



---

An Interview with Michael Palmer

Author(s): Keith Tuma and Michael Palmer

Source: *Contemporary Literature*, Vol. 30, No. 1 (Spring, 1989), pp. 1-12

Published by: University of Wisconsin Press

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1208421>

Accessed: 03/10/2008 00:18

---

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/action/showPublisher?publisherCode=uwisc>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit organization founded in 1995 to build trusted digital archives for scholarship. We work with the scholarly community to preserve their work and the materials they rely upon, and to build a common research platform that promotes the discovery and use of these resources. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).



University of Wisconsin Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Contemporary Literature*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

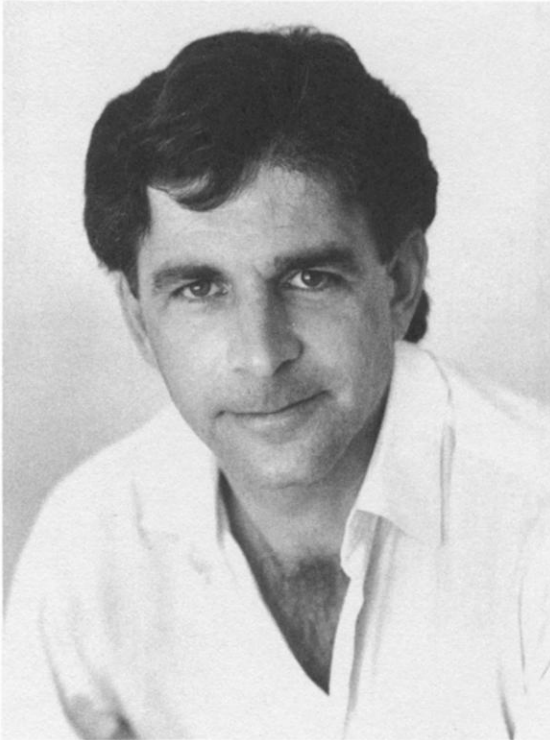
## AN INTERVIEW WITH MICHAEL PALMER

*Conducted by Keith Tuma*

Michael Palmer was born in New York City in 1943 and educated at Harvard, where he received an M.A. in comparative literature. His books of poems include *Blake's Newton* (1972), *The Circular Gates* (1974), and *Without Music* (1977) from Black Sparrow Press, and *Notes for Echo Lake* (1981) and *First Figure* (1984) from North Point Press. He lives in San Francisco, where he is on the faculty of poetics at the New College of California.

Palmer writes a poetry which foregrounds problems of language and signification. While this has led him to be identified with the so-called Language Realism poets, his work actually predates the critical polemics and journals responsible for that much-abused rubric. As early as *Blake's Newton*, for instance, we find him incorporating and adapting phrases from Willard Van Orman Quine's *Word and Object*. Like Louis Zukofsky, one early influence, Palmer is a self-consciously intellectual poet interested in exploring the social and political implications of decisions of technique. While I would hesitate to identify any specific origin from which his effort to move away from a speech-centered model of composition might derive, it seems clear that, more than most poets of his generation, Palmer is close to the work of contemporary French poets and theorists. As such, his work would seem to demand the attention of American critics interested in deconstruction and the politics of signification. In this interview, I wanted to allow Palmer an opportunity to articulate the theoretical concerns that inform his work, especially as he sees them within the context of contemporary theory and criticism.

The interview was conducted in Chicago in May 1986, the day before Palmer read at the University of Chicago.



*Michael Palmer. Photo ©Thomas Victor.*

*Q.* It seems to me that there's a break in your work, probably at the time of *Without Music*. I would define the break there as a move away from habits of enjambment found in, say, Creeley, to an idea of the line as a more autonomous unit often not obviously continuous with a previous line—to an uncentered, “schizophrenic” language sometimes identified with the Language poets.

*A.* I think there's been an evolution of the work. Probably there are early marks on it of people like Creeley and Zukofsky. I don't think there's entirely a Black Mountain model, by any means, as I'm already in much of the early work involved with radical discontinuities of surface and voice, but if there is a change in terms of that kind of enjambment, and so on—I'm not systematically aware of it—it may have to do with moving further and further away from a speech-centered model of composition, a projective model of composition the early work bears traces of. In that respect I suppose you can see, begin to see, the particular concerns with disjunction, and so on, coming forward. As far as this notion of “schizophrenic” language goes, ever since the earliest work I've been interested in it, in the simpler sense—prior to any Deleuzian concept of the schizophrenic. And in that regard I've always been intrigued by the information I could derive from not only that area but areas such as glossolalia, that one sees as outside and yet apposite to everyday discourses, providing alternative logics, alternative modes of thought and perception. These seem to me to offer new information about the territory the poem occupies, how it moves and what it sets about meaning in a kind of resistance to the habituated modes of conventional verse, confessional expressionism and that kind of thing—the representational modes that still remain effectively the mainstream of American poetry writing. The mainstream is in itself somewhat diverse, but it is unquestionably something that rejects the major discoveries and the impetus of modernism in favor of a return to a kind of centered, commodified mode of working that was called for by the generation of Randall Jarrell and others; they felt that things had gone far enough and that it was time to close the windows and lock the doors and get the house in order. So, given that, of course it's easy to see why I was drawn to the first generation of New York poets as well as to the Black Mountain poets for their attempts to counter that conservative (and frequently reactionary) impulse. Let me add that I find the idea of a “break” or “rupture”

attractive, even necessary, as a counter to certain notions of continuity, consistency, oeuvre.

*Q.* I find among younger theory-oriented academics here and elsewhere a large push to free up critical writing, even to the point where some are calling attention to its existence as an art form, thus continuing one “modernist” project designed to make more problematical the distinction between prose and poetry. Why are you publishing books and calling them books of poems, as opposed to books of something else?

*A.* Well, in *First Figure*, you will not find anything that calls it a book of poems, at least not in any of my copy. That was a decision I made, explicitly, after a conversation with the French poet Claude Royet-Journoud a few years ago. I don’t know if some blurb in the book may say “poems.” I think in the front it says, “Some of these poems appeared in the following magazines,” but that’s standard copy really.

*Q.* But it’s deceptive in the sense that it’s marketed as a book of poems.

*A.* Yes. Most look like poems and undoubtedly are in some sense. One is confronted so often with the question of whether this is literature, this poetry, et cetera; it doesn’t matter to me one way or another, finally. There’s always a co-optation of those categories by people who think there are prior definitions of what they are, and I think the easiest way to fight that is to hand it over to them. You want “the poems,” here, you can have them, and you decide what they are. You want “literature,” you can have literature. I don’t really care if something is literature when, in fact, that particular category bothers me in terms of what goes along with it, in terms of decorum, political decorum and decorum in relation to taste: the clothes you wear in the poem and the table manners of the poem. So it’s really, I think, becoming less and less a useful thing to mull over. If someone wants to come along later and worry about the question, that’s fine with me. I really can’t find any absolute distinctions at a linguistic level or semantic level, either between prose and poetry, between prose and verse, let’s say, or between poetry and texts of other orders that are manifestly not, so to speak, poems. I’ll let the genre people sort it out.

Q. Do you feel any sympathy for the various academic theory movements?

A. Well, do you mean the European influence?

Q. Yes—the people writing out of Derrida or Foucault or the *Anti-Oedipus* book for that matter.

A. I read it with interest, some of it. I have mixed feelings; obviously you can't cover everything in any answer to a question that boundless in scope. I'm glad, whenever possible, to see a shattering of the old New Critical models, which that is bound to help bring about.

Q. Has brought about.

A. Has brought about, I suppose, though I would say at the high school level where kids are first subjected to poetry, that's still pretty much adhered to as the responsible mode of reading. In any case, there seems to be more audacity in some of that work, though clearly some people have latched on to it and have turned it away from writing again. If you look at the work—one of the problems I find with the Yale school, for example, is that, despite some of the more exciting work, really these critics haven't moved that far from the drear and shopworn canon. They haven't questioned that at all. They've just changed their mode of analysis; they certainly haven't changed their canonical values. And most of them have not begun to approach the writing of their critical works as writing, so that you still have something that is fixed within a certain style of thought. So we can have neo-Freudians for three years and then this and then that and post-structuralism, et cetera, but without any fundamental reappraisal of what it is to make a work. The kind of criticism that tends to interest me the most is a criticism that is also a making. And I remember the scorn with which that was greeted at a place like Harvard, where the text you were composing, a critical text, was supposed to be virtually nonexistent at the level of writing. And therefore tended to become nonexistent at the level of thought. Writing criticism tended to be a job of work relating more to one's academic career—certification—than to the task of making a book. And I don't see any change in that in most of the writing of Bloom and de Man and so on, even though they are quite brilliant people, some of whose perceptions, particularly the reassessment of romanticism and the investigation of lyric tropology in de Man, are very interesting to me. And somewhat pertinent to what I'm doing. As far as the question of the priority of theory,

I don't particularly go along with that, but I'm interested in a symbiotic relationship with other kinds of writing, such as that which exists in early Jakobson, Benjamin, Blanchot, and certain recent feminists like Irigaray. The most perceptive scholars and critics tend to be in tune with new literature. I don't think you can have a viable theoretical discourse with the kind of contempt for exploratory writing that tends to exist in our universities. And that ignorance is, it seems to me, still demonstrably present. Foucault I am now reading again with much interest, particularly some of the shorter pieces such as "What Is Enlightenment?" where, pertinent to one discussion, he observes that "The point, in brief, is to transform the critique conducted in the form of necessary limitation into a practical critique that takes the form of a possible transgression."<sup>1</sup>

*Q.* How much do you regard the introduction of Marxist theory into English departments as a political phenomenon? Do you regard your own writing as political?

*A.* How things will change with the accession in the academy of new Marxist theory I don't know. Obviously, Marxist theory can be as far from any kind of praxis as anything else. It can be café talk as much as anything else. Everything, it goes without saying, has its political dimension, conscious or otherwise, and I would certainly be well aware of that in relation to my work, though I don't know if I can give a cogent analysis of my work in terms of its effect or in terms of any coherence as a political response.

*Q.* Yet it seems to me that the writing you do and the theorizing about it is centered, to the extent that it's centered at all, around an idea of an audience; that is, you expect an audience that exists within a certain political spectrum, within certain habits of rational discourse, and so on, and you write against them.

*A.* No, that's not entirely true. Yes, there's resistance and opposition and so on, but I also expect an audience that has shared these other dimensions of discourse that are presented in this work. Some people have tended to put these aside or reject them, have tended to be uncomfortable with modes of, let's say, counterlogical thought, analogical thought, the kind that sometimes occurs in my work. In that respect, the work becomes a form of address rather than conten-

---

<sup>1</sup>Michel Foucault, "What Is Enlightenment?" *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon, 1984) 45.

tion; it becomes an attempt to reinvoke such modes of thought. There are various political dimensions that I feel extremely aware of in thinking about the entire politics of the poem in relation to current society but also in relation to all societies, historically. In relation to the discourse of power, for example. I'm very conscious of the role that poetry can play as resistant to and as a critique of the discourse of power by undermining assumptions about meaning and univocality. But also by occupying, hopefully without marginalization, the margins of the cultural landscape, working on the boundaries.

*Q.* You say hopefully without marginalization. Are you fearful of—you wouldn't be the first certainly—poetry's marginalization within the culture now?

*A.* I think the ultimate marginalization of poetry comes from people who trivialize it, poets who turn poems into commodities. The truly marginalized poetry is the poetry next to the cartoons in the *New Yorker* or the kind of rote composition and commentary that occupies most pages of the *American Poetry Review*. That is self-marginalizing verse because it is commodified and can be discarded. Obviously, we don't have large audiences in any given moment, and yet if we're doing work of any significance, we are refusing that kind of self-imposed marginalization. Naturally, we don't move worlds around here. In terms of the number of readers, poetry is marginal to cultural concerns. But what are the central concerns of the culture? They are making money, getting a talking car, and imposing Pax Americana upon the world.

*Q.* Well, to the extent that talking politics means talking about audiences and constituencies, clearly even Robert Penn Warren, our laureate, can't think of himself as much of a political force. Poetry's audience is tiny and specialized, consisting mainly of intellectuals, most of whom are writers and academics concerned with the transmission of culture and knowledge. Is it important for you to make some sort of dent, then, in the pedagogical institutions?

*A.* I think it is important to make those dents. The canonizing center, though, is like a large tar baby, or something that can simply absorb and stick you in there and change you at its will. We were talking last night about the phenomenon of bringing in poets who have been thought of, in one way or another, as poets of a particular cultural resistance. I think of Williams in one respect, for resistance to the given models, but many other poets through time. I mean you could name



Catullus and Villon as well. Or the great Third World writers whose purpose has been much more explicitly political, who also find themselves studied in the schools as a mode or kind of literature, which is already an appropriation of a sort that denies them their functional purpose. I don't know if we can get around that, if you can sit around and read Baudelaire's "gaze," his attention, in acculturated terms. What is forgotten is what these writers actually stand for. Is there any resistance to that? To the certain mainstream effect? I'm not sure.

*Q.* Do you know the essay by Fredric Jameson—"Postmodernism and Consumer Society"—in the Bay Press anthology called *The Anti-Aesthetic*?<sup>2</sup>

*A.* The one where he talks about Bob Perelman's poem "China"?

*Q.* Yes, that's the one. At the end of the essay, he expresses some doubt about whether his project there—related to yours and the Language poets in general I think—can truly be oppositional. Do you—

*A.* Let me make a cautionary note there in that the uses he put Bob's poem to in that essay didn't seem to me necessarily of the best. He didn't really demonstrate a particular knowledge of the whole territory of writing that he is beginning to use; it didn't seem to me a terribly cogent piece of work, certainly less informative than a lot of Jameson's other writing. The essay is an odd piece of *bricolage*, a somewhat futile attempt to scan "postmodernism" as social and aesthetic practice. I do object to the reductiveness of the approach and the illustrational character Bob's poem assumes in that context. Then there is the, to my mind, preposterous claim for Doctorow as an authentically radical novelist and the use of Sartre's work on Flaubert. Here I would strongly diverge from a central concern of Jameson's, since I view Sartre as an often simplistic and patronizing literary critic and theorist. The observation, if not the conclusion, Jameson draws from Lacan about the breakdown of the relations among signifiers, and the materialization of the signifier, is interesting. I suppose the origins of this breakdown can be traced at least as far back as Hölderlin, where we experience both the semiotic rupture and temporal fragmentation—with important historical differences, of course. Yet I think it is an obvious mistake to programmatically deduce from that a century or more of a poetry in itself "schizophrenic." "Oppositional," finally, does

---

<sup>2</sup>Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism and Consumer Society," *The Anti-Aesthetic*, ed. Hal Foster (Port Townsend, WA: Bay Press, 1983) 111-25.

not end with the poem or with theory, and when it is so conceived it will eventuate in futility, with our own means being turned against us. It would be absurd to make grandiose, teleological claims for what one does. Such claims would, in fact, subvert the project.

*Q.* Are you willing to accept the possibility of competing “modernist” traditions?

*A.* Oh, I would think so, yes. If we have a myth of a unitary “modernism,” it’s purely a myth.

*Q.* So which “modernism” are you most interested in appropriating? The poets usually mentioned in discussions of your work or the work of Charles Bernstein or Ron Silliman are Stein and Zukofsky. I more rarely hear names like Bunting or Pound. Bernstein has an essay in a recent *Ironwood* issue on George Oppen, so I guess there’s a move there to appropriate his work. Do you have a sense of the writers who are most important to you among predecessors in this century?

*A.* Specifically among the Americans (who in no way represent the sole limit or focus of my interests), there was a point as a young writer where Pound was certainly very important, when I was twenty years old and the form of polemical criticism that he was writing was very exciting. I was almost half-disregarding what he was saying, fortunately, I think. I centered, in my early work, on people like Williams and Pound, no question about it. And at a certain point Stein was of great use, not in terms of learning to write out of or like Stein, but affirming the possibilities of working outside some of the unexamined norms, questioning the prose/poetry boundaries and focusing on something that was more like writing. Stevens was also important a little bit later on. On the other hand, I’m not particularly interested in the “appropriation” of any of them. On the contrary, I find so much of their own program problematic in many respects. I find myself on the point of rather desperate re-evaluation of what they stand for in relation to any of the work that needs to be done now. So that I find these poets of real substance, but some are tarnished models. Zukofsky, no question, is a very important poet to me, and it was important to know him when I was twenty and twenty-one years old, to talk with him and to think about the issues raised by his work: the complex dimensions of “clarity,” of the relation between eye and intellect, the political use of documents, the idea of condensation, another term that you find, of course, in Bunting. Bunting is a wonderful poet; I

wouldn't know what to do with Basil. Do you appropriate Basil Bunting? I doubt it.

*Q.* To shift closer to contemporaries, is there anyone outside of this Black Mountain–Language school line (whatever value this term has) whose work you admire?

*A.* Before we take the Black Mountain–Language school line, let's say that that in itself is very problematic in the sense that much that certain language-oriented writers, such as Lyn Hejinian, Steve Benson, Kit Robinson, Silliman, and Watten, have done is to undermine the univocal, the presumptions about speaker and subject still carried out in a breath-projected model, with the bodily origins of that metaphor.

*Q.* Duncan as opposed to Silliman, for instance.

*A.* Yes. Duncan is an intriguing figure in that, in the great vatic tradition, he is not univocal either; he allows an entire crowd of voices to pass through.

*Q.* Refashioning the soul . . .

*A.* Yes, and a simplistic soul (a patently delimited construct, let's say) tends to disappear behind those voices. Now, by the same token, some of the Language poets have reacted very strongly against the high romantic affect of Duncan. I feel much closer to Robert than, for example, it would appear that Silliman and certainly Watten do. Not close in what I write, but close in terms of a sympathy toward what he has done, which I think is an extraordinary work.

I share your hesitancy about fabricating an overly simplified lineage, and I also wouldn't want to support any exclusionary authentication of focus or practice by a particular group. I'm interested in a great many "other" contemporaries (outside that so-called language-oriented identity)—writers such as Nathaniel Mackey, Beverly Dahlen, Ron Padgett, Bill Corbett, David Shapiro, Alice Notley, Leslie Scalapino, John Taggart, Gustaf Sobin, Rosmarie Waldrop, Fanny Howe, David Henderson, and Victor Hernández Cruz, along with a few more readily identifiable with traditional forms. What troubles me about that "Language" term is that, taken at face value, it is manifestly absurd, as well as insulting to other writers equally committed to exploring the medium. I think too that it may be deceptive in its possible suggestion of a purely formal orientation. "Exploring the medium" is not in itself the goal. I hope we are questioning ways of understanding, seeing, and various crucial orders of assumption about meaning

and representation in a culture where most things seem to have become re-presentation.

*Q.* Are there petty local power structures in the poetry world of the Bay Area?

*A.* There are probably a thousand petty local power structures in the Bay Area. And certainly petty local jealousies and reactive, vindictive gestures having as much to do with personality as with the real issues. One of the problems that language-oriented writers tend to come up against, for example, is that they challenge beloved paradigms. And certainly the Black Mountain one as much as any. So that people who have, for instance, the notion of spontaneity and unreflective writing and so on, and have dedicated literary lives to that, tend to get very angry when someone says that that's not a coherent model at this point. But, like anything else, a new poetry comes along and thinks it's going to be right and true this time; that's a myth too. Each time one replaces a given model with another model, a theoretical model, whatever, you are inscribing yourself in the larger myth of innovation (and/or myths of recovery, renaissance, et al.). That can be just as problematic as the little elements within it. I think that avant-gardism is so clearly commodified now, so clearly simply a matter of what perfume or what soap you're selling, that no one I know believes in it, as they might have, say, in 1919, or for twenty or thirty years after that.

*Q.* That is, in the sense of a movement, which implies an idea of history—something of a nineteenth-century notion of history.

*A.* A nineteenth-century notion of history and teleology. Now there are times when I feel that Watten, among others, is still temperamentally and politically committed to some version of that model. His own combativeness and his commitment to a coherent movement may lead to that kind of position. Maybe this could be viewed as an attempt to erase that same commodification and reclaim certain possibilities, such as artistic interventionism.

*Q.* Do you have the sense that the French poets are paying attention to what's going on over here?

*A.* Oh, yes. A good number of them are, yes. And are building their own rather different but reasonably coherent picture of what interests them. It tends to be very much not the ideological center of American poetry that interests them. And that's understandable in that the French model is traditionally so much committed to a degree of

formal experimentation and reflection on voice and subject and subjects and objects and the page and the political, the nature of the politics of the poem. It would be natural that they would focus on these other areas rather than on areas like storytelling and narrative and traditional, formal concerns.

*Q.* Do you have the sense that these poets tend to be on the Left in France? My vague sense of the political scene in France is that the Left has been taking a serious beating there, at least since a few years back, around the time of Lévy's book against Deleuze. What was it, *Barbarism with a Human Face*?

*A.* Yes. The Left has been taking a beating all through the century. And currently, of course, the Socialists in power are in trouble; they're in a kind of uneasy cohabitation now with the Right. It's not that the Socialists have, by any means, entirely lost credibility; on the contrary, they are still in a fairly even battle with the old, in effect Gaullist, right-of-center parties. The Communists have been reduced to about ten percent of the vote, whatever that means in terms of the vote, and in speaking to one Communist writer over there, who is an interesting poet, he was saying that maybe the thing to do, for now, is to give that up and get down to three percent of the vote, and reassert some values that they had felt they had lost in striving to get representation in the constituency. But I think there's no question that there's a whole reappraisal and turmoil. You have also the phenomenon of an extreme right, probably quasi-fascist, which is making a lot of noise.

*Q.* Not without some vague parallel here.

*A.* No, of course not, of course not. I don't think any of these phenomena are isolated within a given country. And you also see the *Tel Quel* group beginning to — well, a former *Tel Quel* leftist such as Philippe Sollers is now I'm told going to church. What that designates I'm not close enough to French culture to say. *La schizophrénie*?

*Q.* I know that Derrida somewhere has commented on the reactionary possibilities of certain appropriations of his work, and I suppose that this could be said of your work as well, that this is work that has many possibilities for reactionary politics.

*A.* I think that's right; I think the potential exists within anything you constitute as a mode.

*Q.* It's nothing to worry about, though, on a day-to-day basis?

A. Everything is something to worry about, I find, on a day-to-day basis. But rather than denying that, I think one has to say that that's always a potential. It would be incredibly naive to think that one could constitute a form within which one would not be vulnerable to any kind of drift. And that would obviously be naive in relation to the notion of content, also, and the interplay of the two.

Q. The whole question assumes the straightforward relationship between action and discourse. I mean, after all, Faulkner can be thought of as a liberal if it's 1966 and we're at Columbia.

A. That's right. Yes, and this is one of the things we have to look at in relation to all the heroes of modernism. You have this so-called revolution of the word, yet when you look at the politics of the word in relation to that, it's extremely questionable at best and monstrous at its worst. I think there is an abyss of the subject at the heart of modernism (that's virtually a truism by now), and we're all rather worriedly, concernedly trying to reappraise figures such as Pound and Stevens and Stein, whomever you might name from that generation, Marianne Moore, et cetera. What is that as a heritage? How much of that is acceptable as a heritage?