

## Michael Palmer: *Recovering a constellation of voices*

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*To recover the telling, the human, we must unwind the tale, unbind the tale, the present seems to say. And to recover meaning, we must resist its simulacra, cajolings and screens. We must allow the voice- the work- its plurality, its silences, its infinite, pleated body*

*.-Michael Palmer*<sup>1</sup>

Can we consider poetry as an act of recovery *and* the simultaneous 'unbinding' of a tale? For the American poet, Michael Palmer, these two apparently conflicting possibilities become mutually dependent strategies. Palmer's comment proposes that compositional techniques must always be given an alert if not sceptical eye. His perspective on the writing and reception of poetry considers the poem as a site of enquiry, an enfolding of infinite variations and a constellation of voices. The poet's role in Palmer's matrix is to scrutinise the mechanics of language to reaffirm the importance of the personal utterance. At its most basic this 'unthreading' of the tale told forces us to reflect upon how meaning may be constituted and recovered. Since meaning is almost always a battleground for establishing authority, we could add that this attention to the structures of language has an implicit political and cultural dimension.

Palmer might well be suspicious of such grand social claims justifying the 'difficulties' of a poetic work. But in his essay on Octavio Paz he does remark that the proposition of any avant-garde is to present 'the poem as act, displacing the institutions of art. To anneal it by rupture and displacement. To enter the social by assaulting it.'<sup>2</sup> Palmer's early poetry is associated (somewhat tangentially) with the diverse experimental praxis of 'language writing' (or L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry). As a backdrop for introducing Palmer's poetry it is worth noting that language writing's emergence in the 70s marked an attempt to renew the role of poetry. Its openness to engage and examine a range of theoretical discussions from fields as diverse as continental philosophy, aesthetics and phenomenology *within* the writing of poetry, attempts to motivate the tenets of these discussions into a certain 'textuality' of writing.

Invariably the history of this most recent of American avant-gardes can be traced back to the poetics of Donald Allen's groundbreaking anthology *The New American Poetry* (1950). And in turn the poets of Allen's anthology established an important literary dialogue with their

earlier modernist precursors. Initially then it may be helpful to understand the challenge of Palmer's poetry less as a *rupture* with the past, than an attempt to establish a conversation with an extensive literary community. Indeed Palmer urges us *not* to consider poetry merely within the confines of an emergent chronology, but as a simultaneous dialogue with the poetic imagination of centuries. Cast in this light poetry itself might be approached as what Robert Duncan gestures to as the 'circulation of the song'.<sup>3</sup> It is this ongoing conversation with a constellation of voices which both seduces and provides a certain resistance in reading Palmer's work.

Originally from New York, Palmer has lived in San Francisco since 1969. He has published nine collections of poetry which include: *Notes for Echo Lake* (North Point 1981), *Sun* (North Point, 1988), *At Passages* (New Directions, 1995), *The Lion Bridge: Selected Poems 1972-1995* (New Directions, 1998) and *The Promises of Glass* (New Directions, 2000). He is the editor of a collection of essays *Code of Signals Recent Writings in Poetics* (North Atlantic Books, 1983) and has published a slim prose journal *The Danish Notebook* (Avec Books, 1999). Since 1974 he has collaborated on over a dozen works with *the Margaret Jenkins Dance Company*. Moreover Palmer has worked as a translator of volumes by Arthur Rimbaud, Alexei Parshchikov and Emmanuel Hocquard. His translation projects have extended to working collaboratively with the Canadian poet and painter Norma Cole. In 2000 Palmer was elected as a chancellor to *The Academy of American Poets*.

Palmer's fascination with establishing a dialogue with poetic precursors becomes an evident preoccupation in *Sun*. This volume can be read as a work addressing influence, rewriting, censorship and a history of the European and recent American lyric. Even if the reader is not forearmed with this knowledge the titles of the poems and names mentioned in the volume gesture to a constellation of 'hidden' references within the text. The opening sequence is entitled 'Baudelaire Series', and the names of the following poets appear within this sequence: 'Paul Celan, Cesar Vallejo, Robert C and Robert D', the last two one assumes are Creeley and Duncan. In the volume's final two sections there are further names to add to our list: Scardanelli (the pen name of Friedrich Hölderlin), Dante and Bakhtin, coupled with alphabetical shorthand 'G is for Gramsci or Gobbels' 'Z for A'. The latter one assumes refers to Louis Zukofsky and his lifework '*A*'. Within 'Baudelaire Series' there are also poems dedicated to poets: Cesar Vallejo and Rainer Maria Rilke. Possibly there is no better place to start than with Palmer's more explicit 'rewriting' of Rilke's 'Orpheus and Eurydike':

She says, Turn away  
 Don't turn and return  
 Count no more lines into the poem  
 (Or could you possibly not have known

how song broke apart while all the rest watched-  
 that was years ago)  
 Don't say things  
 (You can't say things)

The ground is smooth and rough, dry and wet  
 Pull the blue coat closer around you  
 (There are three parts to you)  
 I'm not the same anymore

I'm not here where I walk  
 followed by a messenger confused  
 (He's forgotten his name)  
 I'm not here as I walk

not anyone on this path  
 but a figure of walking  
 a figure projected exactly this far  
 followed by a messenger confused

(He's forgotten his name)  
 Don't say his name for him  
 Don't listen to things  
 (You can't listen to things)

Some stories unthread what there was  
 Don't look through an eye  
 thinking to be seen  
 Take nothing as yours

This section works both as a cogent unravelling of a story *and* the recovery of memory. At first it may seem unusual to situate the reworking of the Orpheus and Eurydice myth within a context of reminiscence. After all we are given indications in both Rilke and Palmer's poems that the narrative centres on a state of amnesia. Rilke portrays Eurydice as 'deep within herself. Being dead /filled her beyond fulfilment.'<sup>4</sup> Palmer's poem perhaps more problematically gives us these statements, 'I'm not here when I walk/ followed by a messenger confused/ (He's forgotten his name)'. Palmer's treatment of Rilke's poem enacts the three intersecting perspectives of Orpheus, Eurydice and the messenger god Hermes. These three points finally fuse at the poem's close.

Eurydice in the opening stutters through an elliptical narrative and the poem enacts a sustained examination of 'how song broke apart' by focusing on the separate modalities which

comprise the lyric. The fragmentary statements in the work create junctures in the text which suggest a recalling of events, but this process of recall seem to disrupt the narrative even more. Palmer's poem, although it relies heavily on anaphoric constructions, shows hostility to naming and representative accuracy: 'Don't say things/ You can't say things', 'Don't say his name for him/ Don't listen to things'. This poem can be read as an intersection of discourses, a kind of 'unthreading' of the lyric 'I'. The complexity of subjectivity for Palmer is prevalent in the final lines: 'Don't look through an eye/ thinking to be seen/ Take nothing as yours'. These lines read as a commentary on the Orpheus and Eurydice myth, Orpheus of course does look back desiring recognition. But perhaps most alluring is reading the poem as an active process of *negotiating* memories as opposed to directly expressing them. This texture of resistance foregrounds the complex balancing act between recovery and enquiry which the poem depends upon.

In an early essay 'Memory, Autobiography and Mechanisms of Concealment' Palmer reverses our preconception of the act of recovery in poetry (be it biographical or historical). He proposes that:

what is taken as a sign of openness- conventional narrative order- may stand for concealment, and what is understood generally as signs of withholding or evasion- ellipsis, periphrasis etc. may from another point of view stand for disclosure<sup>5</sup>

We can begin to read the resistances in Palmer's poetry, be they aberrations or dislocations in the text, as attempts to practice more authentic or even ethical methods of representation. *At Passages* includes a sequence 'Seven Poems within a Matrix for War' written at the time of the first Gulf War. Palmer suggests that the sequence aimed to interrogate 'control of our means of perceiving events, the uses of media to present selective, highly manipulated images as truth.' While he remains sceptical of poetry's overall political efficacy he does assert that the purpose of poetry is to 'remain responsible to our manipulation of symbols and signifying practices.'<sup>6</sup> The opening line of the third poem from this sequence 'Untitled (April '91)' was prompted by a mural in a library in the Mission District of San Francisco and retrospectively Palmer comments that what he sought to examine in the poem was the overarching quest, or hunger for a narrative:

*La narrativa* says you must paint a flower  
 paint a flower with a death's head

flower with a death's head at its center  
 center with a desert at its center

clock with ochre hands  
 its face a sun the sun

a multiple sun at 3 am  
 sun of limbs and sun of the lens

flower as if it were a limb  
 anemone, rose, yellow marigold

gravity a word from the narrative  
 word that bends in the narrative

as if suns would flower as sparks of paint  
 then fall before the retinal net

fall into actual space  
 space of minarets and streets

Says, Here is a word that you must erase  
 a word made of particles and paint

Here is a word with no points in space  
 The Higgins black ink has dried in its bottles

so it's true, as angels have said  
 that there are things of glass

light gatherers, cat's eyes, keys and bells  
 and that glass is a state of sand

It's impossible to hold such a key in your hand  
 And it's light you see travelling through angels of glass

through knells-  
 causing the il- lis- les- the li- lil- lit-

forming the l's you're never to understand  
 like the tongues of syllables wreathed in the wells,

like tongue-tied and transparent angels  
 The painting wall still stands

Studio at night  
 Everything in place.

Certainly there is an immense pressure exerted upon the lyric texture of this work. The poem proceeds through an accretive measure, a threading of images which successively displace or decentre one another. This sense of elusiveness or displacement could be read as a challenge to the sustained bombardment of satellite images from 'Desert Storm'. Although this poem has a focus on sources or origins the poem their location is always displaced, unobtainable as a governing locus for a narrative. Instead we are given a series of discrete linkages in the text: Sand is placed in correspondence to glass- which in turn becomes glass bells, cat's eyes and a glass key. Palmer shows us through these linkages how an associative patterning of meaning may be constituted and recovered. Yet the overarching promise of a hermeneutic 'unlocking' in the text is eventually frustrated since it becomes 'impossible to hold such a key in one's hand'.

In juxtaposing the characteristics of a canvas to the pyrotechnics of the news bulletin the poem could be criticised for an overt aestheticisation of war. (Indeed the studio referred to at the close of the poem draws from Palmer's friendship with the abstract expressionist artist Philip Guston.) But perhaps what unsettles most is the decimation of language near the close of the poem. The glossolalia of 'il- lis- les- the li- lil- lit' certainly enforces the sense of unravelling or unthreading of the text to create an aphasic speech pattern. Later in the series some these gutted words assert themselves momentarily as '*illness* and *lilt* as formed on the tongue'. In a letter written during the same month as the composition, Palmer comments that the only strategy left to the poet is to display the discord of satellite images through a rupturing of the poetic composition. In effect he asserts that to recover a slick narrative or present a self-congratulatory oppositional work would be a futile gesture:

We try to somehow respond with letters, words and sentences of our own. Many of these letters have broken apart; many of the words are missing some letters and are unpronounceable, and many of the sentences are unrecognizable as such.<sup>7</sup>

Finally it seems significant that this that Palmer's latest volume *The Promises of Glass* features a series of eighteen autobiographical 'portraits'. The earlier quest for a narrative is orchestrated strategically in this opening sequence as a theatricalization of carnivalesque and philosophical figures. On one level we can read this volume in tandem with the prose journal *The Danish Notebook* which was written from a request 'to connect the dots' in his work.<sup>8</sup> But once more the act of recovery in Palmer's work entails the unthreading of a tale in an unfolding series of possible variations. In 'If Not, Not' one of the more intensely 'lyrical' poems of this volume, an anxious dialogue is enacted and rewritten within other possible stories, intentions and sensations:

They tell each other stories,  
 lies composed as dreams and  
 always in the colors of  
 dreams: rust, chrome, yellow, coral,  
 chemical green. Of the dying  
 figures, loosely assembled, by a  
 riverbank. The gatehouse. A journey  
 by train through beautiful countryside,  
 indescribable countryside. I was there  
 cut in half, only to  
 survive. A young dancer standing  
 at the third floor window. Cobalt  
 blue, argentine, bone white. What  
 we called that hour in  
 those days. He means to  
 say that on the same hill Goethe and Eckermann  
 would sometimes walk. "Always the old  
 story, always the same old bed  
 of the sea!" He means  
 to say, The music of  
 moths, the small lamps. She  
 stares from the window on  
 the third floor, toward the  
 square below. He says, These  
 are yellow-hammers and sparrows, but  
 there are no larks. Come  
 Whitsuntide, the mockingbird and the  
 yellow thrush will arrive. Here  
 at the heart, a small  
 pond, stagnant in the shadow  
 of smoke. The late flowers.

The poem circles its subject, a departure or loss, in order to recreate the idealised narrative which perhaps never existed. In attempting to recover a past that was never present intervening sensations- an inflection of colour or lighting- become compositional methods which momentarily frame and even divert the reminiscence. The poem's reference to Johann Eckermann's friendship with Goethe provides a certain ironic inflection to the speaker's failure to animate the memorialised conversation between lovers.<sup>9</sup> 'If Not, Not' is wonderfully self cancelling, erasing an emergent conversation through a further unravelling of the story at each temporal plateau in the text. As in Palmer's earlier rewriting of Orpheus and Eurydice, this poem balances a process of recovery with a threat of amnesia or immobilising silence-'He means to say'. The French theorist Maurice Blanchot understands this tension between memory and forgetting as an implicit drive in the writing of poetry. He notes that 'the poet speaks as though he were remembering, but if he remembers it is through forgetting.'<sup>10</sup> Maybe this comment grants us a final reflection on Palmer's work. Palmer certainly challenges the

reduction of lyric poetry to the so-called tyranny of recollection. Instead, we are teased into tracing the passage of a pleated textual body and its enfolding of infinite interpretative variations. The orchestration and recovery of memory in Palmer's poetry is marked by an awareness of curiously having *already* forgotten. Blanchot perhaps offers a final word on the possibilities inherent in this perception of poetry as 'forgetful memory':

*Poetry makes remembrance of what men peoples and gods do not have by the way of their own memory...Forgetting is the very vigilance of memory* (314-15).

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Palmer cover note for Norma Cole's *Moirra* (O Books, 1995)

<sup>2</sup> Palmer, 'Paz and Vanguardism (Circulations of the Song)' *PN Review* May- June 2002 21-26 (p. 21)

<sup>3</sup> see 'Paz and Vanguardism' p. 21

<sup>4</sup> Rainer Maria Rilke, *The Selected Poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke*, trans. Stephen Mitchell (New York: Vintage Press, 1989), pp. 49-53.

<sup>5</sup> Palmer 'Autobiography and Mechanisms of Concealment' in *Writing Talks* ed Bob Perelman (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1985) pp. 207-29 (p. 227)

<sup>6</sup> Palmer 'Interview' *Jubilat* no 1 (2000) 108-133 (pp. 113-114).

<sup>7</sup> Palmer Letter 22<sup>nd</sup> April 91 in *A Suite of Poetic Voices: Interviews with Contemporary American Poets* (ed.) Manuel Brito (Santa Brigada, Spain:Kaddle Books, 1992) p. 110

<sup>8</sup> *The Danish Notebook* (Penngrove, CA: Avec Books, 1999), p. 9.

<sup>9</sup> Eckermann famously published a three volume work *Conversations with Goethe* (1836-48) following the writer's death

<sup>10</sup> Maurice Blanchot, 'Forgetful Memory' in *The Infinite Conversation*, trans. Susan Hanson (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), pp. 314-317 (p. 317) Further references are embedded in the text.