

*The Company of Moths*  
*Codes Appearing*  
*The Promises of Glass*  
*The Danish Notebook*  
*The Lion Bridge: Selected Poems 1972–1995*  
*At Passages*  
*An Alphabet Underground*  
*For a Reading*  
*Sim*  
*Songs for Sarah*  
*First Figure*  
*Notes for Echo Lake*  
*Alogon*  
*Transparency of the Mirror*  
*Without Music*  
*The Circular Gates*  
*C's Songs*  
*Blake's Newton*  
*Plan of the City of O*

SELECTED TRANSLATIONS

*Voyelles* by Arthur Rimbaud  
*Jonah Who Will Be 25 in the Year 2000* (Film by Alain Tanner)  
*The Surrealists Look at Art* (with Norma Cole)  
*Blue Vitriol* by Alexei Parshchikov (with John High and Michael Molnar)  
*Theory of Tables* by Emmanuel Hocquard  
*Three Moral Tales* by Emmanuel Hocquard  
in *The Selected Poetry of Vicente Huidobro*  
in *The Random House Book of Twentieth-Century French Poetry*  
in *Nothing the Sim Could Not Explain: 20 Contemporary Brazilian Poets*  
in *Twenty-two New French Writers*

OTHER

*Code of Signals: Recent Writings in Poetics*, ed. Michael Palmer

# A c t i v e B o u n d a r i e s

Selected Essays and Talks

Michael Palmer



A NEW DIRECTIONS BOOK

"No contrasts, no shading anymore . . ."  
They are in the dark.

*in memory of W. G. Sebald*

We work in the company of others (philosophers and farmers, artists and scientists, as we variously require), and we work in the dark.

The historian Daniel Boorstin has remarked that ignoring the past in making decisions is like trying to plant cut flowers. Likewise, to ignore the future, when "we'll all be dead," is to ignore the present. Here perhaps, at this gathering, we can at least aspire to that alternative space I've been addressing, one that is at once inside and outside, a part and apart, much like the workings of our various arts, a space of circulation and exchange. In opposing the profoundly destructive designs of those presently in power, we might consider the architecture of what the poet Robert Duncan once called the "symposium of the whole," a site where the other is addressed and not demonized, and where reason and imagination conjoin. Maybe that is the tonic from which the scale will arise.

[*Keynote Address, Evergreen State College Synergy Symposium, February 2005.*  
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## DEAR WALT

Dear Walt,

I must confess that I was thinking of you all last week, as I sat in my daughter's apartment overlooking Fort Greene Park in Brooklyn, across the waters from Manhattan. Do you still remember how, as editor of the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, you entreated the citizens of Brooklyn to build a park worthy of their young metropolis, and fought to save the Fort Greene area from the unbridled greed of developers? Later, there was a movement to honor the bones of the 12,000 or so "martyrs" of the American Revolution, dead of disease and starvation on British prison ships, their bodies interred in shallow graves along the shore of Wallabout Bay. So the Prison Ship Martyrs Monument now stands at the park's highest point.

It's a bit strange to contemplate these things at our present moment in history. I don't know whether you keep abreast of the news, Walt, but it is not good. The current administration, a dungheap of pious hypocrites and liars, has used the pretext of the war against terror to dismantle the founding principles and values of the Republic and to abrogate international treaties. At Guantánamo, foreign prisoners are being held without recourse to legal council and without charges. Have you heard of Abu Ghraib? There and at other locations, prisoners of our illegal war have been tortured, sexually humiliated, beaten and killed. They've been urinated on, shocked with electrical

## POETRY AND CONTINGENCY: WITHIN A TIMELESS MOMENT OF BARBARIC THOUGHT

Kant thought he was honoring art when among the predicates of beauty he emphasized and gave prominence to those which established the honor of knowledge: impersonality and universality. This is not the place to inquire whether this was essentially a mistake; all I wish to underline is that Kant, like all philosophers, instead of envisaging the aesthetic problem from the point of view of the artist (the creator), considered art and the beautiful purely from that of the "spectator," and unconsciously introduced the "spectator" into the concept "beautiful." It would not have been so bad if this "spectator" had at least been sufficiently familiar to the philosophers of beauty—namely as a great *personal* fact and experience, as an abundance of vivid authentic experiences, desires, surprises, and delights in the realm of the beautiful! But I fear that the reverse has always been the case; and so they have offered us, from the beginning, definitions in which, as in Kant's famous definition of the beautiful, a lack of any refined first-hand experience reposes in the shape of a fat worm of error. "That is beautiful," said Kant, "which gives us pleasure *without interest*." Without interest! Compare with this definition one framed by a genuine "spectator" and artist—Stendhal, who once called the beautiful *une promesse de bonheur*. At any rate, he *rejected* and repudiated the

boxes and deprived of food and sleep. All specifically in the name of democracy, freedom, Christian values. Over 100,000 Iraqi civilians have been killed or maimed. Domestically, human and civil rights, gay and women's rights, environmental protections, social programs and freedom of expression are equally under assault. And so, as Paris calls to celebrate you (Paris, Walt—I think you'd have liked it!), I cannot help but reflect on the pall of irony now cast by events over one of your late, if admittedly far from best, poems:

America

Centre of equal daughters, equal sons,  
All, all alike endear'd, grown, ungrown, young or old,  
Strong, ample, fair, enduring, capable, rich,  
Perennial with the Earth, with Freedom, Law and Love,  
A grand, sane, towering, seated Mother,  
Chair'd in the adamant of Time.

Of course, such a place never was nor could be, as hard as you tried to make it so by means of the poem.

For which we now salute you, Walt, and send love,

Michael Palmer

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