

Between the horizon and the leap: the poetry of Alfredo de Palchi

di John Taylor

It is tempting to declare that Alfredo de Palchi (b. 1926) is the François Villon of contemporary Italian poetry. The poet himself solicits the comparison. Not only does he borrow lines from the fifteenth-century French poet in order to introduce each of his own six collections (now gathered and sometimes rearranged, enlarged, or revised in an authoritative *Paradigma: tutte le poesie: 1947-2005*), but many of his poems—their subject matter drawing on poverty and imprisonment, their razor-sharp images, tense concision, syntactic boldness, forthright eroticism, bitter yet somehow plucky existential outlook—recall the candor and chiseled craftsmanship that we admire in the author of *The Testament* and the “Ballad of the Hanged Men.” Even a recent poem, beginning “In rue de l’Arbre Sec,” dated 29 June 2003, and included in the sixth collection, *Ultime*, stages an imaginary encounter between the admired French poet and his “gradito compagno di sventura” (387). The dried-up tree evoked in the name of this thirteenth-century street, which is located in the once-teeming first *arrondissement* of Paris and which famously had a gallows—the dead tree?—at its northern end, conjures up the legend, indeed possibility, that Villon was hanged, perhaps right there, for the diverse crimes of which he was accused. Villon has obviously been a cherished mentor for and comfort to de Palchi in dark times.

De Palchi’s dark times lasted so long and were so oppressive that his jagged-edged, emotive, yet also intellectually intricate, verse at first beckons to be read as personal testimony, if not exactly as a “last will and testament” in the Villonesque sense. His poetry deeply and genuinely tells his life’s story, but it also goes beyond this strict autobiographical circumscription in that it represents an “example,” an *exemplum*, as the title of his fifth collection, and now his *Collected Poems* in general, makes clear. *Paradigma* is exemplary, and his short poems are especially emblematic, in this sense, though such an equivalence must be qualified by the additional remark that his verse absolutely never proffers moral judgments; instead, it unearths, discloses, points to, without the slightest superfluous commentary. Its lessons must be inferred, though they are rarely obscure. Let it suffice to say that *Paradigma* reveals the deep structure, the “pattern”—another meaning of paradigm—of intensely lived moments, hours, days, years. Taking off from still another, this time linguistic, sense of the word, one could venture the analogy that the book displays a life in all its “inflected forms.”

These exemplary aspects are of course all the more compelling and instructive in that the poet, during his youth and early manhood, experienced harsh setbacks and humiliations. Repudiated by his father at birth (in the town of Legnago, near Verona) and thereafter raised by his maternal grandfather (who was a noted anticlerical anarchist), de Palchi suffered through an impoverished childhood in the countryside. There, as he states in the “Bag of Flies” sequence (dated 1961, written in New York, and included—with this psychologically revealing English title—in his second collection, *Sessioni con l’analista*), his childhood was lonely and deprived: “la mia infanzia / ermetica persino con i compagni — rattoppata, scalza / o in zoccoli d’inverno, scaldata al cuoio vivo / ruminante nelle stalle” (131). Amidst these hardships, de Palchi admired his grandfather, whose presence is beautifully rendered in “Il Cancro,” as the poem was called when it was published in the American bilingual edition of *Sessioni con l’analista* (1970). This piece, now untitled (as are several other, previously titled, pieces in the definitive *Collected Poems*), has been moved to the “L’Assenza” sequence and is comprised in the collection *Paradigma*, which opens with an apt Villonesque epigraph: “Vivre aux humains est incertain.” One of de Palchi’s most moving pieces, the long poem pays homage to a man who

non li scrive i versi sul quaderno
della spesa a debito
il salterio dei poveri
li dice terragni
con inventiva anarchica, non fregi,
crudi che puzzano di letame nell’orto, di sigaro

monco, di corrosione . . . (301)

The child's eyes were opened to the world in at once attentive and trenchant ways by this man who, in reply to his grandson's disgust at a nauseating first-communion bowl of chocolate, sneered sardonically that priests boil meat in water. Instead of attending church on a sultry Sunday, a "domenica con l'afa" (301), de Palchi's grandfather would call out a city—like Rome or Paris—then place the boy on his bicycle handlebars and pedal off, in his imagination, to these and other remote capitals. Actually, the capitals were no more than the grain store or the tavern, but surely these whimsical inversions stimulated the boy's mind. In *La buia danza di scorpione*, a collection appearing in a bilingual Xenos Books edition—as *The Scorpion's Last Dance*—only in 1993, although it was actually composed in prison between 1947 and 1951, de Palchi recalls that "al gomito dell'Adige allora crescevo / di indovinzioni rumori d'altre città" (56). In his early poetry especially, the Adige River remains the last refuge of purity, even though it, too, is eventually defiled by smokestacks, fertilizer works, sugar refineries, barges, and drowned cats:

Ciminiere fabbriche
del concime e dello zucchero
barconi di ghiaia e qualche gatto
lanciato dal ponte
snaturano questa lastra di fiume
questo Adige. (41)

An even worse perversion occurs when Tony the hunchback, as recounted in "Bag of Flies" (132), throws the poet's dog into the Adige, its paws tied and a rag in its mouth. "E questo amore?" de Palchi can only ask. It is a question implicitly raised throughout his oeuvre, and almost always answered with a resounding negative, at least in poems written before his recent erotic poetry. The poet lets such flies out of the bag, a fitting symbol here of the torments of his past as they stubbornly return to and pester his present mind.

Interestingly, in de Palchi's later poetry, the Adige recovers more positive connotations. In an untitled poem published in the Spring 2001 issue of the review *Gradiva* and now comprised in the "Essenza carnale" section of the *Paradigma* collection, the river becomes his lover's body: ". . . l'Adige / è il tuo corpo sinuosamente asciutto, potente, / vortice che accoglie la mia bocca di sete" (341). The beginning of the poem ("La chiarezza delle acque mi regenera / puro nel fiume che dalla cima del tuo capo / sorge a zampilli a gorgi a rivoli veloci") exemplifies numerous other instances in which liquid or aquatic images are associated with a lover's body or, more precisely, in which a lover's orgasmic or menstrual fluids are boldly praised. This being said, de Palchi's erotic vision nearly always goes beyond the corporal *per se*. Present in his erotic poems is a cosmic dimension, an experience of amorous union and the epiphanies of pleasure surely, but also a yearning for the primeval, the primordial, the ab-original. Another untitled poem from the same sequence conspicuously mentions spiritual symbiosis and equates his lover with—enables the poet to experience—the "original water" of creation: "Un'arcata di prosodie carnali / si espande, proponendo spirituali simbiosi / di fiumane — / solida di sali e di spore, / sei l'acqua dell'origine." The poem ends with a telling declaration:

uguale al serpe ti assorbo intera
e tu da madre terraquea
chiami alla nascita il mio ritorno nell'aurora
del grembo, la dimora
di ascendente devozione per lo spirito in frammenti. (355)

This important philosophical dimension of de Palchi's work will be discussed below.

After arriving, not in the Café des Deux Magots, but rather in the disheveled rural tavern, the boy would study old men spitting, drinking, playing cards, and cursing: "succhiano la gota gonfia / di tabacco, sputano bevono / sulla briscola e biascicano bestemmie" (302). At the end of these card-playing sessions, and after tipsily avoiding the perilous ditches bordering the road on the way home, de Palchi's grandfather would, as the poet remembers, sing to him "con raucedine sulla nuca la puzza / di vino e il Barbiere / di Siviglia" (302). In these and other acid-etched remembrances, fondness is expressed through crude, down-to-earth detail; social realities surge forth with a solidity normally attained only through novelistic description. Carlo de Palchi died in 1941. His final moments are memorialized by his grandson with lucidity:

E nello stesso letto, inventando
versi che nessuno scrive
e mi dice, mi protegge
all'ascella che sa di pelo e sigaro; se lo mangia
vivo nelle mie braccia smilze
e smerdate il cancro, e in pena schifosa
si sfiata — e ha il tagliente sorriso
d'un gatto

morto. (303)

Concluding tragically in the Second World War and his grandfather's death, this early period of de Palchi's life nonetheless comprised his "anni verdi" (84), as he phrases it in the "Carnevale d'esilio" section of *La buia danza di scorpione*. In childhood, de Palchi recalls (in the same poem), "erano bianche le strade / andavo per sentieri allagati da orti / liquidi di sole e contro i pali / del telegrafo sibilava la fionda." Besides Villon, Arthur Rimbaud watches benevolently over such lines, which celebrate a sensuality and willful anti-societal individualism that are also pure de Palchi. Conspicuously, however, the quatrain is set in parentheses. It is preceded by lines expressing despair and self-incomprehension ("ogni anno / una pietra nel mare sottostante e no so / ch'io sia — a bracciate mi spiego / io maldestro nuotatore") and followed by this dark ending describing the environment in which he must struggle to find himself: "e alla forza rozza che ha odio soccombo / pelle mente verbo."

There is not a gram of false pathos here: joys like shooting slingshots were short-lived. Toward the end of the Second World War (thus three years after his grandfather's death), de Palchi was rounded up and tortured by Italian Fascists and German soldiers. Then, just after the war, he found himself accused of involvement in a political homicide. He was sentenced to prison on a trumped-up charge. Once again he was tortured, as he explains in the biographical note appended to the American edition of *La buia danza di scorpione*, this time "by Communists and mythomaniacs of the ludicrous Italian resistance." Between the spring of 1945 and the spring of 1951, the poet remained incarcerated, successively in Venice, Rome, Naples, Procida, and Civitavecchia. During his imprisonment, to cite his own words, he "defied and insulted the government, the army, the church, and decried Italy as a country inhabited by vileness." But his outrageous bad fortune and the ruthless injustice that had been applied to him also induced his first stabs at writing. "Stabs" is to be taken literally here. In 1946, he scratched his first poem onto a cell wall in Naples, an event commemorated in these firm lines from *La buia danza di scorpione*: "intanto in questo cubicolo / mi mangio maturando e sulla pietra / raspo per una vita dissimile" (82). The next year, he started to write more seriously, when he was encouraged by Ennio Contini, an older poet and critic who was also incarcerated. (A touching note of gratitude about Contini is included in the *Collected Poems*.) De Palchi was coming of age, both as a man and a poet.

However, as he was yearning for a different life and writing the terse, pungent verse that would eventually go into *La buia danza di scorpione*, the poet's mental and physical suffering was, to say the least, surpassing the limits of the bearable. "Il pezzo di pane mi nutre," he notes with disgust, "il pane / sa di petrolio / lo mastico con bucce di limone / raccolte nelle immondizie" (71). Elsewhere, he describes himself as a stranger roving with both fists clenched ("circolo staniero a pugno / serrato"), adding that the prison bullies have the last word ("la parola è nella bocca dei forti," 65). "Chiedo acqua," he declares in inverted Christic and Psalmic phraseology, "—mi si impone sete / voglio luce / mi si impone ombra" (69). Although he vituperates against institutionalized Christianity in several poems, and directs scathing irony at an "impostor Christ" ("cristo impostore," 73) from whom he demands compassion in vain, a few early pieces nonetheless exhibit his close reading of the Bible and his subtle psychological understanding of Christian symbolism:

anch'io sono, io
mi credo
altri osserva che non sono —
com'è possibile
se sulla croce di tutti ulcerata
mi svuoto le gote
se circondato non c'è chi

mi disseti
solo chi impreca. (62)

Even though inhabited by rage and disgust, de Palchi is nonetheless symbolically accompanied by a Christ-like model (a paradigm?) whose suffering parallels his own and whose persistence encourages his urge to write (and thus save himself). At the heart of his predicament lies the paradoxical, likewise Christic, “believing myself / what others observe I am not,” as in the lines above. As the years go by, de Palchi will increasingly associate Christian symbolism with eroticism. This is especially true of the fourteen erotic poems written in 1999-2000, put to music by the composer Carlo Galante, and recorded by the group Sonata Islands in 2003. In the poem (from the CD) that gives the title “Essenza carnale” to the entire sequence, de Palchi notably writes:

La finestra della cella è chiusa, l’uscio sbarrato,
i muri calcinati assorbono le urla mute;
e tu, monacale, divarichi le carni ustionate,
e con la bocca saturnina piena di lingua che serpeggia
lucifera
avvolgi nell’ideare il mio calvario infiammato
vinto con la religione della tua essenza
carnale — prendimi come vuoi,
in tutte le bocche gonfie di rosa, turgide di passione,
riempiti del tuo salvatore. (344)

A second poem (“Mi / immedesimo in te, Cristo”) from the same sequence transfers the symbolism of communion to an erotic union:

Mi spezzo, come il pane della cena,
e dissanguo, come offerta di vino — simbolo del sangue
prezioso; sono il carnivoro
il cannibale che lingueggiando divora il suo corpo
e beve il sangue della ferita
perché si ricordi di me;
e tu inchioda sulla stessa croce il mio amore
per le sue carni maestose. (358)

(The poems originally used in the CD have now been incorporated into the longer “Essenza carnale” sequence of twenty-three poems that is included in the *Collected Poems*.)

As the poet Luigi Fontanella specifies in his article “Vita e poesia di Alfredo de Palchi” (included in the invaluable *Scritti sulla poesia di Alfredo de Palchi* (a special supplement to issue No. 6 of the Italian review *Hebenon*, October 2000), it was only in 1955 that the Court of Assizes, in Venice, acquitted de Palchi of all charges and proclaimed his total innocence. Villon of course experienced similar despair, rejection, banishment, hunger, cruelty, solitude, and injustice. It prompted him to sum up the world as relentless “abusion.” This acerbic acknowledgment—“ce monde n’est qu’abusion”—is used as the epigraph of *La buia danza di scorpione*. As it were, de Palchi had already given a personal translation, into Italian, of the biting apothegm. “Concluso fra pareti vilipendio / e menzogne,” he writes in the same volume, “mi sfinisco per quello che succede / mai” (66). His longtime American translator, Sonia Raiziss, gives this equivalent: “Between walls, abuse and / men’s lies I’m finished / I waste myself for something that never / happens” (*The Scorpion’s Dark Dance*, 67).

Yet miraculously, de Palchi still had life ahead of him. Against all odds, he was not vanquished by torture and unjust imprisonment. He long performed “the scorpion’s dark dance,” as he harrowingly phrases it, but did not give himself the ultimate sting. And after his release from incarceration, his life remained arduous but changed directions radically. The “vita dissimile” or “different life” to which he had aspired, while engraving verse into the cold stone wall of his prison cell, took shape. De Palchi left Italy for good in the autumn of 1951. He moved to Paris and, using the French capital as his base, traveled throughout Europe, sojourning in Barcelona for a while as well. In 1956, he took a second decisive step by departing for the United States. He sailed into New York City on Columbus Day, an auspicious coincidence, and initiated an exile that continues

to this day. In the first poem of the sequence “L’Arrivo,” now part of the *Paradigma* collection, de Palchi describes his first sight of the Hudson; he expresses the resolute self-independence that is characteristic of all his autobiographical poetry. “Appartengo al mio flato,” he writes tersely (311), rejecting all other allegiances except that of his “breath,” that is his own physical life and his uncompromising poetic inspiration.

In the United States, the individualism, revolt, existential unease, and acute sensibility underlying his inspiration by no means vanish. In his first volume of poems composed mostly in America, *Costellazione anonima* (*Anonymous Constellation* was published bilingually by Xenos Books in 1997 and now represents the third collection in the *Collected Poems*), he finds himself among an incongruous jumble of objects and a crowd of people who have lost all sense of direction in their lives: “fra un miscuglio incongruo di oggetti / di gente senza direzione” (192). These lines are presumably set in New York City, where he still lives. Settling in the United States enabled de Palchi to put his Italian past behind him, at least in his daily comings and goings, though of course not in his musings and nightmares. The sequence “Reportage” (dated 1957 and a part of *Sessioni con l’analista*), which describes New York City, notably begins with excruciating memories: “lacerandomi i visceri per ricordi improvvisi” (118). Even in the imposing, alluring, constantly surprising present of the New World metropolis par excellence, the poet’s European past haunts him still. And the long title poem “Sessioni con l’analista,” which stages fictive encounters with a psychoanalyst (whose unique reaction to his patient’s confessions is “perché?”, “why?”), builds to a suicide poem as well:

suicida estroso
ho l’arcaica ragione intanata in un sonno
stabile

‘non consumarlo’ . . . dice una voce,

non mi commetto il colpo di grazia
ma
non lo amo il mio tempo, non lo amo. (151)

In a note appended to the *Collected Poems*, de Palchi specifies that he had sessions with a psychoanalyst only after the publication of the book.

Sessioni con l’analista is still marked by de Palchi’s familial past and disastrous Second World War experiences, as well as by his scrupulous honesty about an existential malaise that persists. In one particularly despairing moment, the poet wants to put his head “dentro il vaso di terracotta et urlare / il fallimento della mia divisione di uomo” (250). (In the *Collected Poems*, this poem—originally entitled “Topo ossessionato” when it was published in the bilingual American edition of *Sessioni con l’analista*—has lost its title and been switched to the sequence “Movimenti” in *Le viziose avversioni*, the fourth collection.) Such lines, which touch upon solipsism, individuation, and the sudden pangs of conscience that derive from the presence of the past, illustrate how de Palchi’s more or less realistically detailed autobiographical poems almost always include more abstract, psychological or philosophical, ramifications. Reading his poems merely as personal narratives is insufficient. Moreover, now that all the individual poems are untitled (only sequences—and they are numerous—have titles in the *Collected Poems*), the reader is even more encouraged to seek out the philosophical or cosmological horizon implied or glimpsed by de Palchi. Like untitled modern paintings, the poems invite interpretations, but they rarely direct the reader to a single one. For all their tension and terseness, there is ever a sense of spontaneity, openness, and freedom in de Palchi’s work, mirroring the essential biographical fact that his writing of poetry was linked, from the onset, with an aspiration to liberty. Furthermore, the regroupings and revisions undertaken by the poet for the *Collected Poems* suggest that his life-work—as it must be called—should be read more thematically than chronologically, that is as a multifaceted yet coherent social, psychological, erotic, poetic, and philosophical autobiography wherein several personal evolutions, on several different levels, are charted (though hardly as strict linear progressions). Except for the collection *Ultime*, whose poems were composed between 2000 and 2005, the five other collections all include verse going back to the late 1940s and early 1950s. More importantly still, in distinct pieces of the collection *Sessioni con l’analista* and in passages of the long title sequence (whose formal originality as a long sequence of dialogues has been overlooked by most critics), not to mention his other collections, de Palchi reveals a remarkable sensitivity to the broader implications of his own present and past experiences. When, with a characteristic appeal to geological and biological symbolism, he declares (138) to the psychoanalyst that

non so come, da quale mia geologica età
cominciare: estrarre il magma;
impossibile
communicare il gergo inconcluso
attorcigliato, cespuglio vivo di serpi[.]

he represents all human beings—all his “frères humains,” as Villon puts it in his epitaph. De Palchi reveals that it is an integral part of the human condition to be unable to make sense of, even sometimes to formulate, unhealable sorrows and unfathomable treachery. The pessimistic conclusion of the sequence “Sessioni con l’analista” is that he is—we are—“solo, incomunicato, incomunicabile” (176).

In a poet such as de Palchi, it is poetry’s responsibility to take on this paradoxical predicament head on. In this regard, de Palchi is also an exemplary writer. He extracts the self’s magma by the very act of writing; yet what he extracts verges on the incommunicable, not only because of its familial, social, historical, or political gruesomeness, but also and especially because of the ontological depths to which he digs. His constant awareness of the limits of language, which necessarily remains his only tool, suggests why his succinct, spare, forthright yet fragmentary verse sometimes resembles, in its intellectual and lyric intensity, that written by the Italian Hermetics, namely Salvatore Quasimodo, Giuseppe Ungaretti, and especially Eugenio Montale, whose poetry de Palchi helped to introduce in the United States. Leonardo Sinisgalli, Giorgio Caproni, and Vittorio Sereni can also be mentioned. A few lines by Sereni are in fact quoted in “Bag of Flies” and “Sessioni con l’analista,” notably the desperate “non lo amo il mio tempo, non lo amo.” And a nod is seemingly made to Montale when the title “Movimenti” (a section in Montale’s *Ossi di seppia* is used in *Le viziose avversioni*, though de Palchi obviously has the arresting progression “Momenti”—“Movimenti”—“Mutazioni” above all in mind as he organizes this collection into these three successive sections. In any event, like the aforementioned Italian poets (as well as the French symbolists who preceded and, in some cases, nourished them), de Palchi favors the collision of vivid images and symbols as he digs into, excavates, and expresses his innermost experience. He generally eschews narrative expatiation, with the possible exception of the sequence “Sessioni con l’analista,” which is uncharacteristically open-ended in form; and it nevertheless consists more of searing avowals and flashes of self-analysis than of storytelling. In any event, his poetry evidently emanates from—why not complete the metaphor?—a volcano in which subterranean heat builds up over a long period of time and which occasionally erupts. He is not a prolific poet, but he writes from a dire inner necessity.

This eruptive necessity of course brings back to mind the inner turmoil, inwoven with combativeness, that must have incited Villon to record, and revolt against, his fate. Yet whereas the French poet remains a lively autobiographer and a compelling sympathizer with his fellow rogues and down-and-outers, he is perhaps not as philosophically and scientifically alert as de Palchi. Already in *La buia danza di scorpione*, the Italian poet generalizes on the biological act necessarily preceding not only his, but any existence. “Il principio / innesta l’aorta nebulosa / e precipita la coscienza,” he writes almost clinically, “con l’abbietta goccia che spacca / l’ovum / originando un ventre congruo / d’afflizioni” (34).

The very words with which he opens this poem, indeed the entire collection, is “il principio,” which is rendered by Sonia Raiziss in her translation as “the first cause” (*The Scorpion’s Dark Dance*, 5). Like its Latin antecedents and the Greek *arkhé*, the concept is charged with philosophical resonance. “Il principio” is also “the origin,” “the beginning,” indeed the overriding or fundamental “principle,” and the Greco-Roman idea of a *necessitas* or an *ananké* is related to it. De Palchi returns several times to this notion of a first cause, emphasizing its austere physical materialism: for him, arguably, “life” is *bios*, by no means the transcendent *zoé* of the Gospel of John, and thus mere copulation, followed by a single spermatozoon splitting an ovum. But such a conception harbors its own mysteries. As the contemporary French writer Pascal Quignard has also pointed out in several texts, we have no access to this first cause from which we have emerged. We cannot go back to the instant when we were conceived, even as we cannot go back to the instant in which “life,” as we understand it, began in the cosmos. Our coming into the world is perpetually held out to us as an empirical certainty, but at the same time it remains intangible, elusive, remote. It is thus essentially a speculative, more than an empirical, certainty. We are ever separate from “il principio.” And the abiding, sometimes shocking, pessimism of de Palchi’s work partly stems from his cynical view of this onset. The words “egg” and “ovum” are used, not as positive symbols associated with the perpetuation of one’s genes in particular and of the human race in general, but rather negatively, disparagingly. A somewhat more neutral instance occurs in the five numbered erotic notes in the twelfth poem of the sequence “Sessioni con

l'analista." The poet recalls his lovemaking with a long-limbed girl and quips in the fourth note: "sono e ho il tuo ovum / per udirmi" (156). The idea of hearing himself in the woman's ovum is funny, but it also points to the puzzling phenomenology of self-awareness. Can one in fact sense oneself existing only through the mediation of another person?

Acquiring some kind of tangible proof of, or at least a momentary feeling for, one's own existence is a theme of several poems. In "Reportage," de Palchi concedes with autobiographical precision that "in fondo sono io / figlio rigettato / rotto dalle occupazioni / che non so buttare in quale fede / il convincimento della mia presenza" (125). Incidentally, in the 1970 American edition of *Sessioni con l'analista*, a grammatical inexactitude mars I. L. Solomon's version of these key lines, the final part of which he translates as "the belief of my presence." The Italian ("il convincimento della mia presenza") is more clearly construed as "the certitude of my presence," "my belief in my presence" or, to expand the avowal into a paraphrase, "my conviction that I exist (based on the empirical evidence at hand)." In any event, this certitude, conviction, or belief harbors an implicit doubt: the very real possibility of absence, not presence. The doubts go back at least to 1954 in Paris, where de Palchi was writing the poems about loss that would eventually constitute the sequence "L'Assenza," now part of the collection *Paradigma*. In *Costellazione anonima*, the poet in fact less ambivalently contemplates a permanent absence: "la pera del cuore crepato dal verme che scava / con logica quello che rimarrà per sempre assente" (192). Both the autobiographical and the more symbolic poetic approaches to this persistent absence—which is as ontological and even metaphysical as it is historical (familial) and psychological—posit that the center of the self consists of an emptiness that somehow yearns for an impossible fullness. Both poems suggest that, even if one feels oneself yearning, such an emotion relies on false beliefs, and that the desire for plenitude is wishful thinking. The life we feel ourselves living, in moments of heightened awareness, is physiological—nothing more.

Other poems, notably in *Costellazione anonima*, even show de Palchi seeking detachment from the self. It is a quest not uncommon in contemporary European poetry, especially among the French, where the corollary problematics of the Cartesian *cogito ergo sum* continue to challenge writers concerned with the foundation of the self, the phenomenology of consciousness, and one's apperceptive sense of being in the world. Yet whereas some European poets dismiss their own petty needs, decide to avoid the ineffable, remain silent about that which apparently cannot be uttered, and focus on the vagaries and vicissitudes of the outside world, de Palchi and others (from Thomas Bernhard and Dinos Christianopoulos to Louis Calaferte and Charles Juliet) plunge so deeply into themselves that they approach their goal only after an excruciating process of self-dissection, self-destruction. Even when the Italian poet declares that the "la decisione d'incontrarmi è dietro / di me, futile, che mai avrò il coraggio / di confrontarmi" (186), he actually does nothing else than "meet [him]self" in his poems. In light of his tragic past, this process of self-deconstruction is particularly gripping when he considers himself to be his "l'indiscreto / giudice di me stesso, non muri / non leggi, tutto aperto, / porte finestre letto, / dove nessun altro fango su due gambe / giudicherà" (207). The sessions with the (fictive) analyst—with himself as his own rash inquisitor—continue. It should be clear by now that de Palchi's is no facile autobiographical poetry concerned merely with the self's everyday events and ephemeral emotions.

His poetic tour de force is that his, literally, egocentric poetry casts a revealing light on the dubious existential foundations of all mankind. Much more than a single self attached to a given historical time and place, the poet convincingly becomes "l'incendio che brulica la specie" (202). Especially in his more recent work, de Palchi time and again turns himself into a sort of anti-idealistic, anti-sentimental Everyman-poet whose imagery increasingly draws on science, especially geology and biology. "Non vi è esito," he observes in *Costellazione anonima*, "sono / una catena di subdole origini / ordigni ordini fantasie / che posseggono già l'estinzione" (227). Ever since the 1960s, which were crowned by the publication of *Sessioni con l'analista* in Italy (by Mondadori in 1967) and then by the 1970 unexpurgated, somewhat augmented, American edition (see I. L. Solomon's "Introduction" for a few details about the editorial censorship, in Italy, applied to five poems in the original manuscript), it seems that the Italian poet's American exile has enabled him to achieve a greater compression and symbolization in his poetry: despite painful memories, perhaps specific details from his Italian past have lost some of their pull on his poetic conscience. A general thematic movement can be traced from the familial and the social to the erotic and the cosmic. And yet, as the above quotation makes clear, "there is no way out" for him, that is for the Everyman-poet, for any human being.

The tense, epigrammatic, sometimes darkly droll poems of *Costellazione anonima* are indeed most impressive when de Palchi becomes obliquely autobiographical and provides a cosmic setting. He uses science incisively. To wit, envisioning himself as the food chain ("l'unto dell'acqua l'insettivoro petrolio / . . . l'oceano grasso / di corpuscoli, plancton che funziona / con premura per i crostacei," 197), he ends up as a

not yet extinct coelacanth. The bitter postulate underscored here is that we, at best, are configurations of matter inscribed with persistent (genetic) memories of our fish-eat-fish heritage. “Sotto ogni foglia al suolo si appicca / una lotta d’insetti,” he likewise observes, “e dovunque / di sopravvivenza” (213). War is everywhere, as is a rage for survival. Elsewhere, he quips savagely about “carnages” and “cleanups”: “l’oggi imita l’iera / e limita il domani—che importa / vi è sempre scempio / o altra pulizia” (214). Whatever our historical, social, national, religious, and familial backgrounds, we necessarily participate in this permanent agon or polemos. The war may be out in the open, or concealed, clandestine; in all cases, it is war. We can escape neither the debasement of our origins, nor the embattled present, nor our ultimate destination. “Polvere dovunque su tutto polvere su ciascuno,” concludes the poet, who sees himself as locked into his “futuro cadavere / già sepolto sotto il cumulo di polvere” (203). Yet in their relentless desperation, such poems also cumulate into a redoubtable wisdom: accepting one’s identity as no more permanent than an “anonymous constellation” of dust. De Palchi often leaves us with this perspective to contemplate.

This same materialistic, biological, physiological world view governs his erotic poems, many of which are comprised in *Le viziose avversioni*, a book first published in a bilingual edition as *Addictive Aversions* (Xenos Books, 1999). It comprises work written between 1951 and 1996. In such an individualistic poet, the erotic poems are especially telling because they stage confrontations with a potentially positive protagonist, an “other” unlike the deceitful personages targeted in the several justifiably misanthropic poems of *La buia danza di scorpione* and *Sessioni con l’analista*. The first section of *Le viziose avversioni*, a sequence of thirteen short poems called “Momenti,” expresses little, if any, romantic sentiment, but instead much corporal delight, even humor:

fulminazioni sotto la casa e alberi fertili
 di pioggia sorvegliati da varietà
 di uccelli stupendi
 quanto il mio uccello — (238)

*

e come nella Bibbia impalmo
 nella sinistra
 la mammella sinistra,
 nella destra la carezzevole concisione;
 nella bocca inghiotto la mammella destra
 e tu dici che lo sperma ti nutre,
 esatto,
 ‘come carne et uova (237)

Elsewhere, de Palchi views erotic encounters as contests, struggles, additional illustrations of the fundamental agon in which we find ourselves engaged, whether we like it or not. Lovers act at once like plant lice and atomic particles. “E siamo filossera, / compulsione, tempera, / fissione” (245), the poet remarks bluntly, though the reader (especially the American reader) should not deduce too quickly that the Italian poet is using such imagery only with negative connotations. In de Palchi’s work, amorous attractions are irrepressible, free of guilt and moral restraints. The “Essenza carnale” sequence—with its suggestive epigraph from Villon about “spying on well-sculpted thighs being washed,” as one might adventurously render “voyant laver cuisses bien faites”—comprises lines such as “la centralità dello sguardo si narcotizza / nello spacco magnetico della tua figura / la sola imprevedibile solidità / d’un mondo ignoto” (348), “vuoi / che la scopi e raggiunga / il profondo della sua gola; vuoi / che il tuo sesso sia scavato / quanto dici ‘sfondami tutta, completami’” (350), and “so come aprirti il sangue a sgocciolare purissimo / dal mensile ferimento alla mia bocca, / come violarti / proprizia al mistero di voler essere violata” (357). But taking off from explicit sexual imagery as such, de Palchi often points not only to the psychological intricacy, ambiguity or enigma of one’s sexual penchant for another person, but also to something stranger, hidden, more profound. De Palchi’s erotic poetry rarely lacks an ultimate, if sometimes oblique or implied, search for the “origin,” the “first cause” (“il principio”), or essential “roots”:

ora esponi le mani, tocca
 e concentrami nella tua centralità del corpo

a volte bellicose o in accordo fluviale
sotto l'intensità della nostra luce in evoluzione
a scolpare le radici. (356)

Yet de Palchi's erotic poetry is not without its paradoxes. In the aforementioned poem "Topo ossessionato," for instance, the poet goes so far as to confess that "ogni oggetto animato o inanimato è donna, / la fogna dove sta in agguato il mio sesso / di topo ossessionato" (*Sessions with my Analyst*, 68). It is difficult to conceive of a metaphor—the sewer equated to the feminine, the male to a rat-phallus—further removed from any kind of amorous transcendence, though it is important to take into account a change made in this poem when it was republished (see page 46) in *Addictive Aversions* in 1999, then in the *Collected Poems*: the sewer indeed becomes "luminosa" (250). When one reads de Palchi, one is constantly faced with the negative-positive tension of such imagery. The oxymoronic title of this same collection sums up this erotic momentum toward that which is antipodal, opposite, even negative, licentious, dissolute. The English title is even more frank: one becomes addicted to what is adverse.

In *Le viziose avversioni*, the thirteen-poem sequence "Mutazioni" —the sequences "Un ricordo del 1945" and "Momenti" also consist of thirteen poems—ends with an appeal to the "incorrotta / Justine" (294) of de Sade's like-named novel. The poet awaits her "coming" ("arrivo"), perhaps earnestly, perhaps ironically in that her arrival seems to parody the coming of a Messiah. Does this mean that some kind of hope or salvation can be envisioned? It is unlikely, unless salvation is understood as ephemeral physical pleasure, the last resort and revolt of the *homme revolté* against a godless world that also often represses carnal pleasure. "Non sono che una forza sorda," exclaims de Palchi, "o meglio un rumore nel niente, / vivendo in un affogo di mutazioni / privo di baluardi ed esiti" (287). A more ambiguous and intriguing image is almost, but not quite, solipsistic: "ci guardiamo con sguardo di sesso / ma nel totale delle cose prive di senso / dubito che tu esista" (248). And does the ideal Justine exist more convincingly in consciousness than the real "you"'s? In "Essenza camale," de Palchi similarly writes of a "soliloquio" (343) as plunging him between the telluric thighs of his beloved. The subsequent description is graphic in its exaltation of sexual exploration, yet it is also not without abstractions indicating the constant simultaneity of sensation and self-consciousness, indeed a self-consciousness charged, once again, with Christian symbolism:

mi slabbro seguendo ogni curva ogni linea
della tua esile forma che si plasma nella dimensione
di uno spirito unito,
religione della tua fluttuazione,
sostenenza dell'ostia splendente sulla mia faccia
divenuta te sessa. (343)

Such are the puzzles of living. Already in the 1950 piece originally called "Le Sacre du printemps" and now introducing the collection *Paradigma*, de Palchi perceives life—indeed the whole history of biological life on the earth—as "genesì senza punto evoluzione senza punto / solo materia — la nemesi" (298). "Nemesis" has at least two meanings. The first would imply that matter would inflict retribution and destroy human bodies (as the like-named goddess mercilessly would); and to be sure, bodies waste away, rot, disintegrate. The terrible lesson precociously learned at his grandfather's bedside was never forgotten. Yet matter, as "the nemesis," would also signify the formidable opponent, or obstacle, facing individuals who, like de Palchi, incessantly scrutinize the origin, the first cause—"il principio"—of biological life. Even when we break living matter down into its vital systems and infinitesimal components, it still turns its shiny, impenetrable surfaces to us; they loom like obstacle-like questions over our own life. They also loom like mirrors. This standoff also belongs to the human condition. One poem in *Le viziose avversioni* especially captures the momentous existential consequences of these face-to-face encounters with the goddess. "Alziamo la pietra lapidata di scritte, / formicolii, spermatozoi bianchissimi, molecole," remarks de Palchi in lines that also seemingly hark back to his green years, "è questo il continuo inizio, il barlume / che ci imprigiona tra un lineare di orizzonti e lo sbalzo" (291). We are ever locked between the horizon and the leap.

WORKS CITED

De Palchi, Alfredo. *Paradigma: Tutte le poesie: 1947-2005*, Milano: Mimesis / Hebenon, 2006. (Unless otherwise noted, all page numbers cited refer to this edition.)

Sessions with My Analyst (Sessioni con l'analista), bilingual edition, translated by I. L. Salomon, New York. October House, 1970.

The Scorpion's Dark Dance / La buia danza di scorpione, bilingual edition, translated by Sonia Raiziss, Riverside, California: Xenos Books, 1993.

Anonymous Constellation / Costellazione anonima, bilingual edition, translated by Sonia Raiziss, Riverside, California: Xenos Books, 1997.

Addictive Aversions / Le viziose avversioni, bilingual edition, translated by Michael Palma, Sonia Raiziss, I. L. Salomon, and Alethea Gail Segal, Riverside, California: Xenos Books, 1999.

"Eight New Poems," *Gradiva*, No. 19, Spring 2001, pp. 10-25.

Essenza carnale: quattordici poesie musicali su testi de Alfredo de Palchi. CD, music composed by Carlo Galante and recorded by the group "Sonata Islands." Produced by the Sonia Raiziss Giop Charitable Foundation, 2003.

Scritti sulla poesia di Alfredo de Palchi, special supplement to issue No. 6 of the Italian review *Hebenon*, October 2000.

Sessioni con l'analista, Milano: Mondadori, 1967.

Mutazioni, Udine: Campanotto Editore, 1988.

Costellazione anonima, Marina di Minturno: Carmanica Editore, 1998.

Paradigma, Marina di Minturno: Carmanica Editore, 2000.