



**Age of
Artists**

Interview

**Paul-Henri
Campbell**

Frankfurt am Main, Germany
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The interview was conducted by Thomas Koeplin (Age of Artists, AoA) on November 24th, 2014 in Frankfurt am Main, Germany.

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Introduction

I met Paul-Henri Campbell upon recommendation by his associate, the painter Aris Kalaizis. Campbell is a bilingual writer of German and English. In his essays and poetry, he often deals with modern mythologies. He has written poetry about, for instance, the Firebird Trans Am, New York's A-Train, the aircraft carrier USS Kitty Hawk, and the Concorde. We talked on an autumnally cool but sunny afternoon in a café in Frankfurt.

Interview

AGE OF ARTISTS: What brought you to literature?

PAUL-HENRI CAMPBELL: Reading. Reading afforded me an aesthetic experience that I didn't know from the other arts, such as opera, film, or painting. Reading allowed me to be free from any type of restraint that time may impose upon me. While watching a movie, I need to follow it in the way it was cut by its director. While listening to musical compositions, I am subject to the tempi deemed appropriate by their conductors. For me, reading essentially offers an aesthetic experience that is marked by autonomy. I can pause and ponder each word for as long as I want and let the text happen within me. I think this experience was essential in my case. My poetry is about contemporary phenomena. Readers may encounter poems about the Concorde, space travel, and at the moment I am working on poetry on anesthesia. I am trying to bring these things into view as modern myths, as symbols that are not only things or milestones in the history of technology, but objects that play a role in people's lives and capture their imagination or determine their aspirations. For me, these objects are primed with convictions, ideals, and

fantasies. My poetry tries to deliberate them by turning objects into aesthetic experiences.

AGE OF ARTISTS: Was there a key moment that brought on this path?

PAUL-HENRI CAMPBELL: I don't think there was a singular moment, rather it was a process that was made up of multiple experiences. In the beginning, perhaps, the notion that in using languages I might create a home for myself somewhere between German and English, my main gates to reality. I grew up in Boston and moved to Germany later in my life. English and German are my first languages. The ambivalence in being bilingual becomes evident in one's search for the origin of self. That certainly has something to do with my interest in literature and writing. In my case, biography poses that question and literature is a means by which I can respond to that question in expressing myself. It isn't a conscious effort, but looking back I think that was a part of what made me a writer. But there are many experiences. For instance, reading Hermann Broch's *The Death of Virgil* (German: *Der Tod des Vergil*, 1947). In doing so, it sometimes happens that you suddenly perceive reality in a different light. There is an epiphany. Or, for example, a club that I founded many years ago with some friends in Aschaffenburg, Germany. We gave it the most tacky name we could think of: *Society for the Advancement of Poetry along the Lower Main River* (German: *Verein zur Förderung der Dichtung am Untermain*). **We met each week and chose a theme, such as "blue" or "saxophone" or whatever. Week after week, each one of us had to write a poem pertaining to that theme, which we then critically, sometimes violently, discussed. In doing that, I experienced that poetry possesses the power to facilitate communities, that poetry gives people something they can communally center themselves upon.**

AGE OF ARTISTS: Does that set literature apart from other art forms?

PAUL-HENRI CAMPBELL: Literature is unique among the arts. It has something that other arts don't have. It pauses time - the time of those who consume literature - and gives time back to them under conditions that are those of its readers. Literature imparts a sense of autonomy and intimacy upon us. Unfortunately, many poets do not seem to take this unique feature in literature all too seriously. I mean the literal nature of literature, its literality, its written-ness. The Germans call it Schriftlichkeit. Festivals, Podcasts and poetry slams seem to blur the boundaries between spoken and written literature. But what makes literature so powerful is its literality. **Literature is an aesthetic experience that is related and mediated in the act of reading. The author gives up his or her authority over the text in publishing it. The beauty of literature, for me, consists in its potential to become something that has a lot to do with the biography of its reader.** The reader colludes with the text. Without the reader, text is meaningless. As an author, you don't have too much control over that. Of course, you arrange words and images, you intervene, play, and sabotage text, or make it resist its readers, but the text is only as good as its reader.

AGE OF ARTISTS: The painter Aris Kalaizis says he would like to step back behind his paintings. Is that something you can relate to? You open the door, but the reader needs to cross the threshold?

PAUL-HENRI CAMPBELL: Yes and no. I think it's not quite that easy. As an artist, you can certainly pull back behind what you produce and acknowledge the readers autonomy. At the same time, texts or paintings are also invested with subjectivity, even intentionality. You can't just renounce that or sever it from what has been written, even if you give up controlling what a text means for its readers. And especially in the Western World, in which we hold individualism in high regard, we don't just deal with texts as if they had been created from nothing. We tend to be interested in the personality of its creator. Aris Kalaizis doesn't interpret his

paintings, sure. But nevertheless there is an artist's biography that is open to everyone. Just by hearing the name Aris Kalaizis, people looking at his paintings have a Greek name in the back of their heads. And that influences what they see. What is good about that is the fact that in considering art, there is a point at which autonomy of our gaze is stronger than anything a painting or text may give us - and that, then, is what we bring to art or literature. A movie ends; it has a duration. Books never end. We decide how big or small they are. I'm thinking of the guy who said he learned more by reading Plutarch than the entire British Library could have ever teach him.

AGE OF ARTISTS: Before we move on from biography ... besides literature, you also do scholarly work. How do you combine those activities? Are there overlaps?

PAUL-HENRI CAMPBELL: Well, I work for the Catholic Diocese of Limburg. **My literary writing has not only cultivated my interest in literary art, but for creation in general. It has something to do with interpreting or making sense of the world. Describing that creative will in every work of art, to identify it and to think myself into creation, is something that literature helped me with. The bottom line of that will is curiosity. Literature and scholarly writing are very similar in that, even though scholars take less of a risk. You're certainly familiar with many of those writers who seem to have lost themselves entirely, who have been consumed by life, like Joseph Roth or Edgar Allan Poe. The risk of literature is that it is excessive in its curiosity. Academia is merely a domesticated form of curiosity. Scholars always find some source they can cite. Scholarly curiosity is institutional, tame, and less venturesome.**

AGE OF ARTISTS: Does academia tame your literary work?

PAUL-HENRI CAMPBELL: I think the excessiveness refers to the way in which one seeks to satisfy or satiate one's curiosity. I wouldn't say that academic work regulates or balances the work of

an artist. On the contrary, it sedates and poisons literary insight, because it doesn't need to risk anything. **The texts produced in academia always are warranted by their subject matter. They don't necessarily have to have anything to do with their authors. Literary texts are different in that curiosity or excessive curiosity is refracted in the symbiotic personhood of author and reader. Literature emerges in that prism.**

AGE OF ARTISTS: Why do you do both?

PAUL-HENRI CAMPBELL: Well, I am a trained theologian and classical philologist. Theology, perhaps, makes me sensitive towards various dimensions of human existence, even though one might often doubt that. You know, theology doesn't necessarily make you a better person. In a sense, theology might even corrupt a bit. In the best case, theology makes you more sensitive. That sensitivity ranges from ethics to spirituality, but also allows for a certain awareness of tradition. Literary tradition is an important feature in my poetry because literature isn't created in a vacuum, but in the face of the many books and poems that have been written before me. Let me give you an example from my third collection of poetry. In that book, there is a series of poems entitled Rilke-Exorcisms. They are superimpositions. The sound structure of Rilke's poem, such as *The Panther*, is retained but the words are modified and have a different meaning. **Obviously, I'm not the first person to write a poem, but I'm in a tradition of poetry writers. As in theology, there is an affinity between past and present - and you might want to add the future, an acknowledgement of its community.**

AGE OF ARTISTS: How important is linking the present and the past?

PAUL-HENRI CAMPBELL: For me, reading is a central moment that precedes writing. Sounds obvious, but when you consider how many contemporary writers are only interested in themselves, it

can't be reiterated enough. You can only read what has been previously written and continue writing after you have read. I studied classical philology because I thought it might give me a sense of original things, that everything that follows is a commentary on originality. Maybe that's how you could view the relationship of one author to all other authors, a sort of parentage. You know, as descendants, we always dissent and in doing so affirm our inheritance. We want to leave something behind. We want to create something that survives us. The question then would be: for whom? Expression is a liberation from our isolation, by viewing the past in the light of the present and in anticipation of the future.

AGE OF ARTISTS: How do your poems come into being?

PAUL-HENRI CAMPBELL: In my second poetry collection, the poetry is centered on the classical period of space exploration: the Sputnik-Shock of 1958 to the last Apollo-Mission in 1972. The poems are, for instance, about Yuri Gagarin or the first spacewalk. I tried to translate historic events into a present day mythology. It seemed important to me to show that technological achievements are more than mere technical ingenuity and more than just engineering. They are instances of cultural and collective transcendence, of breaking barriers in our imagination. They are products of culturally coded desires and fantasy. Of course, this requires its own language. Poetry makes this possible. Poetry is about augmenting, sabotaging, and transforming everyday language. If I, say, would have written an essay, it wouldn't have been possible to create an atmosphere that gives a sense of the miraculous gravity which inspires such events. Just claiming that Yuri Gagarin is a hero doesn't do a lot. But by dealing with him in a sequence of sixteen poems, I'm able to do to Yuri Gagarin what Virgil did to Aeneas or Homer did to Odysseus. **But I approach each poem differently. When I wrote the Sonnets to Apollo, I researched each Apollo mission in detail and studied protocols, reviewed photo and film material. In doing so, individual lines and themes**

for my poems emerged in little clusters. That's what I initially worked with. Having written those sonnets, I thought the traditional presentation of sonnets was somewhat inappropriate and too static. I retained the verse and sound structure of the sonnet, but distributed the lines over the entire page. I thought that might create the effect of the empty page being the cosmos in which the lines of poem float.

AGE OF ARTISTS: So poetry emerges during your research...

PAUL-HENRI CAMPBELL: Yes, it begins to emerge, but it comes into being in a process. Ultimately, as a poet, you have no control over the many epiphanies that come together in a poem. For me, doing research is a bit like meditating. If I were a nature poet, I'd probably sit beneath a tree and gaze at the passing river. But I am a space poet. In reading and researching, I want to make the world of the poem as present as possible within me. That requires patience. But that contemplative immersion lets me see the creative options of whatever I am going to write and makes me receptive of what may come.

AGE OF ARTISTS: What does that feel like?

PAUL-HENRI CAMPBELL: You're touched by something. I know that sounds banal. But that's what it feels like. Let me talk more about the sonnets. The first Apollo mission failed and ended catastrophically. During a test, the capsule caught fire and the astronauts were killed. Having suffered this loss, the engineers pressed on and started all over again. Their desire to get to the moon was greater than disaster. Their first step was a step into fire. I suddenly had a sense of danger, the risk involved in pioneer work - that touched me. I knew the idea of fire would be the leitmotif for that poem.

AGE OF ARTISTS: What do you want to spark in your readers?

PAUL-HENRI CAMPBELL: Joy, amazement, maybe even envy. Their envy of my lust for poetry. Envy, of course, is a drastic characterization, but that's what it is. When I write reviews, when I read the work of other poets, I often envy their great work. I want my work to inspire envy, as well. I want them to envy my joy in creating things. **Joy, amazement, or envy, however, are only possible if you can feel that in the work of other poets as well. Envying and enjoying the work of others is a way of acknowledging others and acknowledgement of their autonomy. Amazement happens when you are totally sucked into the work of others, you become one with it in tacit affirmation. Envy happens when you feel the difference between yourself and something someone else has created.**

AGE OF ARTISTS: Do methods and techniques play a role in your work?

PAUL-HENRI CAMPBELL: Well there is a canon of techniques and a tradition of forms, of course. I certainly participate in that. But I didn't only choose the sonnet, because I wanted a certain rhythm. Being aware of poetic form and its tradition is always connected to the realization that language needs a certain tempo, a certain deportment and melody. And traditional rhetorical techniques or strategies - such as parallelism, bathos, asyndetism, the choice of elevated or vernacular language - are ultimately only instruments. Using them in a certain way depends on my taste. Looking back on what I have written, one may then realize that I have certain predilections - that's what philologists call style in hindsight.

AGE OF ARTISTS: Do you make those choices consciously?

PAUL-HENRI CAMPBELL: If choice is all too evident in poetry, then you get a sort of mannerism. Conscious choice, if it's right in your face as a reader, often seems somewhat exerted and contrived. For me, it's important to bring the elements together in such a way that creates an atmosphere of harmony, harmony of expression.

AGE OF ARTISTS: Does that set you apart from other poets?

PAUL-HENRI CAMPBELL: I don't think so. I don't think that you can identify something like mainstream in contemporary poetry. There isn't a dominant tendency, like during the Romantic Period. Today, various poetic strategies exist next to each other. There are perhaps extremes these days. There is certainly a tendency, on the one hand, to give poetry over to pure experimental playfulness; and, on the other hand, there is an inclination to bring back classical forms. But what's important is that there is a really a lot in between. Both of the extremes often undo themselves because they seem contrived, their intention all too evident. People always anxious of being on the cutting edge of what they proclaim to be modernity are often ridiculous, but people who have forgotten the present in their detached homages to the past aren't my cup of tea either. As far as I am concerned, I am interested in contemporary artifacts and events. I am interested in casting such things into a language that allows feeling without the naive pitfalls of losing sight of cultural history.

AGE OF ARTISTS: What can people gain from poetry?

PAUL-HENRI CAMPBELL: In literature generally, but especially in poetry, you can experience yourself without external demands and constraints. You can experience that your imagination is enough to create a world, to create an impression, from a few lines of poetry. Readers make verse work for themselves. Literature is about exploring and discovering humanity - often your own humanity as a reader. It's about discovering the richness of personality. Literature is an exercise in empathy because it requires changing perspectives, going along with language, and letting your imagination sound out whatever is fathomable. Sure, literature also increases your precision and expression, but those are side effects. Essentially, literature is an exercise in empathy, for it increases your ability for compassion. And, I mean, look at people

who don't read literature; they usually are hopelessly self-centered.