularly with a Parisian who had asked me to help him master English. I used to write down his mistakes during our conversations so that we could fix them afterwards. I'd be left with these sheets of fragmentary phrases written in broken English which had a sort of overall coherence to them, in that they were all spoken in the context of a single

topic of conversation. They served as great primary material for this poem, as well as for several others in the book. As far as the hyphenated words go, that was another attempt at creating alternative spatial-temporal sensations in a poem. It's meant to function like a wormhole, in that it provides a means to jump instantaneously to another spatial location without having to experience the intervening words in 'real time', although of course it is possible to return to them later. So basically it's just another way of suggesting a non-linear experience of time. The large-scale periodicities I mentioned are probably only relevant to poems like “Temporal Situation” where you have elements that return in cyclic fashion throughout the course of the poem. As you quite rightly pointed out, it is essentially a rhythmic concept, because it has to do with movement and articulation.

I could get into a lot of details about the structuring of certain of my poems, but I think it would be misleading, since the majority of them are written in a quite spontaneous way, albeit with a usually quite lengthy revision process. The main thing is to do it, to start with nothing, or almost nothing, and make it possible for the words, the meanings and the forms to accrue and begin to constitute a palpable atmosphere within which one can live, breathe and act.

With regards to my working methods, there are two parallel strategies I employ in any work I do, really. One is to approach things extremely intuitively, through introspection or through chance encounters with the material world—the other is to start with something more abstract, such as a type of pattern, or a given reservoir of words, a workman-like technique in other words. The funny thing is that while these two approaches are diametrically opposed, the poetry which results from them is often very similar, in my case, anyway. Which I think says something about the primacy of the author's experience, attitude, degree and quality of introspection... any conscious structural idea will provide a degree of more or less productive friction, but it will always end up being bent by the far stronger intuitive level—unless you are not looking far enough.

If I feel I'm getting too lazy, or I don't have enough resistance coming from my material, these structural things can help—like a boxer fighting a mirror image of himself, it provides a form of illusory interaction with another entity. I sometimes spent hours devising these insanely complex formal strategies, then completely scrapping them and starting over with something extremely simple. It's very important to think about why you're using such structural materials, what they're for, what sort of surface they generate, are they even necessary at all. Much avant garde poetry relies heavily on structural ideas which, though possibly interesting in and of themselves, don't necessarily translate into an equivalently interesting text. So why bother?

AP: To end, a couple things. First, you've mentioned creating poems based on a given “reservoir of words.” You provided one example (notes derived from the language acquisition process). Can you give a couple of other examples of this. Second, what are you working on these days, in terms of poetry or music? What trajectory do you find your work following?

SA: The reservoir-text technique is nothing new ; it's a staple of Language poetry, for instance. Steve McCaffery,

who has employed it in works such as 'ow's "Waif" likens it to a form of literary cubism, in which known elements are re-ordered according to foreign criteria in order to reveal new or unsuspected properties. My use of it is rather different. I'm not really interested in

uncovering unknown properties of a known thing, but rather in creating texts which can seem to be pushing in several opposing directions at once, while somehow remaining grounded at a basic level. I'll give you an example taken from Evidence. There's a long-ish poem called "Persuaded by this Lovely Suitcase" which I dedicated to David McFadden (a poet I've always admired). The way I wrote that was to take a poem of David's (I no longer remember which one) and retain only its syntactical structure, while replacing all of the vocabulary. So that, for instance, every time a noun appeared, I had to replace it with a noun taken from a second text—as it happens, a diary entry of mine. So you have the form, line lengths, and syntactical structure of one poem, and the vocabulary of another text, and the two have nothing to do to each other, yet are forced to inhabit the same poem.

Alternatively, I sometimes thoroughly transform an initial starting point through paring down. As an example, I once set myself the task of writing a poem by coming up with one line a day for a year, without re-reading the previous ones. I think I gave it up after a few months, but still, ended up with a fairly lengthy text. The result was surprisingly coherent, but it didn't really work as a poem, so I took the best parts, re-ordered and revised them, and ended up with "Journal", which is very short. It's one of my favorite poems and there's no way I could have written anything similar through other means.

Regarding your second question, there is one important point where I am radically re-considering my initial point of departure, though it pertains mainly to my music. My music used to have a generally agitated surface characterized by continual variation of figures which were themselves inherently complex. One of the ambitions of my more recent pieces has been to have this high degree of elaboration sink below the surface to a deeper structural level. Currently, my music aims for the greatest possible concision and clarity of the basic building blocks, but great flexibility of transformation. The more easily the listener is able to retain in their memory the constitutive elements you're working with, the more you can be radical in terms of what you do with them.

As you will have gathered, a lot of the Evidence poems are based around process. My more recent texts have been a lot less concerned with that. Perhaps because I am not mainly a writer, I tend to write in concentrated bursts, and then sometimes need several years to find the final form of a text. Due to this radically slow production, my poetry evolves in a different way to my music. I'm working on a new series of poems, though when they'll be done is anyone's guess.. after all, Evidence took about five years!