

## Collected Works interviews Stephen Massimilla

**CWB:** In your latest collection of poetry, *The Plague Doctor In His Hull-Shaped Hat*, you seem to take the reader on a journey across Italy. The book's cover is evocative of this also. Could you tell us a little about the inspiration for this aspect of the book?

**SM:** Well, I was on a mission to recover a manuscript that I'd lost upon returning from a trip to and through Italy, my ancestral and literary "homeland." It's still possible to lose a manuscript if you work in hard copy and travel recklessly. Besides, as the titular reference to the "Hull-Shaped Hat" implies, the book is, in a sense, about traveling—not only from Capri to Venice, but from New England to the Tropics, and from Ithaca to Never Never Land. I wanted to pay homage to something that went wrong, all the more *because* it went wrong. Themes such as loss, alienation, obsession, schizophrenia, suicide, memory, and self-realization are explored in and through metaphors about travel. The book is also about searching—in a quasi-Buddhistic way—for freedom from self and place.

**CWB:** Your poems are evocative, in my mind, of a number of poetic traditions. The early twentieth-century Italian poet Giuseppe Ungaretti comes to mind, but also French Symbolist and Imagist poets like Tristan Corbiere and Jules Laforgue. Now, I could be way off the mark; would you share some of your inspirations in regard to poets and poetic schools?

**SM:** Sure, *les poètes maudits* Corbiere, LaForgue, Ungaretti: they're worth defending against a disorderly genius such as Shakespeare. But I've spent more of my life poring over, for example, Dante, or the *oeuvres* of the British Romantics. Among the heirs of the Symbolists and the Imagists, a lot of my teaching and critical writing has centered on the High Modernists from Yeats to Eliot to Lawrence and their local American "enemies" from William Carlos Williams to James Schuyler. I'm also drawn to the so-called "confessional" poets, and, for different reasons, to poets of the Harlem Renaissance, of Black Mountain, and of other movements or schools. Still, I've often been even more captivated by those working outside the Anglo-French paradigm—Rilke, Lorca, Mayakovsky, Tsvetaeva, Milosz, Szymborska, Hikmet, Soyinka, etc. And does Dickinson, Roethke, or Kunitz belong to a "school"? To bring my answer down to earth, I should add that my favorite poets are not all "weighty." I'm an astropotomus\* fan of that inquisitive and delicate psychologist, Dean Young, for instance, and of Heather McHugh. In the end, our sensibilities have a bigger effect on what we do than all the poets who happen to inspire us, so I may appear to be more of a Symbolist than I understand myself to be.

**CWB:** Your poems owe a debt to color, image, and metaphor. You also utilize a very distinguished use of enjambment (or, in laymen's terms, line break) that I am tempted to call Massimillian; thus, my question is, how do you work your poems? In your drafting process, do you write out your poetic lines in a longer form and then break them? Or, does your use of metaphor, enjambment, etc. fall out naturally in the fashion we (the reader) engage with in the final draft?

**SM:** Though the Muse sometimes dictates these matters from the start, it is often only when a poem tells me where it wants the line breaks to fall that I find what I need to say. I agree with Olson and Creeley that the form of a poem should be like the X-ray of its content. For me, the line-break is where the dread, the rapture, the magic happens. Enjambment is integral to the music of a poem; and it can serve so many functions, including conveying emphasis, interruption, dislocation, propulsion, and corollary signification. I sometimes read poets such as Ferlinghetti, Zukofsky, and many others just for the pleasure of re-experiencing their line breaks. In this book, my poem "Staying with the Mississippi," which is about crossing and also permanently entering the great American river, took shape when it broke into riverine lines. In a sense, every line break marks a station of the cross, but we never know if it will be a moment of coronation, decapitation, or both. If that sounds like an odd way of summing things up, all I can do is quote E.E. Cummings: "scolds Forbid /den Stop / Must /n't Don't."

**CWB:** Your book contains a poem entitled "Sacred Defoliation" which tell us that it was written "after Vallejo". Cesar Vallejo is, for our readers who don't know, one of the leading Spanish language poets of the early twentieth century. Could you tell us a little about your connection to him? Also, what is meant here by "after Vallejo". Are we to understand that this is not a translation in the strictest sense, but rather a "transliteration," as the poet Bill Knott would say, which is more of a bringing over of the theme of a poem than a word for word translation?

**SM:** In the final section of the book, we travel through the seasons in reverse, starting in the fall. The "after Vallejo" poem, which is shamelessly addressed to the autumn moon, fits in here. It expresses the tension between the sensual blood of the poet and the tragic idealism of the prophet—the real fatality of this tension. The term "after" can denote anything from a close translation to what Dryden and Lowell called an "imitation" to a radical transformation. Here, I wanted to pay homage to the original while taking necessary liberties to fashion a musically and emotively effective English version. And there was another issue. Since this poem was published in 1919, Vallejo could not have intended his verb *holocaustarse* to remind us of the Holocaust. It's now impossible to read that word in a poem without making that association. Therefore, I changed Vallejo's active, reflexive "holocaust themselves" to "are holocausted." My grandmother's family was killed in the Holocaust. Also, when Vallejo used the word "gypsy" to describe his heart,

he wasn't thinking of this context but of the artist as marginalized outsider, given the lack of adequate company that kept him nevertheless brave and (darkly) cheerful.

**CWB:** I am always interested in process and I wondering if you would share with us some of your process in the generation of poems. How do you draft your poems? Do you keep a notebook for handwritten notes or are you always working digitally from a tablet, computer or other device? How many drafts, on the average, would you say that your poems go through before they are ready to be submitted to journals or published in a book?

**SM:** When I write, I don't let anyone breathe or even think in my vicinity. For someone suffering from spiritual pregnancy, self-isolation is one of the terms of instinctive sagacity. Writing poetry involves wanting the whole world to oneself. It's an impossible, ridiculous proposition. I start with pen and paper before moving any words to that dangerous Friend, the computer. I don't own a tablet, but I have a sketchbook that I'm always filling with drawings and drafts of poems. I sometimes even follow my old mentor Derek Walcott's advice to compose first in pencil, as Hemingway did (Hemingway was a poet as well as a novelist). That way, early drafts never look too good to mess with. In recent years, I've relied on poets and friends in The Urban Range, especially Sally Dawidoff, for feedback. And I revise *ad infinitum*. The average poem takes about forty years to write.

**CWB:** Stephen, you are a poet, a scholar, and a painter. This type of "Renaissance Man" artist is more and more common. My question is twofold: is this, in your mind, related to the increase in higher education systems that offer studio practice and creative writing degrees? Do campuses like Columbia in New York and The Chicago Art Institute put students in more direct contact with the creative arts on so many levels that the young arts student is engaged with more possibilities so far as artistic creation goes? And, furthermore, is the trend for interactive, or installation based art, increasing the number of artists who "do it all"?

**SM:** In my experience, people are multifaceted, and creative people often work in more than one medium. Famous poet-scholars from Boccaccio to Berryman and artist-poets such as Michelangelo, Blake, Rossetti and Cummings don't seem to reflect a single historical trend. Most writers, scholars, and artists I know also teach for a living. Anyway, my grandparents met at the Art Student's League, and I've been painting for as long as I can remember. After college, I studied studio art at the Art Institute of Chicago, and I continued to paint while pursuing later degrees in writing and literature at Columbia University in New York. I've done the bulk of my artwork outside of university facilities, though.

To answer your second question, I am all in favor of the collaborative projects of the New York School. In fact, I was just rereading O'Hara's poem "Why I Am Not a Painter." Still, when I taught writing and literature at an art school in

Manhattan, I noticed that the undergraduates were working in traditional media, whereas everything the graduate students were doing was installation-based, “out there,” and “conceptual.” I see no reason for dividing the terrain in this way, given that so-called “traditional” painting (everything from the cave paintings of Lascaux to the work of Odd Nerdrum) has long been very “out there” in its way; and “conceptual” art (as in, everything from Zulu masks to the Anthropophagisms of Yves Klein) has never had to be exclusively installation-based. Within the literary academy, meanwhile, writing programs and literature programs have tended to be isolated from each other. Also, as Marjorie Perloff has pointed out, the very label “interdisciplinary” has lately entailed focusing on the sociopolitical at the expense of the aesthetic, as if they were separate realms. I understand why rifts such as these have formed, but I don’t see them as necessary or true to the spirit of interdisciplinarity.

**CWB:** What do you see as being a new avenue for poetry in its relation to other arts or public arts. How can poetry break from the page and reach out into the world? Or can it?

**SM:** The poet writes out of an internal abyss, creating out of his own response to the world. Over time, I become unable to endure my own work *unless* it reaches out beyond the page. By painting the cover for the book and writing poems influenced by Baroque, Surrealist, and Expressionist painting and sculpture, I’m already reaching out to engage different genres. I also believe in the potential of poetry to address various sociocultural, psychological, and spiritual plagues, to elevate the spirit, and to open up new possibilities. The word “doctor” is as important to the title of my book as the notion of a “plague” in our midst and the metaphor about traveling *through* the world.

**CWB:** Finally, our standard question: Some sort of apocalyptic scenario: limited resources, solitude, long silences—what books are in your survival kit?

**SM:** You know, that doesn’t sound half bad! I could use some more solitude...for a while. After that, I’d rely on Stendhal or the early Tolstoy for the brilliant details of a social world I’d be missing. I’ve been even more of a Dostoyevsky fan so far, but you’re talking about a game changer. There is a risk to spending too much time alone with Dostoevsky’s perverse brand of profundity. What kind of apocalyptic scenario did you have in mind? A nuclear winter might be too long even for Tolstoy. If I were going to a desert island, Vallejo’s knack for facing hardship would make him a candidate, but his heavy insistence on ecclesiastical tropes and agonies in stony places might not be suitable for the beach. I’d probably take Neruda and Lorca. Neruda knows tomorrow will be like today. And Lorca would remind me that I could always make a lot out of a little, that it takes only one miniscule ant to drink up the entire hemisphere of the midday sky

reflected in the eye of one of Robinson Crusoe's dead goats. Come to think of it, this might be a good occasion for a tablet with access to millions of books; but I'm assuming those devices wouldn't function on a desert island. I much prefer reading in hard copy anyway.

**Stephen Massimilla** is a poet, critic, professor, and painter. His co-authored book *Cooking with the Muse* is forthcoming from Tupelo Press. *The Plague Doctor in His Hull-Shaped Hat* was selected in the Stephen F. Austin University Press Poetry Prize competition. Massimilla also received the Bordighera Poetry Prize for his book *Forty Floors from Yesterday*; the Grolier Prize for *Later on Aiaia*; a Van Rensselaer Award, selected by Kenneth Koch; and others. His work has appeared in hundreds of publications. Massimilla holds an M.F.A. in writing and a Ph.D. in English and Comparative Literature from Columbia University, and he teaches at Columbia and the New School. **For more information about Massimilla and his works visit [www.stephenmassimilla.com](http://www.stephenmassimilla.com).**