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Heliotropic Discourse and Michael Palmer's "Sun"

It is a question of the relationship between a certain poetics and a certain ontology. And it is a question of the extent to which Aristotle's rhetoric still guides our notions of reference and metaphor, and leads us in our search for truth. For what are we to do, in our search for truth, with the continual recurrence of cat-achresis, the unruly figure? What are we to do with a discourse which points towards the sun, but which constantly falls short of reaching the sun, that ever-evasive source in eclipse, in ellipse? Is a poetry which continually subverts signification in the service of truth?

What is involved, now, is a reading—or rather a situating—of Michael Palmer's "Sun" through/within Jacques Derrida's "White Mythology: Metaphor in the text of Philosophy." For it is there that we encounter "The Ellipsis of the Sun" and "The Flowers of Rhetoric: The Heliotrope."

1. Derrida tells us that the noun lies at the center of Aristotle's theory of metaphor. For Aristotle, metaphor is the displacement of nouns, the transport of names, the transport of categorematic but not syncategorematic words.

Everything, in the theory of metaphor, that is coordinate to this system of distinctions or at least to its principle, seems to belong to the great immobile chain of Aristotelian ontology, with its theory of the analogy of Being, its logic, its epistemology, and more precisely its poetics and its rhetoric. (Derrida 236)

The world is an object

Place yourself here as if on a surface

Replace horizon with an equals sign

(Palmer ll.38-40)

The horizon, the line, I suppose, between signifier and signified (among other binary oppositions); an equals sign as the problematizing of binary logic.

2. Meaning and reference: that is, the possibility of signifying by means of a noun. What is proper to nouns is to signify something . . . , an independent being identical to itself, conceived as such. It is at this point that the theory of the name, such as it is implied by the concept of metaphor, is articulated with ontology. (237)

But what is the status of the name in Palmer's "Sun"?

B says, It could be made of silk,
of marble, of extract of clouds

B asks, Is the discourse
of objects specific

(ll.41-44)

Identity, the bedrock of the subject, is a function of the proper name, yet here we have an elision, a calculus of subject-positions as functions of discourse.

An indefinite calculus
watches, writes and rewrites

(ll.34-5)

3. *Mimesis* is never without the *theoretical* perception of resemblance or similarity, that is, of that which always will be posited as the condition for metaphor. *Homotosis* is not only constitutive of the value of truth (aletheia) which governs the entire chain; it is that without which the metaphorical operation is impossible. (237)

Can one decode the birth of the sign

from the miniskirt, the unconscious, TV the
mirage

of the referent, the equation
of A with A

A body disappears into itself
its mirror self or sister self

(ll.46-52)

4. The condition for metaphor (for good and true metaphor) is the condition for truth. (237)

unreadable, even invisible
The snow is ours, no part of this page

coating Moscow's courtyards

(ll. 126-8)

5. *Physis* is revealed in *mimesis*, or in the poetry which is a species of *mimesis*, by virtue of the hardly apparent structure which constrains *mimesis* from carrying to the exterior the fold of its redoubling. It belongs to *physis*, or, if you will, *physis* includes its own exteriority and its double. (237)

But what of the poetry of conspicuous redoubling?

behind a screen I was aware of things those
things were me amazing the forked branch

spilling names I had been-not I
had been not-lost I had seen you once

(ll.325-8)

6. The power of truth, as the unveiling of nature (*physis*) by *mimesis*, congenitally belongs to the physics of man, to anthropophysics. Such is the natural origin of poetry, and such is the natural origin of metaphor. (237)

Day One is called Tongues

Day Two might be This-and-Only-This

Day Three is Antinomy

(ll.79-81)

7. *Mimesis* yields pleasure only on the condition of giving

us to see in action that which nonetheless is not to be seen in action, but only in its very resembling double, its *mimema*. Let us leave open the question of this energetic absence, this enigmatic division, that is, the interval which makes scenes and tells tales. (239)

Words will say this
resolved to write a play

(ll.19-20)

Sun flares, then divides

(l.90)

8. According to the elliptical syllogism of *mimesis*, the pleasure of knowing always accomodates itself to the marking absence of its object. It is even born of this accomodation. The *mimeme* is neither the thing itself nor something totally other. (240, n.43)

We spoke in the zero code
system of assemblage and separation

arcuate scar and necklace
doubled by their reflections

then redoubled in the lens
34,000 words spread out before me

words like incarnadine, tide and cheer
asymptote, locus, tear or tear

waiting to say things
(you cannot say things)

(ll. 135-44)

9. Henceforth, the annagrammatical, which functions with the aid of parts of nouns, dismembered nouns, is foreign to the metaphorical field in general, as is also the syntactic play of articulations. (240-1)

Name you this: a region
a language, a pot of stew

A magical chain
shreds particles and objects

(ll.363-6)

10. **Marking the moment of the turn of the detour . . . during which meaning might seem to venture forth alone, unloosed from the very thing it aims at, from the truth which attunes it to its referent, metaphor also opens the wandering of the semantic.** (241)

lens
question

in

And black
As when

(ll.377-8 1)

11. **Rather than a metaphor, do we not have here an "enigma," a secret narrative, composed of several metaphors, a powerful asyndeton or dissimulated conjunction, whose essential characteristic is "to describe a fact in an impossible combination of words"?** (243)

12. **There is only one sun in this system. The proper name, here, is the nonmetaphorical prime mover of metaphor, the father of all figures. Everything turns around it, everything turns toward it.** (243)

13. **[The sun's] name is inscribed in a system of relations that constitutes it. This name is no longer the proper name of a unique thing which metaphor would overtake; it has already begun to say the multiple, divided origin of all seed, of the eye, of invisibility, death, the father, the "proper name," etc.** (244)

Place an allogene within the graft
The hood is black with two holes for my mouths

(ll.21-2)

This I is the I who speaks
(signed Scardanelli)

(ll. 67-8)

14. **Is not this flower of rhetoric (like) a sunflower? That is—but this is not exactly a synonym—analogue to the heliotrope?** (250)

Is not Palmer's language that which gestures toward reference but constantly ends up elsewhere, diverted, disseminated?

15. **Heliotropic metaphors are always imperfect metaphors . . . as the metaphoric trope always implies a sensory kernel, or rather something like the sensory, which can always not be present in act and in person, and since the sun in this respect is the sensory signifier of the sensory par excellence, that is, the sensory model of the sensory (the Idea, paradigm, or parabola of the sensory), then the turning sun always will have been the trajectory of metaphor.... Thus metaphor means heliotrope, both a movement toward the sun and the turning movement of the sun.** (250-1)

A headless man walks, lives
for four hours

devours himself
You bring death into your mouth—X

we are called—
sleep, festinate, haul rocks

The eye follows itself across the screen
Words pass backward

onto the tongue
are swallows

in clay cliffs
The sea's no picture at all

(ll. 1-12)

16. **For if the sun is no longer completely natural, what in nature does remain natural?** (251)

17. What is interesting to us here, thus, is the production of a proper sense, a new kind of proper sense, by means of the violence of a catachresis whose intermediary status tends to escape the opposition of the primitive and the figurative, standing between them as a "middle." When the middle of an opposition is not the passageway of a mediation, there is every chance that the opposition is not pertinent. The consequences are boundless. (256, n.60)

My speech explaining the layers went very well. (1.60)

Again, is a poetry which continually subverts signification in the service of truth? When the source of truth, of illumination, lies perpetually out of sight in its own revolution, what propriety remains for a discourse of truth? And what of this key term "dis/course," that which attempts to stop the sun in its tracks, the asymptotic course of the ellipse?

Now a filament of light

penetrates the image-base
where first glyphs are stored (ll.425-7)

18. . . . this is how philosophy traditionally has interpreted its powerful catachresis: the twisting return toward the already-there of a meaning, *production* (of signs, or rather of values), but as *revelation*, unveiling, bringing to light, truth. (257)

Hold your head in your right hand

As a lantern
a light impossible for this season (ll.524-6)

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Bruce Campbell

"A Body Disappears into Itself": Michael Palmer's *Sun*

The titles of Michael Palmer's last three collections of poetry—all published by North Point Press—offer us a temptation: to trace the ecolalia of *Notes for Echo Lake* (1981) to the originary *First Figure* (1984), which turns out to be none other than this current *Sun* (1988). A well-primed proposition lurches forward. Palmer, obviously tired of the echo, has staked a claim to something definitive, essential, and originary.¹ There's only one thing wrong with this proposition: we discover that this *Sun* brings with it "snow" ("*sun-snow*" [S, 9—Palmer's italics]).² If "sun" can be taken as an archetypal first figure, this first figure is cloven, bearing within itself its opposite. The first figure, then, is not originary. It is already an echoing chamber, yet, in this echoing, we are privy (somehow) to "secrets beyond the boundaries of speech" (S, 83). There is something in the first figure which is already excessive or elusive, vagrant or violent, disorienting or dystopic (as in "dystopic//figures confound the matrix" [S, 67]). After all, how can we know these secrets without, in some sense, knowing them within a language, and how can we know them in a language and yet not be able to speak of them? Doesn't this just go to show how circular a first figure might be? "Here the first figure, here the false figure of speech playing with a ring" (FF, 64). Or, as Palmer noted in an interview, "The first figure, then, is an arena of mystery, yet you are always trying to disclose things through language which have a quality of primacy. We want to peel away layers of language to arrive at a word which is entirely absent—once you've found your way to it it isn't there" (TP, 142).³

So, perhaps, all we've shown is the danger of reading books by their titles—or of not reading them deeply enough by their titles; for, in ecolalia, a first figure had always been crucial, even if impossible to distinguish; on the other hand, the first figure shall not prevent the echoing back and forth of "afterwards and opposite" (FF, 64) due to "what might be said before the sentences enter: there is no focal point; I have no idea what the future will bring; we did not make the new law ourselves" (FF, 64), although we did discover—*contra* Wittgenstein, I suppose⁴—that "the word is all that is displaced" (FF, 65). Writing, then, is an act of