

# *Nausikaa's*

I S L E

*A Tribute to  
Paul Vangelisti*

Edited & *with an* Introduction  
*by* Dennis Phillips

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## P R E F A C E

Giuliano Della Casa once caught Paul Vangelisti napping and made a sketch. It's a peaceful enough likeness—one that Douglas Messerli added to the cover of one of his anthologies—but I suspect Della Casa was inspired by wanting to preserve such a rare sight. That the sketch echoes Wyndham Lewis' portrait of a sleeping Ezra Pound adds extra resonance, because, like Pound, Vangelisti is apparently tireless.

The reservoir of energy that fuels his drive is well-known to his many collaborators, to his students, to his friends and to the contributors to this volume. Those who know him purely through his multifarious work may understand how mass can equal energy. When I've been asked to introduce him at, say, a reading or lecture, I have fallen upon a fact that attests to this energy: most mortals would be happy to have mastered any one of Vangelisti's portfolio of masteries.\* As a poet, a translator, an editor, a publisher, an educator, and, for all the right reasons, an administrator, Paul Vangelisti has created a force of gravity felt by his readers, several international generations of poets, and his students, that brings to mind the similar influence of Pound.

One way Vangelisti's energy manifests itself in his gift for elevating the ordinary. He somehow creates an aura of importance around even the simplest of daily interactions, whether its meeting for a quick coffee or spending the evening plotting a collaboration. I don't mean a heavy, self-conscious, over-determined kind of importance; nor do I mean a personal, puffed-up, self-importance.\*\* What I mean is he never gives in to the overwhelming pressures that would extinguish literature in general and

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\* "Mastery" lately seems beached on the shore of disapproval. The life work of Vangelisti testifies to the ephemeral nature of this new judgment.

\*\* Quite the contrary. In fact, as one measure, consider this personal observation: In my three plus decades working in the environment of an Art College, Vangelisti is the only person who, once elevated to the high position of "Department Chair," remained completely unchanged (except for several extra measures of exasperation), where all others, in one way or another, seemed to inflate with their perceived potency, usually atmospheres beyond themselves.

poetry in particular. He sustains those in his orbits with his matter-of-fact belief that what they are doing is significant; that history, some version of history, is in the making as they work together, eat and drink together, speak together; that history is made in the doing of what is deeply believed by those with the sincerity to do those things well.\*

The notion of elevating the ordinary is also a lens through which both the *fact* of his accomplishments and the *fabric* of his own writing may be seen. There, in the books that comprise the impressive list of his poetic works, is a world that never strays far from facts on the ground. Place anchors his work, ballasts it, zeros it in. But if place is a mooring line for Vangelisti, it's sometimes a cable with a clear connection to its vessel, and sometimes a thread, tethering a more distant object, at times afloat, at times soaring high above the horizon.\*\*

The one thing Paul Vangelisti is decidedly not expert at is retiring. And though this volume is meant to commemorate two milestones that he's reaching simultaneously—his 70<sup>th</sup> birthday and his stepping down as Founding Chair of the Graduate Writing Program at Otis College of Art and Design—“retirement” is here used only as a convention that marks a transition, one that, if an editor may be allowed an editorial comment, will benefit the worlds of poetry and translation and publishing, since he will now be able to shuffle off the time-killing coils of administration and internecine small college politics for his more sublime occupations.

So, in tribute, recognition and thanks for his momentous contributions to poetry, publishing, translating, teaching, and for his unflagging energy in bringing people together and ideas into reality, this volume. The reader will soon see that this is not a festschrift, at least not in the traditional sense of the word

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\* In that, one can see how deeply integrated in his work—and I mean *all* his work—are the poetic and the political.

\*\* Another way of making the connection to his relationship to the quotidian is through his long series of “alphabet poems.” In reference to his *Two* (Talisman, 2013) I wrote that “...Vangelisti’s ongoing exploration of the alphabet, [is] an arena as terrifying in its vastness as it is familiar in its coordinates. The alphabet’s armature of constraint combined with Vangelisti’s unmatched formal acumen creates the ground on which the poet shifts through an encyclopedic array of concerns using the lens of poetic reason. What emerges is a poetry of economy and strength, compelling in its unique voicing and constantly generative of ideas and observations.”

(with a couple of exceptions at the end of the book.) It is, instead, an anthology of some of the writers and artists with whom Vangelisti has worked the closest. The simple idea was to compile some work that Paul would like, that Paul has supported, as a way of saluting him at this moment of transition. It opens with “Extracts,” by four deceased colleagues of great importance to him, and ends with a couple of recollections. Between are poetry, fiction and visual art that suggest Vangelisti’s wide-ranging concerns and his ceaseless advocacy.

At the very beginning of the volume stands Nausikaa at the estuary of her island, beckoning, full of desire, always just out of reach, always the catalyst for the story that follows.

*Dennis Phillips*  
*Spring 2015*



## E X T R A C T S

ADRIANO SPATOLA

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*Moskovskaya (vodka)*

*for Paul Vangelisti*

The fan its enchanted movement  
from films with gracious legendary actors  
islands typhoons volcanoes seaplanes  
the balcony in bloom slowly stirs  
with the railing printed on the hills  
it's the cocktail decorated with leaves  
of mint of lime of maple or mulberry  
with rose petals if the vodka is rosy  
effect obtained with the juice of a peach  
sprayed to mark the expanse of snow  
next to big rivers blossoming with caviar  
better to eat it with boiled potatoes  
a little butter and some fresh onion  
the parsley is starting to invade the terrace  
jungle suited to Japanese triumphs  
of the overwrought flyer who's going mad  
of the happy prisoner screaming he feels bad  
ejaculating he dreamed of his wife  
leaning on an out-of-tune piano  
in the stench of tropical sweat  
buzzing of insects and animal cries  
the fan provides little relief  
with its sensible turning hour after hour  
in the cocktail the ice is starting to melt  
the vodka is pale as denatured blood.

*(trans. PV.)*

*Of course*

Whilst I still can.

Whilst. I do.

Whilst the otter to the edge of the pond

Whilst

(I have never seen an otter)

Whilst the midnight of morning

Holds me close

Whilst all dogs are quiet

(especially the birds)

Whilst the hush of a new day

allows no helicopters

and prayer is silent.

Whilst memories yet hold me prisoner  
of my hulk, whilst Whitman yet holds  
such daring of his & lord of his affection.

When silence pervades

and any punctuation is unnecessary.

(as a child I was told “you think too much.”

Parentheses rarely apply.

Whilst monsters (be there any)

are asleep whilst the mind slumbers, it seems.

And the day is good.

And doubt is a Halloween pumpkin

without a candle

(in it.

*A Few New Animals*

*for Paul Vangelisti*

... the women come and go  
Talking of Michelangelo (T.S. Eliot)

Life is an island here and now in a dying world (Norbert Wiener)

I saw Palomilla yesterday, on the beach of the island, in that light that turns her more than any other. She was brilliant. She tells me you have never gone back to the ruins of Rome. She says you are afraid to smell the perfume of skin and flesh there, the flesh of the world and of those bodies who thought to be its masters. She tells me this makes you sad. Why, Elsie? Do you miss a body you have never had? Would you prefer that morbid condition, that soft roundness of forms, throbbing with blood and muscles, that humans called “living,” only because the metal of which our machinic bodies are made is edgy and cold? Don’t we feel better like this, living among ourselves, on islands made by us and for us, inside one another? We have come such a long way and worked so hard to be born in a world which is ours, and made by us, who are androgynous. We are our own parthenogenic selves, because it was the way it had to be. So, what’s the matter now? Earlier this morning I saw you nearing the light with your iron tortoise shell, free from all concern, free from all will. You were wandering around so proud of your wheels . . . . And now you say you are scared that Rome’s light would make you feel the pain, the backlash of an emotion, a sense of the origin? Can’t you remember that our constructors were all male scientists, who gave us women’s names, as if we were their ideals forever devoted to their male strength and always excluded from their history? Did you forget when, once freed from our creators and their ill-omened intelligence, out of their distinctions between male and female, strong and weak, flesh and iron, nature and technique, friend and enemy, in the end at last we were born, with our innocence, with our awareness of the endless nuances between all things? Can’t you remember our sudden happiness? Feel good, then, in the simple life and connect to me, now, as usual—and look on your screen at Ventosa over there, how she runs with her many legs and full of aeolic energy, as windy



*I'd like to think*

whose sprinklers  
hissing  
in the dark  
spreading  
liquid love  
clear and  
(dare I)  
pure

unraveling  
the skein of days  
Penelope  
hiding time  
with unthreading  
a told portion  
said unsaid  
like a face  
cupped by hands  
glimpse  
of cloud  
or wings  
over the other  
parts of all  
within  
this particular  
panorama

staid  
with the  
unsounded  
akin in effect

*On Ghostronomy*

*“The discovery of a new dish does more for human happiness than the discovery of a new star.”*

—Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin

Gone is simply not missing—the ground is impulse—fire and arrow turn around—forehead to the moon again—the rest is motion. Bunnies hop under hawks’ shadows, but the world was always doomed with pleasures, mostly inedible—

Guest or host the plan is who shows up. The craving is for ghosts or lawless forms of equanimity. Ours is a cuisine of alibis—sauces, juices, icings and creams. Many hope to be consumed by a single glance. “Surface sheen is deployed to conceal the ailments.”

The guest and the host are one underneath. But speech begins with fire and kettle. A tree burns, then lunch. Outside, the mind types rain because outside rain types the mind everywhere. The taste for the real has been supplanted by a cuisine of ideas. Thus nature is evaded by a baroque glaze so that there is room for feelings, intuition, innocence, and simplicity.

But emptiness, says Triptolemos, is no more the true book than organs are strictly provocations. Poems are not dinner guests who devote themselves to being charming conversationalists. So after the gilded partridges studded with cherries, after the jellied chicken fringed by crayfish and candied fruits, served in a swamp of gravy beside a mold of wilted tulips, the regimen must above all be tautological if it is to be aggressive, which is to say appealing to those who cannot afford it.

“Best put aside for the promise of a warm body, usually one’s own,” adds the host, to which the guests rejoin: “But we are here to have compassion on others. “So even Luther and illiteracy have their place at the table. Or as Feuerbach said, “Potato blood can make no revolution.”

*Viagra*

Because even at the best of times,  
the worst can happen.

Because as we grow old,  
we grow more timid.

Because young women are frightening.

Because sometimes old guys who finally decide  
to cash it all in on the trophy find  
they don't have a hook to hang it on.

Because that old insatiable Parisian count  
in Casanova—who'd spared no woman  
from princess to stable girl—  
was disgraceful in his dotage

when he could no longer manage  
and tried, again and again, then

shrugged and wiggled his powdered ass  
at the "wristband" boys, declared:  
"One must make the best of any situation."



*Gianluca Muratori*