

EDUCATING THE IMAGINATION

Michael Palmer

Interviewed by Daniel Kane

Daniel Kane: We began our interview before September 11th, and the questions I asked you then strike me now as oddly ridiculous. I'm interested in repositioning our conversation in light of what happened. Could you tell me where you were on September 11th and offer your impressions of what happened to poetry in the aftermath of the attack?

Michael Palmer: My daughter, who lives in New York, in the East Village, woke us by telephone here in San Francisco with the news and said we should turn on the television. The first image I saw was of one of the Twin Towers falling, and my initial thought was that Sarah had not phoned, but that I was dreaming she had phoned and dreaming that I was now seeing this image from a childhood fever-sleep.

The New York Times reports that a young child being led to shelter from his school, upon seeing the falling bodies, remarked to his teacher something like, "Look, the birds are on fire." And a friend and visual artist, Hanna Hannah, just back from Paris tells me of her conversation in the taxi to the airport with her driver, a man from Guinea, who said of the terrorists, "*Ils sont allés au bout de l'imagination.*" ("They have traveled to the limits of the imagination." Or perhaps, "the imaginable.")

What followed in the ensuing days was what the poet Robert Hass has described, I think quite accurately, as "the hijacking of the disaster" by the extreme right. One of the first casualties of this second terrifying moment was, as ever, language itself. My thoughts inevitably returned to the days of the Vietnam War, the time of "peacekeeper missiles," "pacification" programs, and destroying the village to save it—the discourse of power mobilizing against meaning.

We lived then, it's accurate to say, within a world of manipulated and destabilized reference. But the truth is that the linguistic field is never entirely stable, and that it is a source both of great danger and great poetic possibility. Poetry itself, when it is more than verse and more than a display of creative cleverness, is also a dangerous place, a site of slippages and folds, of irrational commands from the *melos*, where a multiplicity of meanings may be joined in a word, and where the *nothing* beneath is never far from the surface, a place, in other words, where the arbitrary and the necessary play out an intense negotiation concerning the possible.

DK: Can you give an example of a poem that is “more than verse” and how it might function in the face of 9/11?

MP: The remark I quote above by Hass occurred during his introduction to a reading that Lyn Hejinian, Forrest Hamer, Jewelle Gomez, Bob, and I gave to celebrate the opening of a bookstore in San Francisco on Friday the 14th. We chose to read poems of our own along with poems by other poets associated with the city (and undoubtedly, we all had the moment in mind).

Thinking of my daughter so close to the event, and of our being so far from her, I read section 29 of George Oppen’s *Of Being Numerous*, moved always by George’s sense of the one and the many, the thought of being numerous, the question of being numerous, the idea of being numerous. I also read a poem by Robert Duncan, “The Sentinels,” from his final volume, *Ground Work II: In the Dark*. It is one of his “dream descent” poems, a poem of after-light and ghost folk, images brought back from sleep, of creatures witness to our transitoriness, our darkness.

We all remarked later how unusually attentive the audience was that evening, as if poetry mattered a bit more in such circumstances, or its purposes were clearer given its attention to matters of living and dying and even laughter, of which there was some. I remember writing to the Mexican poet Pura López Colomé after the reading that on such occasions people listen to poetry differently, with greater permission for the logic of its music and greater permission for its difficulties.

Finally, I guess I should note that, for whatever reasons, I’ve found myself returning at this time to Wallace Stevens’s final collection, *The Rock*:

It is an illusion that we were ever alive,
Lived in the houses of mothers, arranged our-
selves
By our own motions in a freedom of air.

And also to Paul Schmidt’s heroically unrealizable translations of Velimir Khlebnikov:

I’m going out again today
into life, into the marketplace,
to lead a regiment of songs
against the roar of rat and race.

DK: Directly after September 11th, the concerns of poetry seemed to be absurd. Yet you seem, thankfully, to invest poetry with a power that counters such sentiment. How do you see your writing as a critique of power if, as I suspect, poetry in the United States appeals to a relatively limited, privileged audience?

MP: A poetry of instrumental rhetoric—such as some of Amiri Baraka’s, or some of Pablo Neruda’s, or some of Nazim Hikmet’s and Aimé Césaire’s, or some of Vladimir Mayakovsky’s, or some of Allen Ginsberg’s and Adrienne Rich’s—aims to incite to action. It is directed outward, and is direct rather than indirect (though exactly *how* direct might be worth exploring in detail). It speaks for an imagined many, with whom the author identifies in terms of utopian aspirations. It is the poetry we properly think of first when considering explicitly political verse.

However, poetry as critique, and critique of power, exists in many forms. Anna Akhmatova’s refusal to efface her erotic subjectivity was a real enough critique to draw significant attention and concern from Stalin, in a nation where poetry was known very much to matter. The complexly visceral lyric experiments of César Vallejo must be read within the tumultuous field of his political consciousness. When Robert Creeley read his intensely personal and innovative early lyrics at large political demonstrations against the Vietnam War, we felt their appropriateness alongside more public verse.

To understand the resistant effects of poetry, it is probably most convenient to consider those totalitarian societies where it is prohibited or strictly controlled, and many have done so. Yet we must look inward too, toward the censorship of the marketplace, fully supported by our supine media, for the regulation and surveillance of poetry within our own culture. To

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cite a ludicrously blatant example, we have only to turn to *The New York Times Book Review* where, on the rare occasions it does review poetry, only the blandest of pap receives a “safe for consumption” label. It is not really so far from that to the robotic and shamelessly simplistic speech of our 43rd President, the one who was not elected, the one who is a poetry-free zone unto himself, and who would seem, at least initially, to have a free hand to direct our response to the monstrous crimes of the 11th. I fear that no terrorist could wish for more, but I deeply hope I will be proven wrong, just as I hope that the flag will not be manipulated as it has been in the past to sanction anti-constitutional measures and the murderous abuse of force.

Poetry in the United States, as in many cultures, does have a limited audience, but it is not exclusively a privileged one. I think that an audience is drawn to the space of poetry for the way in which words there may operate, and images circulate, so as to offer an alternative to discourse as usual and to thought as usual, an alternative to the learned logic of our daily duties and negotiations. That role for poetry—and it is one of critique among many other things—is as old as the art and the *polis* both; yet it is only sustainable through the radical renewal of that art. If poetry too tests the limits of the imaginable, it is in service to the expansion of thought, rather than its annihilation.

DK: Your idea of “the radical renewal of that art” suggests that the very act of innovation is inherently revolutionary. It reminds me of something I heard the bass player Charlie Haden say in an interview once. Haden, as leader of the politically-committed and progressive Liberation Music Orchestra, was asked if he wished jazz musicians would generally be more politically active. Haden explained that the very act of creating innovative jazz was political and liberating, so that further commitment wasn’t really an issue for him (despite the fact of his own participation). Does that make sense to you as a poet who doesn’t write in a way that, as you say of Ginsberg and Rich, is directed “outward”?

MP: I think there is a great deal of sense in what Haden says, though naturally not all would agree. One can certainly defend the notion of protopolitical or protodialectical meaning in work that is not overtly political. Let’s put it this way, anyone who can play like that must know something.

I would agree with part of what you say concerning avant-garde practices, though to call them “inherently revolutionary” seems overstated. The historical vanguards took many forms, of course. Among a certain number of the Italian Futurists, such as Filippo Marinetti, there was a strong identification with fascism. The same for the Vorticists in England, who briefly took on the coloring of vanguardism. And we should add that some of the most politically progressive poets in the twentieth century chose to work in traditional forms. So in considering the inside/outside status of poetry, and the consequences for a culture of its apparent inconsequentiality, we must avoid the temptation to find one-to-one correspondences. Poetry does not need to justify itself, in fact cannot justify itself, by means of exaggerated or inappropriate claims.

DK: Many of your poems challenge the concept of stable reference. Yet, despite this concern with the arbitrariness of meaning, I still sense that you engage with a very old-fashioned and powerful idea of the poet as inspired vessel. Might your poetics combine a contemporary interest in poststructuralist theory with a very traditional understanding of the poet as one who transmits visionary experience?

MP: As far as the muse goes, perhaps she had better be given a rest. Rough handling has tattered her garments. On a thousand occasions she has been asked to inspire but not herself to respire. She has been conceived to exist without breath of her own, while rendering it to others. She expires, that the afflatus may exist. Enough of such slaughter.

Nonetheless, there is always an outside that brings us words, and an other with whom we speak. Without this conversation, a two-way conversation,

there is no poem. Fernando Pessoa writes of the poet as a *resonateur* of multiple tones and forces, inner and outer. Its current theoretical disrepute aside, the “linguistic turn” in philosophy, insofar as it speaks to poetry, can also be seen as contributing to a rather ancient notion of a primary engagement with language or *logos*.

DK: In your poem “Lens,” you write, “I failed to draw a map and you followed it perfectly / because the word for ‘cannot’ inscribes itself here.” The word *cannot* seems to arrive precisely from this “outside” that the author doesn’t so much control as administrate. Is there joy in denying control over language’s presence on the page?

MP: Administration is for administrators, those who manage things or in certain instances impose things. There are poets who work that way, but I don’t think we have to consider them. What, in my experience, do poets do? We wait for things, we watch and listen for things, we steal things, somewhat like magpies; and then again we shape things and make things.

So much goes into poetry, so much that may seem paradoxical—intuition, judgement, choice, chance, construction, rage, desire, self, non-self, dream, reason, the unconscious, etc.—that the question of authorial control becomes itself an ungovernable one. Ungovernable, that is, unless we make the answer, the definition, hopelessly reductive. Yet when we acknowledge that, we have at least taken a step toward understanding poetry’s multiple natures and possibilities.

Another paradox: There is inevitably an essential element of subversion in enduring work, subversion of expectation about the subject, about the line, about caesura, the pause, about the turn, about what follows, about the end, about belief and the breath and the step; yet, this is a subversiveness we expect and demand, if we ask of poetry something more than a vignette in verse, or metered homilies. And since the time of Plato, we have praised and demonized its strangeness, its estrangement, and there will always be those among us who would banish it from their republics. This returns us to that question

of control, though perhaps in a different sense than you first intended. All compelling poetry itself is an *ungovernable* entity, whether it be composed in traditional or freer forms. You might say that it is a site that resists surveillance.

DK: In your book *Notes for Echo Lake*, I’m struck by the wide range of tones you employ—there are prose poems, highly rhythmic poems, abstract fragments. Yet I’m struck especially by those poems that seem to evoke nursery rhymes or fables. Could you talk about your relationship to the fable by discussing your motivation for writing “Song of the Round Man”?

MP: “Song of the Round Man” is the first in a cycle of poems for my daughter, begun when she was first coming into language, that moment when the poetic possibility of language is not yet estranged from the practical or the instrumental. It is a stage when language resembles a kind of magical practice. Both nursery rhyme and fable access and evoke such linguistic powers, the one by incantation, the other by fabulistic narration. They open the door onto a world of *a-musement* (Robert Duncan’s term) that is perhaps primary to language-as-making.

It is a world I think we must recover (recover, but as something different of course) as we come into working with words. This cycle was for me part of that job of unforgetting, of anamnesia. I was also eager to see whether such songs were still possible without falling into triteness, whether in such a time as ours rhyme in *all* its dimensions could still be honored.

DK: Why might something like rhyme *need* to be honored? That is, what are the conditions in poetry today that impel you to resuscitate or renovate traditional poetic and narrative structures including rhyme and fable as opposed to forging ahead and continuing to, as Pound advised, “make it new”?

MP: I was using the term metaphorically, thinking of its derivation from the Latin *rhythmus*. Etymological speculation has it that the word may ultimately derive from an Indo-European sign for the arm, more specifically the arm extended, as in dance. Cooper’s *Thesaurus* of

1565 offers us: "*Rhythmus*, number or harmonie in speaking; meeter; rhyme." So, I was speaking—or speaking—of the play of identity and difference, harmonies and disharmonies, that occurs at so many levels of the poem, and that is at once ancient, at the origins of the lyric, and entirely new. "Make it new," for Pound, was certainly a modernist call to arms, a call for new forms. Yet Pound's teachers in that art were Dante and Cavalcanti, Homer, Sappho, Propertius and Catullus, Li Po, Arnaut Daniel and François Villon, Theophile Gautier, Arthur Rimbaud, Browning, and Yeats, among many others.

The urge to innovation without that ground (I mean, of course, some version of one's own, particular to one's cultural needs, and not necessarily so vast) can easily become superficial, a novelty act or fashion show. To "rhyme" things, to create a field of rhyme (I'm thinking here at once of sound and meaning), at least has the potential to be a profoundly dialectal activity. In this regard, Pound emphasized attention to "the tone-leading of vowels," as necessary to the poem's coherence.

DK: In "Song of the Round Man," the "sad-eyed man" says, "I am you and you are me // [...] / I'll write you in where I should be." It seems like the presence of the author here is being fractured by the very act of writing. That is, writing appears to provoke absence as opposed to presence. What is your interest in authorial presence as it manifests itself in writing?

MP: I'm not sure I've ever actually met the author. The author passes through my life, a kind of presence-absence, but we do not speak. Maybe I get an occasional glimpse in dreams, those not of falling towers, but he-she never joins me for morning coffee. When I go to market or roam the streets, I will sometimes imagine a tap on the shoulder, or hear a whisper, but when I turn around no one is there. If I knew the author, I might better be able to find him-her in the work.

On the other hand, I will occasionally find myself in the work, lurking somewhat guiltily in the author's place. On such occasions, my instinct is to depart as quietly as possible, but this isn't always easy to do. Sometimes the exit signs have been removed, or the instructions for egress appear in a language that is mysterious to me. Occasionally I will reach the door only to find that it has been sealed shut, possibly by the author. Sometimes I wonder whether it is the author who occasionally causes my reading glasses to break or my watch to stop. Sometimes I suspect that there might be many more than one.