

Angelic Orders: The Work of Ralph Angel

Jack Myers | September 2008

An even larger aspect of this feature of obliqueness can be grasped in the sculptural, gestalt quality of Angel's poems. They feel composed of felt-space and the silences of alienation that are threaded throughout by a carefully selected, inward-radiating array of imagery that expresses the speaker's desire for connectedness.

On the occasion of Sarabande Books' simultaneously publishing two of Ralph Angel's latest volumes, *Exceptions and Melancholies: Poems 1986-2006* and his translation of Federico Garcia Lorca's early volume, *Poem of the Deep Song*, I thought, as a partisan apologist for his brilliant work, and in order that it might be read more widely and appreciated, that I would scatter-shoot through his poetry to explain why, as elegant and original as its style is, its understated and deflecting qualities may make the work seem at first elusive and difficult. I thought that with a few pointers about its tactics and aesthetic, I could show that a little extra attention on the part of the reader is well worth the effort. Not that it hasn't been richly rewarded and extolled in prestigious quarters: his recently released selected volume, *Exceptions and Melancholies*, received the 2007 PEN Poetry Award, and his translation of Garcia Lorca's *Poem of a Deep Song* won the Willis Barnstone Poetry Translation Prize. And much earlier, John Ashbery went on record saying that Ralph's *Anxious Latitudes* is "an extraordinary first book of poems." And *Neither World* won the James Laughlin Award for best second book.

In initial encounters with Angel's poetry, the reader usually feels a bit estranged, dislocated. Its pastiches of imagery may seem arbitrary or at least abstracted through indirectness. There's the *noir* tone of European Existentialism. The phantom, pastel taste of the Mediterranean, with a slight metallic aftertaste of fatalism. The five Ws of journalism (who, what, when, where, and why) and the linear narration that mainstream, lyric-narrative American poetry currently depends upon have been jettisoned before departure. In their place, accompanied by the calm, silent hum of an exploring consciousness, there is an exotic, meditative, almost entranced, ambient quality that pervades the subspace through which the consciousness of the poem travels. And though the bulk of the poems may locate themselves in the very "now-ness" of contemporary, chic Los Angeles, their imagery has been cleaned and rarefied: selectively sieved and lifted up to the light, and focused upon like diamonds against black velvet. In place of telling metaphors bolted down to reality, Ralph prefers reality. Of the kind Eliot used in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock": "Arms that are braceleted and white and bare / (But in the lamplight, downed with light brown hair!)." The reader follows a kind of perceptual hopscotch of objectified but harmonized detail and imagery, interspersed with commentary, which creates the intersections of the poem's delicate webbing.

Great care and time have gone into these soft-spoken, seemingly off-handed monologues. I know this because I taught with Ralph for some ten years in the Vermont College low-residency MFA Program and witnessed his thoughtful, informed, and encouraging guidance as a master teacher (he holds the Edith R. White Chair of English and Creative Writing at the University of Redlands) who examines whatever work is placed before him through both ends of his analytical

telescope-from close, detailed, editorial scrutiny to the work's larger developmental aspects-then pulls back a bit and in a soft and considerate voice offers accurate, quiet, and effective advice. His reading style, in keeping with the autobiographical nature of his work, is intimate, almost private, as if a lid had been lowered on his voice so others should not hear; and yet a horizon note of resignation, as one finds in flamenco, rings through it all, as if he knew that in the larger picture some great cancellation was at work.

You would have to know Ralph personally to witness the range of his personality and complexity of his character; otherwise, you would see politeness, modesty, and humor, and would not glimpse that layer of spiritual anguish and abiding sense of psychic aloneness that informs his work, and which is indicated so obviously in his titles: *Anxious Latitudes*, *Neither World*, *Twice Removed*, and *Exceptions and Melancholies*. But his poems stretch far beyond the simplistic, repetitive purging work of, say, the blues by moving through the improvisational, discovery modes of jazz and abstract painting to a more complex, postmodern in-bending of his self-reflexive meditations and monologues. His subtle voice's everyman dilemma has an urban, edgy, psychological tremor to it, that of a sort of postmodern Willy Loman who isn't so much weighing the meaning of a life burnt out at the end of a smile and shoeshine; but one who lives a life of comparative middle-class ease, yet whose sense of alienation and rootlessness is so pervasive that it underpins the aesthetics and direction of his work. Should a middle-class artist in The Age of Middle-class Artists feel guilty because he writes about suffering and loss? A satisfying answer to this would be George Sand's epigraph to *Exceptions and Melancholies*: "I fall into melancholies of honey and roses which are none the less melancholy..."

To more easily receive Ralph Angel's poetry, the reader has to quiet himself down, surrender, and, as if in preparation for meditation, open fully to silence in order to bloom inside the muted minor key Angel writes in. Think of Miles Davis's nocturnal trumpet solos. Marc Chagall's drifting montages. You have to be comfortable with his deft and painterly touches in which the light snowfall of seemingly disparate images descends gently into associative patterns that quietly accumulate as, in an improvisational drift, one image substitutes for or leads to another, as seen in this opening stanza of "The Unveiling":

As it is it could be
fog upon the eve of your unveiling,
or memory-unspooling every
distance-
or the mockingbird,
or the muffled screams of a neighbor,
or laughter-from strangers come
relatives and friends,
and small bowls of vinegar
in a roomful of thinking about you,
the almonds, the prayers and the figs.

In its beginning, "The Unveiling" establishes at least a conditional sense of a dramatic situation, but in many of Angel's poems the reader begins in the middle of some unnamed occasion, meditation, or event, *en media res*, so that he or she is dislodged from the ordinary and

predictable, distanced from any sense of stability or grounded purpose, and placed in the center of the speaker's shaky, unreliable psyche. Look at the intentional nebulosity of these openings from some randomly chosen poems:

Something stayed in the mind there.
The most credulous birds. An indifferent
road.
("Untitled")

* * *

And so say nothing of the birds
out back, or how the leaves of trees grow louder
than the city...
("The Heart of Things")

* * *

Not even sleep (though I'm ashamed of that too).
Or watching my sleeping self drift out...
("Twice Removed")

* * *

And then the head is at odds with the body

And then the head strangles your way of thinking
("Breaking Rhythm")

By this dislocating tactic (raised to the level of a strategy) that is either more fully involving or off-putting, the reader is challenged to invent his own stabilizing context or to relinquish the comfortable anchorings of narrative elements and join the speaker, as one does in many of John Ashbery's poems, in floating along in the borderless, open field of his setups. In an era of relativistic philosophy, geo-politics, global economics, and a science that discovered that the subatomic foundation of an objective, ultimate reality, as far as we can see, is all based upon principles of indeterminacy and uncertainty in which the very act of our perception disturbs what we're perceiving, the aesthetics, prosody, and psychology of Ralph Angel's poems are mingled. I am reminded of when W. S. Merwin's *The Lice* came out in the '70s, and he was asked why his poems seemed so difficult and elusive. Merwin replied that he was simply trying to say what he could in the best way he knew how. Similarly, while the elusiveness in Angel's poetry demands of readers a large degree of active participation, that quality also gives them a great deal of intellectual and aesthetic respect in return.

An even larger aspect of this feature of obliqueness can be grasped in the sculptural, gestalt quality of Angel's poems. They feel composed of felt-space and the silences of alienation that are threaded throughout by a carefully selected, inward-radiating array of imagery that expresses the

speaker's desire for connectedness. Watch how in the penultimate stanza of "The Unveiling," Angel creates a ladder of wildly leaping, replacement imagery that through its all-encompassing and seeming randomness accrues to, as it educates us to his singular order of thinking, a final wholeness:

Impossible,
like the unwashed letters of your name,
or the faintly wailing
sirens of childhood, or the ocean
a half mile away-
like a kiss on the cheek,
a flutter of trees
in the plaza,
the breath of every
person you'll be.

If you look closely at this list of generalized and seemingly arbitrary imagery, you'll see that beneath its apparent randomness, as can be seen in the deep structure of metaphor, shared characteristics are at work; here the common denominators of ephemerality and distance work toward unifying the list into a pressure that releases the final statement.

On a boots-on-the-ground, technical level, other purposefully dislocating moves that his work features within his swirling dynamic are metaphors which Renaissance rhetoricians classified as "figures of logical fallacy." The first of these is the commonplace prepositional metaphor that typically employs a concrete image followed by an abstract image (the (concrete image) of (abstract image) equation), as in "the bite of your anger." In the example below, he has raised this ordinary device to a higher level of sophistication by paradoxically concretizing an abstraction:

a broken
tile
of nothing in your way
(*"a picture of it"*)

At other times he'll reverse the terms of the formula and present an abstraction followed by a concrete image. The following example is a bit more complicated because the abstract term of "private music" has been metaphorically telescoped out of its antecedent phrase "public prayer":

and public
prayer
was private, a kind of private music
in which a dog might
nose around.
(*"inside Out"*)

And still another twist of figurative logic that helps achieve surreal and stunning effects is his oxymoronic inversions of normal imagery in which he stands on its head what would normally be thought of as mundane imagery. For instance, it would not be at all extraordinary to walk out on a spit of sand and look up at the sky, but consider the fascinating effect of these lines when those terms are inverted:

As if you
nudged a narrow
shoal of sand
upon the currents
of the sky
(*"a picture of it"*)

or this example of a logical reversal from "Sometimes an Image":

A long time ago the sky
invented flesh

Here the reader looking for logical sequencing must fill in the leap in logic with, say, maybe the story of Genesis. Sometimes the logic of the imagery is breathtakingly cinematic, as if you had pressed the reverse button on your remote:

the light glimmers beneath the horizon
before sinking into our own inaudible sigh
(*"The River Has No Hair to Hold Onto"*)

The arena of the page for him, it seems to me, is like a Zen meditation garden in which a spare amount of what seems like randomly placed stones of details, imagery, and statements are buoyed in a sea of raked silences. Upon reflection, the observant devotee will discover the poet's many angles and levels of thought.

Another unpredictable move his work features, reminiscent of the juxtapositions of the Surrealists, is to make a yoked compound or zeugma out of disparate images and qualities which might range from the exotic to the everyday: "bougainvillea and glare," "pink heat / and someone sitting there," "the piled-up / newspapers and the rooftop pool."

Lastly, I wanted to catalogue the frequent syntactical and grammatical tactics that Angel makes, which critics have noted as part of his signature. All of these break the normal rules of rhetoric in order to induce ambiguity and plasticize meaning.

First are the reversals: sentences that work against the reader's stock response. For instance, "Quiet is the demolition," which at first sounds like the pigeon-English of an Old World immigrant, or the archaic wrenched order of 19th-Century lyric poetry, but upon re-readings proves to be an abstract, paradoxical equation. The same sort of *trompe l'oeie* occurs in the following lines which through a "con-fusion" of subject and object transforms the predictable into surprising new meaning: "...a wrecking ball / symbolizes the eye my world-weary sister / couldn't know to turn away / from."

Then there are the disagreements in implied tenses designed to jump time; in what follows, to expose the neighbors' real intention of procrastinating: "The neighbors got to know each other / someday soon."

The misplaced modifiers meant to stunt and contradict what's just been set up: "...how a room / begins as though it had been taken away / only."

The masked point of view that creates aesthetic distance and ambiguity: "And so stayed longer, he said, into the evening"

And, as in his poem "Soft and Pretty," the run-on sentence whose lines, connected by serial conjunctions, pass by like a locomotive pulling an assortment of rolling stock: flatcars and tankers and boxcars and stock cars and backward caboose.

These are not techniques invented merely to sensationalize and dazzle, though these are admittedly their effects; they have been worked toward and honed throughout his books as a means of expressing how Angel experiences the world in and around him. And they are not poetic habits of writing so much as a means to express his vision of creating a beautiful sense of desolation in the void of alienation.

In terms of the overall dynamics of Angel's creative process, typically it seems to have an in-spiraling, centripetal motion; that is, his images spin inward toward the creation of an unstated thematic center which the attentive reader can infer. As in music or a fine tone poem, the final "statement" is abstractly expressed as a complex chord on a psycho-emotional scale. The mode is Eastern, or Middle Eastern, in temperament (Ralph is a second-generation American of Sephardic descent), never opting for the slam-bang kickers in the closure found in most American poetry, seldom relying upon a sequential or even a fractured plotline, but circulinarily surrounding his subject like a pattern of thoughtfully placed stepping stones that pressure his central theme to light through a process of sensing its way toward discovery. The arena of the page for him, it seems to me, is like a Zen meditation garden in which a spare amount of what seems like randomly placed stones of details, imagery, and statements are buoyed in a sea of raked silences. Upon reflection, the observant devotee will discover the poet's many angles and levels of thought.

In his earlier, more solipsistic work, in which the angst and pain of contemporary isolation seems sharpest and the imagery bolder and heavier, the poems are a step away from the dramatic monologue subgenre; they are often autologues in which the speaker of the poem is talking to himself, or maybe the assumed presence of some anonymous, ideal reader just out of earshot, as in these heartbreakingly nervous lines from "Man in a Window":

I took a shower about noon you know and I shaved and
thought about not shaving but I
shaved I took a shower and had a lot of work to do but I
I didn't want to do it I was second-guessing myself that's
when doubt got involved

I struck up a
rapport with doubt I didn't do any work and so

and so I said to myself I said well
maybe I should talk about something but I didn't learn anything
I couldn't talk about anything there was
lots of distraction today
A beautiful day Lots of distraction

The voice, rhythms, the repetitions, the heightened pauses, and tonal poignancy here are reminiscent of the pitched battle between angst and resignation expressed by the main character in many of Samuel Beckett's existential plays, as in this excerpt from his crowning achievement, *Krapp's Last Tape*:

I sat on for a few moments with the ball in my hand and the dog yelping and pawing at me. (*Pause.*) Moments. Her moments, my moments. (*Pause.*) The dog's moments. (*Pause.*) In the end I held it out to him and he took it in his mouth, gently, gently. A small, old, black, hard, solid rubber ball. (*Pause.*) I shall feel it, in my hand, until my dying day. (*Pause.*) I might have kept it. (*Pause.*) But I gave it to the dog.

But while there's a stifling grayness and airlessness suffusing Beckett's work, Angel, who has been influenced by and has translated the beautiful, softly surrealistic poems of Federico Garcia Lorca, also often uses color to effect a similar, signatory gorgeousness that is ironically poised as a bulwark against the drop-off of his speaker's loneliness. In "Brighten," the tropical imagery is beautiful, but the speaker swims away from it:

I swam out further then,
away from the songbirds and the laughing
banana trees, and the small wooden
houses painted in lunatic colors.
When I was the blues
I was listening.

Or these painterly images, shadowed and undermined by the nuanced tensions of violence and darkness, strung together from "Subliminal Birds":

A whole galaxy of stars in the nod of the proprietor
of a carnival shooting gallery.
Where, ecstatically, with the blinds drawn,
a woman tumbles from her bed
into the swirling green waters of an Oriental carpet.

In Greg Simon's introduction to Angel's book-length translation of Lorca's *Poem of the Deep Song*, he recapitulates the great Spanish poet's intense preoccupation with the famous Andalusian singer Miguel Torre's theory of *duende*, that spiritual wrestling with the shadow of death that deepens with intensity the art of whoever enters that abyss. It seems obvious to me that in his ongoing artistic development, Angel has both willfully and, by nature, without much choice in the matter, taken up this dark torch of his Sephardic forebears and brought forward into

American poetry a sensibility that melds and suffuses the thoroughly postmodern with the ancient, fatalistic spirit of the *duende* that Torre defines as "the black torso of the Pharaoh."

There's no single poem in *Exceptions and Melancholies* that reprises even a majority of the techniques described above, so I've chosen the poem "Phosphorescence" as being emblematic of his voice and style because it combines postmodern shifting frames of reference and fractured rhetorical stresses with Old World grief:

Phosphorescence

Only when I looked away did I wear
a woolen cap and winter coat to confuse myself
and give in to the rot and the decay
of months and days of rain and mud seeping
through the windows,
and didn't I dream as always
the most northern
of the islands and of their
phosphorescence,
and wasn't it the one cold day
I could not remember that threw me
from behind the bar repeated sideways glances
and though the news was sad
I just had to laugh, having
read the book.

Even when the sidewalks
are spread with sunglasses and a woman
with a hat steps away from her
reflection and takes
her pulse, and I notice for the first time
the tables in the alley and the unsafe
distance between the tracks
and the brittle walls
I walked down
when nothing came to me
but time,

don't I love dusting off the crumbs
and drinking lukewarm coffee
as a woman with a cane
tells me that her husband was a fisherman
before she outlived him, and though I can't
understand a word she's saying, that her daughter
in her middle age has met a man
who wears too much jewelry

but loves her back,
and who wouldn't help her to her feet
and count her tiny steps
and walk her to the restaurant
above the seawall

that her nephew owns, she tells me,
with its thick aroma of garlic
and roasted peppers,
where she can watch the small boats drift in,
one by one, and that after
dark swells with
dancing and traditional
music.

"Phosphorescence" originally appeared in Exceptions and Melancholies: Poems 1986-2006 (Sarabande Books, 2006).

As 19th-Century painters revolutionized art by concentrating on aspects of light, and as 20th-Century poets revitalized their art by concentrating on voice and the image-as-statement, so 21st-Century poets are capitalizing upon these gains and pushing beyond what seem now these old, accessible, and sedate borders by locating themselves inward to focus on consciousness. Angel, in his poem "Vertigo," says we all live in the rented rooms of subject matter and "lock the door from the inside." But from the risk-taking, original, and finely crafted work of the soul that he's doing, we find that even if we are listening closely from outside the door, we can hear who we are.

AWP

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WORKS CITED

Quotations of Ralph Angel's poetry are taken from *Exceptions and Melancholies: Poems 1986-2006* (Sarabande Books, 2006).

Quotations of Miguel Torre and Angel's comments on Lorca are taken from Greg Simon's introduction to Angel's *Poem of the Deep Song: Federico Garcia Lorca* (Sarabande Books, 2006).