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Apocalypse of Words: Interview with Alessandra Bava

K A Laity · Wednesday, August 6th, 2014

Dr. K. A. Laity, author of *White Rabbit* and creator (along with cartoonist Elena Steier) of the occult detective novel *Jane Quiet*, interviews poet Alessandra Bava.

After reading this interview, please enjoy five works of poetry from Alessandra Bava by clicking [HERE](#).

KL: There's an urgency in the poems that seems haunted by dread. Why such an 'apocalypse of words' — is it the times? Or is the apocalypse always near?

AB: I am grateful for this question, as it helps me clarify the use of the term "Apocalypse" in the poem. In fact, I do not imbue the term with its more modern and accepted meaning of a "cataclysmic event," but I rather stick to its etymological meaning. So, apocalypse is more like a revelation or, if you like, a sort of vision as the title betrays. I do not mean to imply that I am a sort of Joan of Arc who sees things others do not, but that reading the work of certain poets (and I refer to Plath specifically, here) makes me "see" words in a different light. So words create visions and they are revelations to me. This poem is about a day-dream I experienced after reading Sylvia Plath's "Lady Lazarus." A poem that is so close to a disintegration that it made my own writer's cathedral of certainties collapse.

KL: Your poems speak with Plath and Sexton, Rimbaud, Breton and Henry Miller. Is there any 'agony of influence' or does the conversation come easily between you and the past?

AB: The 'agony of influence' is always strongly there. I turn to Sexton, Plath and Rimbaud among the others for the ferocity of their words and I am always profoundly touched by how their lives have so influenced their writing. There is a great empathy I feel. I have oftentimes been haunted by their very ghosts. As you know, I am in the process of writing the biography of a contemporary American poet so I know for real that there is no escape. One cannot obliterate a poet's life from his/her works. It will always be there and it will always tell us something more about who they are or were. The past matters.

KL: So many of these lines portray listening as an active art. Every artist hungers to be heard, but it seems more difficult every day to cut through the cacophony. How do we do that?

AB: We live in a world that is more and more visual, but I feel that listening is the key factor. A

poet must listen to everything that surrounds him/her and not just to what other poets have to say. Being alert is the key. I am also a poet who writes about social issues. There is so much desperation, there are so many unheard voices out there, that I really feel we must listen to them and write about them in our poetry too. This is why I actively take part in the World Poetry Movement and in the 100 Thousand Poets for Change events. Poetry's strength goes well beyond the mere words.

KL: Your lines on García Lorca speak to every artist's fear of being silenced, the work unfinished. Can the work ever be finished?

AB: García Lorca was murdered and silenced, but his words still speak and resonate deeply today. The work will never be finished, even after death occurs. What we have written will ultimately still be there for somebody else to read.

KL: Even more than death, there's a theme of torture here. While the tortured artist may be a well-known icon, you bring new life to the trope. Is creation always torturous?

AB: Creation can be torturous, but I am quite lucky. When the Muse speaks to me I simply sit and write. I hardly ever edit. For some poets and writers writing can be much more demanding. Anne Sexton wrote several drafts of her poems until she achieved what she considered perfection. It would kill me to write like Sexton, as much as I love her poems I could never fathom working like her!

KL: I love the recasting of Sexton as the 'St Barbara of Poetry'. Like Caravaggio, there seems to be a sensuality in your appropriation of traditional religious iconography. How do the material arts inspire you?

AB: I live in Rome, thus I have always been surrounded by art which has had a great impact on me as a person. As a writer I am greatly influenced by art as well. Both Caravaggio and Artemisia Gentileschi have found their way into my poems. My personal iconography is wildly captured by sensuality and sensuousness. How can someone not be enraptured by Michelangelo's or Bernini's bodies? Such unparalleled beauty. Something hard to achieve in writing, but still worth trying!

KL: I love Patti Smith as 'Madame Bowery'! Do you see parallels between your obsessions?

AB: Patti Smith is a real icon to me. A poet and a woman who has never accepted compromise. A talented artist who writes about lyrical and social issues. I am definitely obsessed by her candor and attitude. She is not a rock star, but rather a very intelligent woman. Being able to chat with her for a few minutes last year was such an amazing experience. We talked about literature and translation. I had brought her a book of poems by Albertine Sarrazin, a French writer she loves. The book was in French dating back to the late Sixties. She was so surprised and delighted that she hugged me. Truly a woman after my own heart!

"Madame Bowery" was a nickname Patti was given when she lived in NY in the Seventies. The poem I wrote is about her walking in the Bowery district.

KL: I know you struggled for a while this year with a block; how did you get beyond it?

AB: It's been very, very hard. I had never experienced it before, but I was glad to be given such great advice from writers friends. I just accepted the idea I did not have to fight it, but rather feed

my spirit with art, music and literature. I did and I am perfectly recovered now.

KL: What's next for you?

AB: I am working on a full-length collection of poems in English. My first one. Wish me luck!

KL: All the best of luck and inspiration to you!

AB: Thank you, Kate.

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