

living in poesis/a day with pier giorgio di cicco



(an interview with my interrupting yet thoughtful interjections)
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photos by sarah e. truman

introduction/suspicious of poetry
and god: okay let's go

White petals are falling.
Our wineglasses slowly
drain. Sarah and I talk about
God, our day in Ontario, Father Di Cicco.
Sarah says, *There are probably lots of
geniuses hiding out in the woods, doing mass.*

I say, *I hope so.*

Before I met Father Di Cicco I had
been carrying around a napkin with
his name scribbled on it for over a year.
Pier Giorgio Di Cicco. That name was
tucked away in my purse, in the ter-
rible handwriting of a friend who had
told me about a poet he used to know,
a poet who stopped writing when he
became a priest, but recently began to
publish poetry again.

This interested me immediately.

Poetry and God. Two things I am
slightly suspicious of, but tend to spend
most of my time thinking about. It's
not very often that those two things
come together in an acceptable way,
but I respected my friend's opinion very
much, so I went to find this Di Cicco's
books. When I found them, I didn't
know quite what to do.

We all look for what speaks to us
– poems, novels, songs – our experience
reflected back, but more eloquently than
we could have put it. So seldom is it that
I see my own experience on the page,
and not only my own present experi-
ence, but how I imagine my past and
future to be.

Yet there it was.

Funny that I find myself in a car with
Sarah driving out of Toronto on our way
to meet Di Cicco. I somehow knew I
would meet him the moment I opened
up one of his books, but as we turn

off the highway, onto country roads, I
wonder what exactly I am doing here.

The other day my friend who scrib-
bled Di Cicco's name down emailed me,
saying, *In his most recent phase Di Cicco
acts as priest: outsider as holy mediator,
and as a poet: the outsider as the betrayer of
brotherhood. But in doing so he also marks
the very conditions of community, the finite
singularity of beings divided from them-
selves. Put in other words, as poet/priest he
is the gatekeeper to "communion."*

And I thought, yes, yes! Beings
divided from themselves. I am divided
from myself! So, am I searching out the
poet/priest to receive this communion?
Maybe, maybe not, but I do feel that
I will find some answers; I'm just not
sure what the questions are yet.

Di Cicco lives in the Ontario coun-
tryside, north of Toronto. We get out of
the car and try to find our way through
the mess of country living to his door.
He finds us first, squints at us through
his cataracts, and after a kiss on each
cheek, inquires about the colour of our
eyes. He shows us around his land, ges-
tures out to the soft hills, and says, this
is the honeymoon wilderness.

The Honeymoon Wilderness is also the
title of his first book of new poetry after
fifteen years. Maybe I have never spent
much time with a poet, one whose work
I know really well, but the day unfolds
like this – at every turn are fragments of
his poems, in his speech, on his wall,
the dripping faucet, cactuses, the fruit-
picking ladder made out of one log that
reaches up to nowhere. He leans against
it and I say, *you wrote a poem about that
ladder.* It's the first time all day that I
call him on it, and he looks at me with
a particular expression of mistrust and
astonishment; maybe he was surprised

that I actually read his poems, I don't
know.

The land is wild and untended.
His house is spare and accented with
'50s furniture, some kitschy Catholic
knick-knacks, a few books (ranging
from vintage fiction digests to *Derrida
for Beginners*), old records, and not
much else. On the wall is a painting of
Route 66, complete with blinking red
lights. He's a mix of backwoods hermit,
high-talking philosopher, man of God
and Canadian poet. He gives weekly
mass, teaches at the university and has
recently been made the poet laureate of
Toronto. His priest's collar lies on the
kitchen table alongside ashtrays and
coffee cups. This is where we spend
most of the day.

we begin/what the f*** is
metaphysics?: a lesson

But at first we sit in his living room.
I'm glad Sarah has come along,
because she is occupying Di Cicco
with grandiose arguments of dualism.
For the time being, I get to sit back
and observe. Very quickly I know
what we are in for. Poet Dennis Lee
has described Di Cicco as "gregarious,
intelligent, cantankerous, lonely, droll,
obsessive, impulsively tender." And I
would have to agree with him.

Di Cicco begins like this, and it is
typical of how the day follows:

I hate to jump on the old band-
wagon, but the bad guys still appear to
be the Greek philosophers. But what is
it that presupposes a people to become
dualistic? We tend to look for psycho-
logical, philosophical, social, anthropo-
logical answers to this, and this is very
easy for us to do, because we are a very
non-somatic society. We don't think in

You know, the dark night of the soul is more than just a psychological overhaul. A lot of us think it is. I want to be free on my own terms; I want to be holy on my own terms. Being holy, I don't know much about it, but it seems to me that it's about having your heart broken so many times that you don't have a heart anymore. You don't have a heart anymore.

terms of the body in North America or Nordic countries, and the answers may be in the intelligence of the body and not in the body of the intelligence.

The metaphysics of any people are predicated by land and the environment that they are from. What is it in ecology that predicates thinking, feeling and reasoning? As central a thing as light. As light. The light in the Mediterranean is very dramatic. It goes from sky to earth. There's a movement you can see and feel, a movement; it's like the light of heaven shining on the Earth. You've got two things already that predispose you against a metaphysic of one joining with the other.

Sarah leaves to load the camera and spoke around the grounds. I try getting background material on Di Cicco's life, but he acts bored, and isn't having any of it. I can't tell if he is avoiding answering my questions, or just doesn't like the subject matter. He wants to engage, and he doesn't want me to be the interviewer. At one point our conversation goes like this:

How has being Italian affected your poetry?

What do you mean? Why do you ask that?

I don't know, it was your segue. You started talking about poetry, then said how Italian you are. Are they connected?

I'm still trying to figure that out. It

would look like the attempt to reconcile oppositions like Italian and American, Med and North American would seek to find its resolution through the arts, but I don't think so.

I've realized lately that we tend to explain much of what we do by socio-cultural-anthropological backgrounds. But in fact, we are propelled by a metaphysic. And that metaphysic gives birth to the cultural, not vice versa. Culture has become God in the 20th and 21st century. We think everything is explained by culture. I don't believe that to be the case. As I was mentioning earlier, just as the light predicated philosophy, metaphysics predicates the culture.

The way Italians make an arc of a gesture with their hand, that's simply a gestural mimetic, of the relationship between what is around the body and the body. Our bodily expressions are expressions of our relationship to the land. Our thoughts, our syntax, are predications of that, our cultural habits are predicated by that. So that my poetry was a result of a certain kind of metaphysic. ...

Let me take a rest. Let me think. It's not wise to think rapidly. When you think rapidly, you are forced to syntax, to narratives, to scripts that may not be genuine. That's why the poet takes time writing. So as not to fall into predictable and handed scripts. I trust myself in poems; I don't trust myself in conversation.

That's interesting, because you like

conversation.

Yeah, I especially like it because it can become a poem. That's the best part of conversation. Mostly it doesn't; mostly it's dialogic. And poetry is not dialogic.

What is it?

The poem is always about becoming one. The poem creates oneness in itself and draws the reader into oneness. It seeks to become. It seeks to become the reader. The dialogic doesn't seek to become, the dialogic likes separateness. It's a difference between the unitive and the binaristic.

My metaphysic has always been impelled to the unitive. I suggest that all metaphysics, all people are impelled to the unitive, but by apparently different strategies.

And your strategy has been poetry and prayer.

Yes, poetry and prayer ... I need a glass of orange juice. Do you want more Pepsi?

No, I still have some.

a bit of background/why he became a priest: making eggs

I do manage to squeeze a few biographical details out of him. Pier Giorgio Di Cicco was born in Arezzo, Toscana, Italy, in 1949. His family moved to Montréal when he was three, but he grew up mostly in Baltimore and considers himself of the particular Italian American breed. He moved back to Canada in



the late 1960s to attend the University of Toronto and live among the thriving Italian-speaking community.

He published his first book of poetry in 1975, *We Are the Light Turning*, and went on to publish over a dozen books until he moved to a monastery in 1983. After four years he decided to become a priest and for the last seven years has been “a country priest, which in some way duplicates the best aspect of hermitage.”

Di Cicco’s exit from the literary community in the ’80s was abrupt and unexpected. “Art” and “Religion” are two institutions that, when entered into at a very serious level, are often exclusive of one another. The boundaries are not usually transcended, and yet Di Cicco has made this movement seem fluid and effortless. And it also seems as if he just doesn’t give a shit what people think. He prays, he writes. “What difference does it make if you write on paper or on your heart?” he asks me.

Maybe we could talk about the time in your life when you decided to become a monk. I’m curious about the time leading up to that, how you made that decision and what impelled you toward that life.

Well, I had done most things that anyone would want to do, at the age of thirty-three.

Yes, but what attracted you to prayer?

I had gone through an intellectual conversion. I had just finished a book called *Virgin Science*, which was a poetic restructuring of holistic paradigms that were available, and psychology and physics, quantum mechanics, holographic theories of consciousness, you name it. Back in the ’80s when these things were beginning to be popularized; now they are sort of household ideas. I thought I would take that route, looking for a scientific apologia for spirituality... but...

Why don’t you turn that off and let me have a couple of eggs. I’m a little peckish.

I lean against the kitchen counter, trying to look at ease, a false grace I affect when I am nervous but want to seem as if I know what I am doing. The act of turning off the recorder loosens him up and breaks apart the awkward relationship of interviewer and interviewee.

What I really want to know from him is how and why he became a priest.

I want to know for this article, but also as a person who has had thoughts of “religious vocation,” I want to know what it takes, what happens in a life, so that the decision can be made, the step taken.

But how did you start to pray, why did you go to the monastery, what was your life like then, the circumstance that made this happen, how did you make the decision? This is something I need to know. You were my age then ...

And between the melting butter, the empty eggshells, he tells me. He was my age then.

I sneak the recorder back on. The sound of eggs frying.

And were you bored with yourself?

Yeah! I need to be excited, I needed an intellectual conversation, I needed to be inspired. I needed to be ... fulminated, epiphanied. Looking back on it now, who else but God could excite? Who else understood physics and poetry, or whatever, the most esoteric; who else was I going to go to? The Internet? Like everyone is doing now?

That’s why prayer came in. Prayer. You see, I could talk to God about anything and he would listen. I needed to

hear him. I didn't hear God for a long time because I was mentalizing him. You know how I did that? By not talking to him.

Vocal prayer is essential. If we are body, and you can't leap from the somatic condition in prayer, then you have to pray through the body; that means talking to God the way I am talking to you now. Excuse me! (*he shouts at me*) I'm talking to you! I'm not thinking about you. I mean you're real, body, voice, touch. Hello! People say, Oh, well, God is an abstraction. Well, he's an abstraction if you treat Him like an abstraction! God speaks through the self-revelations of the somatic, kinesthetic. And the body is kinesthetic, because when you talk with the body, the mind and heart come together. When kinesthesia is reached, then God's presence is manifest. Hence people feel the presence of God at parties – why? Because they are somatic with the incarnational components of each other. The rest of the time they go home.

In yoga, the holy trinity is body-mind-speech ...

Yes, exactly. The phonocentric is essential in prayer. People come to ask me how to pray. I say, have you tried just kneeling in your apartment and looking up and talking to God, you know what I mean? We don't want to look ridiculous to ourselves, do we? And sometimes that's all it takes. You're going to feel ridiculous to yourself if you say to someone you haven't known for long, but you feel like you're in love with (*grabs my arm*), I think I love you. Because you don't know! You might get slapped back, rejected. Well, God is no different than a lover. You know? He loves you but, I'm sorry, he wants you to come out and say, I think I'm in love with you! These are

such basic things!

We are called to talk, to unite. We are called to recognize and be recognized. We are called to recognize the indistinguishable, the inextinguishable, the appetite, hunger – that's the metaphysic. We are all called to the unitive, but some are called with particular passion. It sounds elitist, but some are called with particular passion. As near as I can tell, there simply are more passionate people and less passionate people. It doesn't mean that the less passionate people aren't all walking toward the unitive. But some have to run.

broken hearts/living in poesis: we have coffee

It is near the end of the afternoon. We are all sitting at the kitchen table. The way he talks about a unitive metaphysic sounds to me like the idea we have in yoga of liberation or enlightenment, or moving (maybe running) toward something we think could be freedom. So I ask him,

How do you understand liberation?

We have this idea that we want to be free. (*laughs*) We don't understand that being free means saying goodbye to things that we are not ready to part with yet and don't want to part with and some things that we will never be ready to part with. You know, there is this gung-ho wholesale run toward the embrace of total freedom. The price of that is ominous; the cost of that is ominous. Not in terms of what we pleasantly call risks. The freeing of yourself may involve the loss of yourself. That's a nice idea, because we have this idea of self as this ego, as this barking little dog, that once we get rid of it, the house will be tidy again. But I mean self, who you are, recognizable to yourself by

any demonstrable means. That's a scarier proposition. Not just throwing out the dog, but the furniture as well.

You know, the dark night of the soul is more than just a psychological overhaul. A lot of us think it is. I want to be free on my own terms; I want to be holy on my own terms. Being holy, I don't know much about it, but it seems to me that it's about having your heart broken so many times that you don't have a heart anymore. You don't have a heart anymore.

Well, you have heart, but it's a useless paradigm, 'cause hearts are meant to be mended. What if they're meant to be broken and have water run through them like the Colorado River through the Grand Canyon? I mean, everyone wants a heart that can be mended. But what if we are not called to a mended heart? Scary. I for one am not ready to surrender the metaphor of a heart that can be mended. I'm fifty-four years old; I'm still not ready.

Let me make you some coffee. Turn that thing off.

Sarah and I sit in silence for a while, contemplating the possibility of a heart that is not meant to be mended. Di Cicco conducts the day with these odd and stunning metaphors. It is at once exciting and exhausting. I think, *where am I?* Here we are, at a very regular Formica kitchen table, in a rather empty kitchen, at an ordinary house in the country. But he keeps saying things like... this is as palpable as the flesh, as the style of love and the texture of someone's benevolence. What do you think of that? It sounds rather....

Poetic.

Poetic, eh? I did three public lectures

at the university this year, slamming Aristotle. I had everyone believing that they were in poesis. As soon as the lecture was over they slipped back down the slippery slope of dualization, of thinking that thinking and feeling were two different things. The whole point of being a good metaphysician is that you can have a thinking feeling and feeling thought. That's the binarism to stitch back together right there. If you can do that, you can do anything.

It's not as if intelligence is outside the heart; it's not as if mind is without feeling. But how do we manage to be that way? Language goes a long way to defeating us. What perpetuates the dualism, is language. It perpetuates linear thinking. That's why poetry is good for nonlinear thinking. Syntax is within Newtonian time, past, present and future. Poetry, which I claim is where we mainly live, whether we admit it or not, is in the timeless.

Have some cream.

sadness/we arrive at the end of our day: sarah takes a picture

It's starting to make sense to me now. I described reading his poetry at the beginning, as being able to imagine my own past, present and future. But that perhaps is an overly ordinary way of describing it. There is something irresistibly touching about his poems, that tugs on the reader, tugs one out of the regular sequences of time. Maybe that is what all poetry does. Maybe that is what prayer does, too. Di Cicco is someone who sincerely practises both, and in that practice, his voice takes on a certain transparency that lets you walk right in.

The day is ending. I ask,

Has your life changed by becoming a priest? Where is this path taking you?

I'm not on any path. I'm just going back to what I was, the origins. Everything's a journey these days. When you think about things in terms of journeys too much, you lose sight of the fact that you may have arrived. It's so popular to say journey journey journey, and so unpopular to say arrive arrive arrive, that even if you've arrived, you're afraid to say so or even admit it to yourself. Every poem is an arrival. I can say it's part of many poems, which are an ongoing journey. Well, what's the point of that?

My point is not to have an overview of many points of arrival; my point is to be lost in arrivals as they happen, because the back doors – each one has a trap door that leads into the timeless. Not back into narratives of Newtonian time. Journeys are about narrative, narrative is about Newtonian time, the timeless is what we want what we are where we live for the most part. Where we are from. It's not where we are going, the timeless is not where we are going; timeless is what we flip into at any given time, when you stop the mental strategies of narrative.

The phone rings. Di Cicco has to get ready to give mass, at his church in the city. Sarah is fiddling with a piece of plastic on the table, and I say, *Sarah, that's his priest collar*. We giggle and wait for him to get off the phone.

I don't know if I can ask him this next question or not. It's been on my mind all day. *Are you sad?* It's a simple enough question. And I don't know whether or not to tell him I have spent hours reading his poems and crying. Literally, tears run down my face. It sounds a little crazy. I haven't quite fig-

ured out what the crying is all about.

Anyway, all I can force out is,

This just might be me... but I find a lot of your poetry quite sad. So, uh, are you sad?

Am I sad? (*long pause*) The sadness, is, uh ... is the frustration. Some people are very appetitive, and are always asking that the bar be raised before it is raised. *I'm* always asking that the bar be raised before it is raised. And the sadness comes out of that. Sadness is the result of not knowing what we want to know, when we want to know it. I am very appetitive about the rendering present of God, and God rendering the Divine present. And when I am frustrated by it, I get impatient. I can rest, but I am also restless. So the sadness comes out of restlessness. Wanting things that I am not supposed to want.

From God or from the world?

From God, I'd say. What does the world have to offer? Not much, as far as I can tell. Maybe other God searchers like you...

Click

Sarah explains,

There's more light coming in, that's all. ☺

selected di cicco bibliography:

Dead Men of the Fifties, Toronto, ON: Mansfield Press, 2004.

The Dark Time of Angels, Toronto, ON: Mansfield Press, 2003.

The Honeymoon Wilderness, Toronto, ON: Mansfield Press, 2002.

Women We Never See Again, Ottawa, ON: Borealis Press, 1984.

A Burning Patience, Ottawa, ON: Borealis Press, 1978.

Clea McDougall is the former editor of the magazine you are reading right now. She currently lives in Barcelona and sometimes cries on her rooftop while reading the poetry of Pier Giorgio Di Cicco. You see, nothing really changes. Not the essentials.

Visit www.ascentmagazine.com to read a selection of poems by Pier Giorgio Di Cicco.