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## REVIEWS & PRESS

Piero Heliczer. *A Purchase in the White Botanica: The Collected Poetry of Piero Heliczer*. Granary Books, 2001.



**Scharf, Michael and Jeff Zaleski. "Hymns to Life (Poetry Notes)." *Publishers Weekly*, (March 18, 2002).**

An avant-garde '60s filmmaker in the same orbit as Andy Warhol and Jack Smith, Piero Heliczer (1937-1993) has been rediscovered by film enthusiasts—and now poets. *A Purchase in the White Botanica: The Collected Poetry of Piero Heliczer* spotlights his other, lesser-known artistic endeavor, via the editorship of his friends and fellow poets Gerard Malanga and Anselm Hollo. This anthology of Heliczer's dreamlike, New York School—inspired verse ("much like the zinc patter and flat/ perspective of Paris in the lukecool light the/ nude tree man is wormed he loves/ that scrawl of plumbing the small perfectly/ shaped girl walking slowly") collects his previously published books and early undergraduate work, and includes a biographical interview with Heliczer's sister.

**Dixon, Winston Wheeler. "Gerard Malanga and Anselm Hollo, *A Purchase in the White Botanica: the Collected Poetry of Piero Heliczer* (Book Review)." *Prairie Schooner* 78.1: 195-202.**

As the jacket for this volume notes, the poet and filmmaker Piero Heliczer was born in Rome, Italy in 1937 and died in Preaux du Perche, France in 1993. His books of poems include *i dreamt i shot arrows in my amazon bra* and *the first battle of the marne*, both of which were printed and published by his own press, Dead Language. Another key volume, *the soap opera*, a collection with illustrations by Andy Warhol, Wallace Berman, Jack Smith, and others, was published in London by Trigram Press in 1967. On-screen as an actor at the age of five, Piero was a child star in the Fascist film *Bengasi* (1942). Much later in his career, he performed in a very different sort of film, Jack Smith's underground classic *Flaming Creatures* (1963). As a filmmaker in his own right, Heliczer made such classic experimental film[s] as *The Autumn Feast*, *Satisfaction*, *Venus in Furs*, *Joan of Arc* and *Dirt*. The present volume, edited by Gerard Malanga and Anselm Hollo, brings back into print all of Heliczer's published poetry,

supplemented with an extensive illustrated biographical interview with Heliczer's half-sister Marisabina Russo-Stark.

So much for the bare facts. Heliczer's legacy as poet is admittedly limited, at least in terms of his lifetime's output; this slim volume clocks in at a minimal 129 pages, preserving entirely Heliczer's eccentric punctuation, spelling, and syntax. But behind this slight body of work is a story that is both terrifying and tragic. As a child in Rome, Piero was fascinated by the cinema and began hanging around the giant film studio built by Mussolini, Cinecittà; he won his key role in *Bengasi* at an open audition against several thousand competitors. In the film, Piero, then all of five years old, portrayed the ideal Fascist youth: swarthy, adorable, dedicated to Il Duce, and handy with a submachine gun (this image appears in the film's poster). *Bengasi* was an enormous commercial hit in Europe, and for a while, life for the Heliczers was good.

But the Heliczers were Jewish, and despite Piero's poster boy fame, the family gradually became more and more of a public liability. In a pathetic attempt to protect his wife and children from the Holocaust, Jacob Heliczer, Piero's father, saw to it that his family converted to Catholicism before the outbreak of the war. Predictably, this was not enough to appease the authorities. Before long, Jacob was detained in a holding camp and tagged for deportation to Germany. After numerous escapes and heroic service as a member of the Italian Resistance, Jacob was tortured to death by the Gestapo, who had come to Italy to speed up the deportation process of Jews. During this time, Heliczer's mother, Sabina, and his brother, Bobby, had managed to elude the authorities, but were eventually captured through the efforts of an informer. In a remarkably sadistic gesture, the Gestapo forced the now seven-year-old Piero to identify his father's body in the morgue, as Sabina was sick in a hospital at the time. The soldiers had gouged out his father's eyes and brutally mutilated his body. The experience marked Piero for the rest of his life.

With the liberation of Italy, Sabina hitched back to Rome with her two sons and reclaimed the family apartment. One of Sabina's sisters had survived Auschwitz; Sabina's mother had managed to live through internment in the Theresienstadt concentration camp. Sabina had yet another sister in the United States, who had fled Italy before the war. Sabina was convinced that she had to flee Italy; only America offered safety for her sons. With ferocious tenacity, Sabina got a menial job at the Rome airport and scanned the visiting dignitaries every day for a possible ticket to the States. Eventually, she convinced a member of the Italian trade mission that her knowledge of German, French, and English would be useful in reestablishing trade in the postwar Italian economy, and she emigrated to the U.S. in 1946 with her two sons, settling in Washington, D.C.

Piero adapted quickly to his new life in America, relying on the natural charm and confidence that always carried him through difficult situations. As a student he excelled. Piero graduated from Forest Hills High School with Highest Honors in 1954, scoring a perfect grade on his English Regents exam as well as being a finalist in the Westinghouse Science Competition. It was also in high school that Piero made his first important avant-garde contact with the poet and musician Angus MacLise, later a founding member of the rock band The Velvet Underground. Sabina,

too, took a liking to MacLise and welcomed the budding musician into their home. After graduation, Piero was lucky enough to win a scholarship to Harvard and, despite the harrowing difficulties of his early childhood, it seemed as if fortune would smile upon him at last.

During his junior year at Harvard, Piero began to suffer from bouts of genuine schizophrenia. According to Piero's half-sister Marisabina, Piero "heard voices. He felt that he was somehow meant to be king of the Roman Empire. He imagined that he was supposed to be in charge of the world, like running for President." Things came to a head when Piero casually "borrowed" a statue of Guilia Domna from the Fogg Museum and put it on the mantelpiece of his dorm room. When the authorities discovered the theft, Piero was expelled, not fully understanding the gravity of his actions. Reeling from this blow, Piero impulsively set sail for Italy in search of his father's grave, and jumped ship as the ocean liner entered the Naples harbor, determined to swim the last few miles himself. This gesture was interpreted by the ship's crew as a suicide attempt, and Piero was unceremoniously fished out of the water and immediately deported.

By July of 1958, Piero was living in Paris, where he founded the Dead Language Press. But Piero was unable to stay in one place for very long, and soon was back in the States. He followed MacLise to New York City and fell in with Gerard Malanga and Andy Warhol's Factory group. It was during this period that Piero began to work seriously on his poems; the bulk of his work was composed between 1955 and 1967. Afterward, although he still conducted readings, Piero was, like Rimbaud, finished with poetry. Living in the 1960s was cheap, and Piero supported himself by working as a graphic designer, a Flamenco guitarist, an actor, and general "scenester," who could be counted on to keep things interesting when the party got dull. Warhol's Factory was a twenty-four-hour a day hotbed of film, poetry, painting, music, and theater. Piero soon became a regular, appearing in a Warhol "screen test," and convincing Warhol himself to star in his own film, *Dirt*, along with Malanga and the poet Ted Berrigan. Piero's films became popular and were reviewed in *Variety*, *The Village Voice*, and other mainstream publications. As a poet, Piero presented readings at numerous locations, including St. Mark's Church and Gerde's Folk City.

It was during this period that I first met Piero, at an impromptu party thrown by the poet at his apartment in Greenwich Village. The poet Ted Joans was reading his works to a rapt audience as Thelonious Monk blared from the phonograph. Piero, his eyes intently taking in the entire scene, sat on his workbench surveying the crowd, as behind him, strips of his films in progress were neatly arranged in a small editing suite. Later, at Warhol's Factory, I admired a poster that Piero had designed for a show of his films in Italy; impulsively, Piero handed me the poster, his only copy, and insisted that I keep it. Wherever he went, his 8mm camera was always loaded with film, ready to document the friends and situations that constituted his new life. Throughout the 1960s I would see Piero at screenings, parties, and poetry readings all over town, always dapper and immaculate, usually leading the discussion or suggesting some new diversion for everyone's amusement. Life in the 1960s was chaotic but reassuring; there seemed to be enough money and food for everyone. During this period, Piero's mental condition remained relatively stable; as long as he was busy, and had a public, he could function with little difficulty.

But as the cocoon of the 1960s was replaced by the sleek emptiness of the '70s, Piero started to fall apart. Soon he was walking the streets, homeless, sleeping in the tunnels under Grand Central Station. For a time, Piero lived on the street in front of a bookstore in Greenwich Village with all of his remaining possessions arranged about him as if he still had a fixed address; there was even a rug on the pavement, a couch, and a battered record player. Piero drank too much and became violent and abusive. He ate out of garbage cans. His mother, brother, and half-sister were forced to cut all ties to him for fear of their own safety. Toward the end of his life Piero could only communicate with his mother through a post box, and she would meet him at designated intervals in front of St. Patrick's Cathedral to give him food and money.

Finally, in the mid-1980s, all of Piero's possessions were thrown out in the trash during a sweep of vagrants, and his makeshift "sidewalk apartment" was destroyed. Left with nothing, Piero soldiered on, marking monuments and walls throughout the city with his signature holograph, a capital "P" inside a segmented circle, with the words "Vote for Piero Heliczzer," or "Piero Heliczzer for President." His films survived because he had placed prints in distribution with the Filmmakers' Cooperative; his poems survived in the hands of collectors who had copies of his long out of print volumes. Somehow, Piero still managed to find the money for travel, and in his last years shuttled desperately between London, New York, and Amsterdam like a latter-day Nancy Cunard, becoming ever more unstable. In 1993 Piero was staying in Paris at George Whitman's bookstore, Shakespeare and Company. Piero suddenly decided to drive his moped to a dilapidated farm he owned in Preaux, in the dead of night. Never a careful driver, Piero drifted into the truck lane and was hit from behind by a huge trailer truck. Death was instantaneous. Piero Heliczzer's death was ruled an accident, and his body was laid to rest near his farm in Preaux. He was fifty-six years old.

In sharp contrast to his nomadic and difficult life, Piero Heliczzer's poems are quiet, mysterious, and guarded. As Anselm Hollo notes in his introduction to this volume, Piero never courted fame or fortune; and "without some accommodation to [the] social stratum, in both life and work, the artist or poet runs a genuine risk of invisibility" (7). Piero seemingly sought oblivion. He never submitted his works to a conventional publishing house, preferring to publish them himself. Thus his first self-published and self-distributed book, you coul[d] hear the snow dripping and falling into the deers mouth had an impact only upon his immediate circle of friends and associates, including Malanga, Berrigan, Donald Aiken, Gunnar Harding, Clark Coolidge, and Anne Waldman. His second volume of poems, the first battle of the marne, continued Piero's preoccupation with short lines, brief, epigrammatic sentence structures, and an interior language that poet/ critic Anthony Thwaite described as "completely impenetrable." Piero took this as a genuine compliment, and printed it as part of the advertising copy for the 1963 printing of his poem "girl body." Similarly, Piero sent some of his work to Robert Graves in early 1958, and eventually received this reply on March 7 of that year:

Thank you for the poems. In absence of a guiding metre (not strict, but a norm on which to make your personal variations), I wish for a music which would fix them permanently on the mind; as it is, they

read to me like translations of poems from a foreign language which I would like to understand. Forgive me.

As with Thwaite's comment, Piero took Graves's comments as a sign of his success in creating a secret language, and prefaced his volume you coul[d] hear the snow dripping and failing into the deers mouth with Graves's words.

Piero's work is indeed mysterious. His lines have two basic scansion patterns; there are long lines, "softly chanted" by Piero in public readings, as recounted by Hollo, and short bursts that erupt from the page with an explosion of energy and passion. Consider these opening lines from "girl body":

some one steals my nerves  
airs evening tuileried is  
by girl body god  
i wish i were her badminton racquet  
or some thing connected with her.

These lines are seemingly quiet and calm, yet they are suffused with an erotic urgency that is both mystifying and evanescent; the words evaporate as you read them, refusing to remain fixed on the page. Piero, a sylphlike, quietly sinuous personage in real life, questions his own corporeal existence in these lines and longs for a greater connection with his beloved. Indeed, at the end of the poem, he concludes that:

if i had had a boy body to go swimming with  
i think i should have made no stir on that Innocent sea.

Others of Piero's poems are more direct. "a purchase in the white botanica," to my mind Piero's major work, consists entirely of a series of 29 couplets and a final one-line summation. Having spent an evening walking the streets, leaving his wife at home with no word, Piero confronts her the next morning with a mixture of sadness and beatific resignation:

i did not come home last night you walk in the beautiful  
morning which i hope to describe holding back your tears.

Later in the poem he describes his gradual disillusion with everyday social commerce:

white and black gave me their promises then disappeared  
and disappointed me how was i to know  
why did i begin to hate my time why and giving away my  
secrets hating ones fellow man is only the last step to  
hating ones self.

This feeling of permanent outcast status led Piero to reject the path of conventional American '50s society, as did so many others, and he cast his lot with the Beats with whom he felt an immediate kinship. When the Christine Keeler/ John Profumo affair broke in the early 1960s, Piero refused to comment on the central characters in the sordid drama, but rather composed an elegy for Stephen Ward, the man who introduced Keeler to Profumo and died penniless and friendless as a result of the ensuing scandal. In "the death of stephen ward," Piero adopts his subject's persona, describing Ward's initial infatuation with Keeler in lines that are both effortless and transient, capturing a moment's stolen pleasure before it vanishes completely:

i would not dance  
embarrassed you bent back a pleat in your white skirt and  
came towards me not knowing what not being able to say  
but your hand could not help reaching subtly for  
me.

In still other poems, Piero sketches out ideas that he would later expand into films, as in the autumn feast, which Piero shot as a film under the same title in England in the early 1960s. The film remains one of his most ambitious and successful works. After a day's shooting, Piero recounts the difficulties he experienced in photographing a rather complex sequence, when a passerby spoiled the shot:

i turned hey man you are mucking up my foot prints  
i said to the unknown i realized was walking behind me  
up the path cant you see i am making a movie  
i was camera man and actor i was a saint in the movie

i had the movie pretty much planned out  
when i sat down to have a coffee with friends  
i wanted to see the rushes.

In all his poems, Piero's consistent tone is that of the anguished penitent. Contrary to Graves's or Thwaite's assessment, Piero's lines are neither inaccessible nor radical. They are classically modern, and thanks to this volume, we at last have the opportunity to catch up with them. Piero Heliczer's poems are the meditations of a man who is acutely aware of his own consciousness and the brief span of time allotted to him for his work. He has no time to waste, so his words are few. And yet each phrase carries a considerable weight, a sense of purpose and seriousness that indicates the true nature of Piero's vocation as a poet. Malanga and Hollo have performed a signal service in collecting Piero's work in one volume. This is nothing less than an act of heroic rescue, a gesture of appreciation and comradeship between poets. Similar volumes, on other key poets of the 1960s New York scene, would be equally welcome.

**Sawyer, Larry. "& i dreamt i shot arrows in my amazon bra." *Jacket Magazine* (August 2002).**

I looked forward to reading *a purchase in the white botanica* by Piero Heliczer, having heard his

name mentioned among the elite cadre who are considered to be the best of the underground filmmakers of the late 1960s, New York scene. Two of his collections, *I learned*, were published in his lifetime by his own press, *dead language*, and now this book represents almost everything collected and considered to be his lifetime poetic output. Staring out at me from the cover of this well-designed book, Heliczer himself, in a photo taken by Gerard Malanga in Paris, circa 1970, seems to beckon to us to come inside and look around.

Piero Heliczer passed from this life in 1993, but this book serves as a testament of his stay among us. His poetry reveals a positively otherworldly sensibility full of medieval imagery. Anselm Hollo, in his foreword, states that: "Heliczer, the poet, was a loner—not glum at all, but often as impish as his Etruscan smile." He then quotes from a poem by Heliczer:

i am the sort of figure meant to be heretic  
the stone age seduction girl taking her clothes off  
i seem more of an ant than a cigale because i like to sing in winter  
joan of arc the woman astride a prick  
when i smoke my shirt turns blue

("soul searching institute," uncollected).

Heliczer emerges from the pages of this book as if some exiled wanderer from an Old English poem. The best of what exists in this collection interests this reviewer because of its eccentric qualities. Much of contemporary poetry seems banal in comparison. The quotidian has its place in Heliczer's work, but it is filtered through an Old World lens. Heliczer is not some lost American original, but this book will add a bit to his mystique. America does not suffer fools gladly, but at some point in the process that's what poets risk. But poets are fools of a divine sort, who explore regions of thought hitherto undiscovered. At least that has been the accepted, Romantic understanding. Has America produced an equivalent to Gerard de Nerval? In Heliczer, I think that is what we have, but because he was primarily a member of the underground, his work is not as well known as some, and rightly so. His is a poetry that exists far from any workshop. It is our good fortune that this book has appeared to give the apparition of his talent a coherent shape for our present-day world.

The air of isolation prevalent in Heliczer's work, also gives it a unique quality and visionary allure. As the underground culture of 1960s America became a recognizable part of the mainstream in the Nineties, would-be bohemians discovered true bohemians. Heliczer's existence was truly bohemian by all accounts, in that his itinerant lifestyle led him to travel constantly between three main locations that serve as the artistic centers of the western world. He would travel from New York to Paris to London on a whim, usually one step ahead of the law. Through it all, and despite a turbulent upbringing that forced his family to travel from place to place to escape detection by the Nazis during WWII, Heliczer has written of an inner world that hinges on the truly marvelous:

all of my actions are self-made prisons

then i said goodbye to the lieutenanted darkness of the night

("buckingham palace").

and then:

there is an open scar on my right hand  
which i purposely keep unbandaged  
when i shake hands with someone  
i am giving them perhaps more of my self than they  
expected

is that the right thing to do

...the chestnuts burgeon above the walk  
in their parasols

("mantis").

In the sort-of easy, surrealist, mannerism of Heliczer's work, we are simultaneously charmed and made aware of a dark undercurrent of thought that keeps us questioning his intention. His line breaks and diction do seem arbitrary at times, but his metaphors provide many interesting hooks that coalesce with assonance in the imagination long after this book is set aside for other interests.

Ultimately, what we come away with is the idea that Heliczer has left us with a testament to his double vision, as he synthesizes late twentieth-century New York in the mindset of a medieval troubadour. Amid the sometimes sterile environment of contemporary poetry, this book provides a fruitful cathedral of new avenues for a whole new audience, giving Heliczer a rightful position among the visionary artists of the twentieth century.

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Original URL: <http://jacketmagazine.com/18/sawy-heli.html>

**Pouncey, Edwin. "Print Run: New Books: Music and Beyond." *The Wire* 78.**

The writing and images in these three books resurrect the work of three major underground artists—film maker, writer and artist Jack Smith, poet and publisher Piero Heliczer, and calligraphic/light artist Marian Zazeela—whose separate and combined vision was directed straight at the palpating heart of the 60s New York underground movement and is only now being fully recognized. The late Jack Smith is today mainly remembered for his epic of "Baudelairean cinema". *Flaming Creatures*, a film which, at the time of its release, was praised by the likes of Beat poets Allen Ginsberg and Gregory Corso, together with fellow film makers

Andy Warhol, Ron Rice and Film Culture magazine editor Jonas Mekas, but branded obscene by the authorities who were scandalized after witnessing the scenes of soft focus genitalia and blurred transsexual bohemian romping. "It was hot enough to burn up the screen," was what one cop who raided a screening of Smith's film would later tell the press.

The star of *Flaming Creatures* was originally intended to have been Marian Zazeela. By the time Smith got round to shooting the film, however, Zazeela had met La Monte Young and her commitment to both her partner and the embryonic Theater Of Eternal Music meant that she would hand over the leading role of Delicious Dolores to Sheila Bick, another member of Smith's Warhol-style Cinemaroc society. Zazeela's main contribution to *Flaming Creatures* was to design the titles for the film, but her early influence as one of Smith's photographic models is seared into the celluloid of his creation. Underground film enthusiast and Village Voice film critic Hoberman's fascinating, meticulously researched account of the making of *Flaming Creatures* and Smith's other, equally extraordinary Cinemaroc productions is an illuminating piece of cinematic scholarship which reveals yet another side of 60s avant-garde New York and ushers in a host of colourful and curious characters who were instrumental in making it happen. Illustrated with stills from the films, and a hitherto unpublished portfolio of revealing photos by Norman Solomon, taken while *Flaming Creatures* was in production, Hoberman's book will remain the last word on Smith's magical masterwork.

At the same time as he was piecing together his *Flaming Creatures* movie, Smith was also experimenting with still photography as a medium to bring his Byzantine New York fantasies to life. His tiny studio would be transformed into a scene from the *Arabian Nights*: he would arrange various members of his coterie to form "plastique" portraits that were both sensual and psychedelic. Smith's main model for these sessions was the young Marian Zazeela who, posing mostly nude or semi-nude, resembles some unattainable siren of mythical legend on the finished contact prints. Smith's other models included Frank Di Giovanni (aka Francis Francine), Joel Markman, Rene Rivera (aka the notorious Mario Montez) and Arnold Rockwood, all of whom would appear in *Flaming Creatures*. Although the authorities screamed pornography, Smith's photographic and cinematic studies were reaching towards an intense level of consciousness rather than mere titillation.

In 1962 Smith and Zazeela put together a selection of these prints, titled them *16 Immortal Photographs* and offered them for publication to Film Culture. The idea was to produce "an abstract visual poem" within the pages of the magazine. When Mekas declined the offer, they approached poet, publisher and film maker Piero Heliczer, who agreed to publish 19 of Smith's original photographs tipped into an artist's book, titled *The Beautiful Book*, with a cover design based on a drawing by Zazeela. 200 copies of the original *Beautiful Book* were handcrafted by Heliczer's dead language press (although due to the technical intricacies involved in its production, fewer were probably produced) and it has since attained a legendary status amongst Jack Smith admirers and collectors of 60s counterculture art. Copies of Heliczer's dead language edition of *The Beautiful Book* rarely come up for sale; a pirate edition with only eight of the 19 photographs present briefly surfaced, but even this inferior version is now scarce. This latest reproduction is a labour of love that goes back to the original negatives and uses an

original copy (from La Monte Young and Marian Zazeela's archive) as its template. The end result is an astonishingly accurate facsimile that has also been printed in an edition of 200 copies. 140 of them are for sale. Despite the hefty price tag (a bargain compared to the thousands of dollars an original would cost) this wondrous glimpse into the secret fantasy world of Jack Smith is irresistible.

*The Beautiful Book's* publisher, Piero Heliczer, was another intriguing and, until now, relatively unknown member of the New York underground. His independently run dead language press was a vehicle for publishing his own poetry, as well as important work by such fellow literary visionaries as Angus MacLise, Gregory Corso and Anselm Hollo, who co-edited this collection of Heliczer's writings with poet and former Factory employee Gerard Malanga. *A Purchase In The White Bohemia* gathers together all of his dead language press poetry collections, together with his long poem "The Soap Opera", which was published in London in 1969. Heliczer's poems are liberally sprinkled with dreamlike images that wantonly abandon all accepted poetical conventions (much to the annoyance of such old school writers as Robert Graves) to produce the literary equivalent of a primal blast of feedback from The Velvet Underground.