

## NED CONDINI

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### I MYSTICAL CARNALITY IN DE PALCHI'S *PARADIGM*

The complete works of Alfredo de Palchi, presented for the first time by the Mimesis-Hebenon Editions, Milan 2006, and translated in the USA by October House, New York, 1970, and Xenos Books, Riverside, California, 1993-1999, will no doubt surprise the reader for their vigor, originality, truculence and outré sensuality; they will also make anyone familiar with the beautiful Italian landscape and its tormented history wish to revisit Verona, the city in the Eastern North where de Palchi was born.

De Palchi has eluded the average lover of poetry for the asperity of his language and his uncompromising, hostile stance towards the academic establishment. His *Paradigm*, which comprises poems written between 1947 and 2005, spans in the succinct, solid arc of six collections more than half a century of Italian poetry, with subtle echoes of Villon and Céline. Prefaced by editor Bertoldo's polemical note and Alessandro Vettori's crisp critical introduction, the magnum opus debuts with magmatic beginnings, telluric metamorphoses, mythical fluvial auspices that will circularly return in *ULTIME* (Last Ones), the forty sonorously defiant pages (many of which are translated by the author of this essay for the first time in the States) that conclude the volume. But let's go back to the overture, a collection that by its bleak tone adumbrates the drama soon to unfold:

“Tormented by  
patience doubts ambiguity  
their microbe of camouflaged peace  
mars your cells, is a phantom  
that flees if you dissent  
if helpless against snares  
you mumble sincere words  
ruminates the long wait  
for yourself or the next

misfortune that already  
flicks her tongue like a whore.”  
(pp. 76-77)

Compiled between the spring of 1947 and that of 1951 in the Procida and Civitavecchia penitentiaries in Southern Italy during de Palchi's political detention, *The Scorpion's Dark Dance* (Xenos Books, Riverside, CA, 1993-95) was first included in *Sessions With My Analyst*, but later rethought of as a work standing on its own. Drafted in prison when de Palchi was twenty years old (and published later when he was sixty-seven), taut, bristling images relive in four sections the agony of adolescence, war and imprisonment, with the ghost of suicide hovering over all. *The Scorpion* is dedicated to fellow detainee poet Ennio Contini, who encouraged and spurred de Palchi to read, observe and write.

De Palchi underwent the humiliation of being jailed and brutalized by Communists for a grievous error in the social and political chaos of post-war Italy, just as the fifteenth century French poet François Villon was unfairly persecuted, imprisoned and tortured by his arch enemy Thibault d'Auxigny, bishop of Orléans. Villon vented his anger in caustic *Ballades*, de Palchi in scratching his first irate poems on the walls of his cell, digging a metaphoric escape in the shape of an inner excavation. “Lapidary, essential, unadorned,” as Vettori points out, de Palchi's diction clearly takes after Villon's adherence to a factual poetry, to the *mot juste*, but it also embodies Villon's attack against the hypocrisies of his time – a total disrespect for reason and logic, the abuses of insolent authority, be it that of the church or the state. Add to this a quite substantive batch of personae who behave like degenerates or loonies, and a corrosive spirit that no defeat or bad luck can break, and you can easily see why both Villon's and de Palchi's poetry uphold an intensity of consciousness:

“You condemn me you break  
my bones but cannot touch  
what I think of you: jealous  
of reason and bare courage  
attacked by a nefarious rush of ticks.”  
(p. 63)

Direct is the word for every word that Villon set down, writes William Carlos Williams in the introduction to his work. “He was totally concerned with the affairs of his life, took his responsibilities deeply and, as he grew older, bitterly, but saw no reason to seek to avoid them or to confess them.” De Palchi, in turn, subsumed Villon’s courage and forged cogent pronouncements in the nudity of his cell:

“Down the fist crashes  
on swarming nature – pain  
is this act on the greedy  
helplessness of all insects  
and my own.”  
(p. 46)

Villon, as a poet, needed no intermediary, secular or sacred. He quarreled with priests; according to legend, he even killed one; acknowledged no party; subscribed to no creed. Ignored or viciously maligned, he scorched his critics just as de Palchi at the end of *Paradigm* will spew his venomous indictment:

“You unhappy amoebae  
turning plebeian to propagate the cowardly  
myth of you cowardly even in your looks.”  
(p. 404)

*Sessions With My Analyst* (1948-1966), subdivided into *A Remembrance of 1945*; *Reportage*, New York, 1957; *Bag of Flies*, New York, 1961; *Sessions With My Analyst* proper (1964-1966), tackles such disparate topics as the human brain, psychology, the atom, female fecundity and macho man’s inordinate eagerness to promote it, Freudian guilt complexes, the typology of the sixth sense and the folly of the human heart.

If *A Remembrance of 1945* is a cold, shocking exploration of de Palchi’s imprisonment at a time when “crime was honored, laws were just words, and the shapeless city a worm that devoured itself,” an equally dismal panorama unfolds in *Reportage*, where robotic men and women go hand in hand with drug addicts, lesbians, long-haired youngsters in tight jeans and black leather jackets

who delight in nailing squirrels to trees. Religion is business, Christ a myth exploited by the church. In this paranoid mindscape, the dupe is always conned, eliminated with an almost unfeeling, anonymous big slap on the back. With growing disdain the poet watches the sodomites of publicity everywhere study how to snare their victims in streets where no flower or color delight the eye, but elbowing one's way legitimizes and sublimates the overbearing few. In a city that smells like a crematorium, and the shiny legs of ladies line up with dogs' excrement, the poet sarcastically exclaims: "Oh how I enjoy this splendor."

In *Bag of Flies*, the theme of New York as a foul collusion of sex money and power returns, framed by the poet's bitter adolescence, his cruel father, his anarchic grandpa destroyed by cancer. "Here in Manhattan, an exile better than the one endured in the village with its daily cruelty (Tony the hunchback who from the bridge tosses into the Adige my dog, a rag in his mouth, his paws tied up), I am still offended by my poverty and peoples as usual ground by the Eichmanns of the earth, by the millions of Pontius Pilates." It is impossible not to notice in this paraphrase how close de Palchi is, consciously or unconsciously, to the French novelist Ferdinand Celine who in his *Journey To The End of The Night* blasted the Fascists for their phoney sense of order and their - triumphalistic military parades, and the Communists for their ambiguous revolution that promises freedom to everybody and then squashes any dissenting voice with tactics that smack of the Inquisition.

But, even if obviously biased by the contents, de Palchi is careful in the diagnosis of his (temporarily) obnubilated brain. Thus initially, shall we say in clinical situation 1, he simply tries to understand his past of shy boy liked by girls who one day pulled a rabbit by the hind legs out of its cage and then hit it on the neck with a clean blow, heard its cry of imprisoned child, and was for years haunted by his own meanness and man's inhumanity to animals and the environment. "They ask me why I am mad," the poet writes. Animals are tortured physically, he's tortured mentally, and then the so-called "analysts" are surprised if, after wading through the world's injustices, one joins the cuckoo's nest.

In situation 2, the Fascist moloch compels our unfortunate narrator to enroll in an army he does not trust, to obey brutes who bully him. For the record: de Palchi was a member of a group that first mangled a Communist then shot him in the head. He saw, didn't approve, but did not make his witnessing a murder matter. For that, he later paid a price that drove him insane, destined to be beaten up by Fascists (do not tell what you saw), and harassed by Reds (you were an accomplice to the killing). Caught up in this tragic dilemma, de Palchi lived days of terror that reverberate with a livid light in many lines of *Paradigm*. Like CŽline he is horrified by the insanity of war and frustrated by the enormous effort to be reasonable when surrounded by potential murderers and rapists. He feels like a man who cannot speak because his tongue has been torn out:

“Today my head a perverse bird  
at each summon to light  
migrates to darkness as it did before;  
tortured by sea by driving winds  
is the island I inhabit  
I can't communicate...  
endlessly I head for other islands.”  
(p. 150)

In situation 3 we go back in time to the year 1951, evidently a pivotal milestone in de Palchi's psyche. The woman he is walking with on the snow-covered avenues by the Vercelli station in Lombardy, Northern Italy, is for some reason ashamed of being seen with him. Showing the humorous side of his Odyssean personality, the poet subtly courts her by digging deep into his entomology manual. Crickets and grasshoppers are inclined to music, he solip-sizes; butterflies rely on scents, may flies aromatize seduction with a dance, some tropical cockroaches (like scoundrelly de Palchi) entice the female with a piquant nectar to loosen their inhibitions. Naturally the girl's taken, and the purported idyll downloads to a heart-rending tabloid:

“Standing under the overpass she cries  
why did you do it?”

cleaning herself with snow...  
(her virgin blood make the crystal catch fire)  
...my mother”  
(p. 153)

In situation 4 the poet deals with his analyst's secretary, tormenting her with his incessant why's, his desperate urge to get to the ultimate meaning of the relationship between man and woman, to go beyond the imposture of the senses. But in this screwed up world the secretary is, like all others, not the one he thinks he knows. She craves more than he can offer, and when he challenges her with violent words, she only squeals like a lab mouse ready for more sex. No one seems to understand that a part of his personality is irremediably beyond reality. A character out of Eliot's *The Waste Land*, on the phone she pathetically complains that she's "alone with her pills." The situation ends with a sardonic comment:

“I pause at the photo:  
he in a red robe standing  
in front of the mirror – she lying  
on the rug, naked, her buttocks  
made warmly mauve by a sun lamp:  
they are reading *my life*  
*in a ray of sunshine*  
how original, you say.”  
(p. 169)

De Palchi's ferocious irony is unmitigated. "Mental instability," he states, "is absolutely normal for me, who deny what others respect... a home, love for family, children (big mama of course smack in the middle), the indecency of a job." Like CŽline's hero, Baryton, he argues that people hate clarity, the real motivations of their actions. They are afraid of telling the truth, afraid of the tempestuous wind of freedom because it threatens to sweep them away:

“No nostalgia can chain me  
...I don't need roots to feel I am alive:  
a suitcase filled with books  
a ream of paper

a typewriter and a woman sum me up  
the rest does not matter, so long as  
my suffering is equal to the one  
of the animal dissected in the lab.”  
(p. 174)

And further on, spelling out his iconoclastic manifesto, once more  
he lashes out at the establishment:

“I am an easy prey: nobody ever  
says to me ‘peace be with you;’ I do not need it.  
Whether peace be with me or not is for  
others just like familial  
legal or saintly curses

please don’t bother now  
I myself push  
my gloomy cart under a light  
– alone, reserved and incommunicado.”  
(p. 176)

*Anonymous Constellation* is de Palchi’s angry pamphlet directed both at the chameleons who betrayed him and at a clique of miserly souls engaged in the struggle for survival. The carnality component erupts here not as ecstasy or passionate delirium, but as part of the general depravity and greed that ultimately force the poet to ideologically remove himself from the world of humans and orbit in cold space, rarefied like an anonymous constellation.

Man is no good, he rages on, ready as he is from early morning to grab by the neck any uncautious prey crossing his path. The rootless seagull is the only conscious expression of the – to us – unreachable glow. We can only stare at a desolation of doomed birds plants and mammals, of summers incinerating rivers and winters freezing humans in their homes. Even the poet admits his own failure. He’s a mongrel scratching at his fleas, a man who perennially invented a glory that he longed for and will never taste. For years he hoped for a conversion of spirits. But he only sees a procession of cretins raised to the rank of Poet Laureate. All around him:

“...everything sterile and astringent:  
dead houses bushes trees  
animals squashed along the highway, us  
packed on the bus hating each other’s guts...

slaves to paltry existence, rendered mute  
and unwilling to say  
hello, we’re robots,  
engines rammed in our asses.”  
(p. 198)

He propels himself towards abstract beauty, beyond that putrefaction of bloodless flesh, yet keeps finding the world a pew – calamities – yells – weapons – money – weapons. Everywhere boredom reigns, a lack of élan that should stir everything up. As ages change, our flying Dutchman pushes his rootlessness toward other lands and asks which is the way of the heart that with a bird’s instinct points the direction that of course he is not allowed to follow:

“Dust everywhere dust on all things  
on everyone on me endless dust shower  
from the ceiling on rugs, bottles, my bed  
that clamp me in the vise of my cadaver  
already buried under a heap of dust  
this dust that solidified in space  
orbits around itself, the thermonuclear  
system just like the corpse I am  
turning upon myself removed  
that much from my center around myself:  
a nameless constellation.”  
(p. 203)

It’s useless to pretend, de Palchi’s diatribe relentlessly reiterates. We don’t care for creatures who need our help or are dying, for slaughtered animals, for the butcher boy who clubs the ox and with greedy power yells Now I’m going to kill you! Nothing matters: the massacre goes on. We must kill, and those who are selected are not the stronger or the more intelligent, but the smarter. Total destruction is a coherent end, a desert world where man, all else extinct, will go hunting for man. Vengeful like Achilles

spurned by Agamemnon, the poet wishes to disappear from the stage of the world after branding it with the fiery letters DP, his spirit determined to put an end to himself atop the human dump:

“The dark of the tree begging for light  
thickens and stains the sky lowered by rain  
with mounds of dirt  
– the tree gets panicky  
squirms now, a poisoned giant  
animal with me here  
another mangled tree  
squirming with the shame of being  
human.”  
(p. 219)

After such a conclusion, a break from the previous three movements was imperative. *Addictive Aversions* lays bare de Palchi’s infatuation with and occasional aversion to sex. The reader will certainly remember the only trepidly positive note in *Anonymous Constellation*: the one where some sort of hope was slowly blossoming:

...just as I shaken shed  
the tension that will sprout from beneath snow  
newly next April.  
(p. 228)

In *Addictive Aversions* intercourse between man and woman makes a roaring comeback through ultra-convulsive images that border on the blasphemous or the gayly irreverent. As an example, if you analyze the text from a strictly semantic point of view, you will be amused by the number of lines where de Palchi is constantly waiting for the woman’s “triangular sun” to catch his seed; enchanted by true gems:

“I have flesh to consume and bones to split  
to the marrow where there still boils  
the liquid gold of my sex;”  
(p. 269)

or:

“How to dissolve forever  
this snow of hers and melt it  
in the turbine that I am

love, my love, I choke strain waste  
my manhood’s strength  
when your divisive body shuts me out;”  
(p. 253)

slightly dismayed by his epiphanies: “only your menstrual blood colors the leaden day;” “you worry about me/soothing the boiling tuft/of melted grains,/harvested beauty/of the monthly light-headedness;” “your sperm nourishes me like meat and eggs.” This happens because in de Palchi’s treatise on sexuality woman is not the suave creature idealized by the stilnovisti, nor is she the down to earth, yet loving woman exalted by Villon. De Palchi’s woman is a firehouse, a warrior that demands total submission from her innamorato. So the poor lover is fired up by her, disgusted, afraid, terrified. Sex is both good and evil, de Palchi says, willynilly cracking a paradoxical Christian fissure in his heretical garden.

De Palchi’s free salvo continues: Woman is a solar force, her vagina a nebula that brings light, her menstrual blood food for man like the succulent seeds of a pomegranate; but she is also subterfuge, insolence, mockery, felinity, bad moods and languors – a creature devoid of that definable existence the poet in his misdirected elation had believed he had catalogued. With the passing of time their relationship seems less controllable: woman has become a centrifugal force, a witchy seduction, a herald from the prince of darkness:

“I no longer count the steps  
your luxurious movements  
that corrupted me  
and drove me away.”  
(p. 249)

“I want to scream  
my failure at my divided self

or undress on the fire escape and let  
the wind with its howl freeze  
my martyred body –  
each animate or inanimate object is woman,  
a luminous sewer where my sex lurks,  
an obsessed rat.”  
(p. 250)

Dissatisfied by Margot, his opulent and insatiable mistress, Villon wrote:

“I am a lecher, and she’s a lecher with me.  
Which one of us is better? We’re both alike:  
the one as worthy as the other. Bad rat, bad cat.  
We both love filth, and filth pursues us:  
we flee from honor, honor flees from us,  
in this brothel where we ply our trade.”  
 (“Ballade de la Grosse Margot”)

Burdened by his hopeless entanglement in shameless vice, de Palchi thinks of himself as a drain pipe, a garbage can, a prey to love-rat gnawing at his throat. Molested by excesses and aversions, by physical and mental disorders, he would like to “cut this cord of blood.” But his invincible partner still dazzles him; she is an oyster open “to the lapping mouth of the obsessed.” Instead, he is calcification, spent seed that needs her purifying liquidity. At the end, in a humble act of contrition, the poet sends his woman a prayer that she may remain faithful to him who, after all, is looking for something untouched by degradation, a green blade that a sick dog likes to sniff:

“...even if gust of wind throws  
the window open to the snow  
on the roof and the carcass of a man,  
don’t let me down –  
I’m waiting  
for the coming  
of an uncorrupt *Justine*”  
(p. 294)

The fifth collection, *Paradigm*, connotes many things: touchstone, keystone, archetype. I prefer to translate paradigma as paradigm, that which serves as a model to others, and I find it confirmed by de Palchi's following lines about the snake:

“Each snake egg hosts a compact everyman,  
hurricane is reality that casts  
the foot, the gorgeous hand: the paradigm.”  
(p. 326)

To posit a normal man is easy. To create a mensch you need a tornado, a seismic quake, a flagration: the beginning of the *Scorpion's Dark Dance*. In *Paradigm* one of these exceptional men is certainly de Palchi's grandfather, that bold anarchist eaten alive by cancer, who “in disgusting pain loses breath and has the cutting smile of a dead cat.” At that time the poet was ten years old and already feared “the growing genius here intent on teaching me evil.” Yet a random submissive touch animates painfully burning memories:

“Snow dries up chestnut trees, empties them out,  
and protects me a seed in a mole's den  
by the digé.”  
(p. 308)

From the L231\F”TimesNewRomanTUR”\s12digé to the French Garonne river to the American Hudson a would-be man has left the chestnut trees of his childhood and a part of truth that will never be the same. He is now an island that moves from continent to continent, “an animal that knows all kinds of fear.” From the trapped beaver to the nests destroyed by the flood of progress, we all are victims of greed, never love or reason. Faced with these vile forces, the poet in his self-deluding moments thinks he can remain a prince; instead he too is a miserable louse that allows himself to be squashed, a “hamletic fungus, displaced man.” In this tegument he ages, derided by himself, annoyed to no end by the fact that in this paralyzing *condition humaine* we still have idiotic presumptions of eternity. Here begins an acrid commentary on Christ and the cross that strangely permeates so many pages of

*Paradigm* – a hybrid mixture of spirituality and carnality bordering on morbidity, madness, suicide:

“In a circle of fire even the scorpion  
commits suicide piercing  
its head with its sting.”  
(p. 322)

The poet is incensed by the impostures that surround him, by literary midgets who like Villon’s hungry wolves descend from frigid mountains looking for helpless lambs. Even the thought of his departed friend, Sonia Raiziss, becomes a meditation on the contemporary wry congealment of creation. Sonia, dying, drools “libido at a bivouac kindled with roses.” Yet she too must leave everything behind, ice frozen together with refuse and mud. Bit by bit there emerges in the poet’s consciousness the sense that he must recapture the pure spring he has lost. For the time being it’s only a trickle that pushes through the rocky caves of the underground. But at the still far conclusion the trickle will become a current, a stream, a river that will catapult itself towards a limitless opening, as in this glowing intimation:

“If only I could quench the enormous doubt  
battering my franciscan memory...  
but, çdigé, gather  
gravel along the contour of your shores  
and in your liquid nets  
catch the iridescent pike that darts  
in the stream rendered sandy by a noon  
as solar as the doubt is dark; and then  
as yet serene, get to the bends  
tall with grasses and bushes, and there whirl  
throwing yourself at the pylons of the bridges  
embossed with rust till calm you expand towards  
space right there where it does not exist.”  
(p. 333)

But the time for all senses to catch fire has ripened. Paroxysmic identification of himself as the Savior and of Woman as his slave-saint, “carnal essence” is a reckless doxology of twisted love, with its due accompaniment of cells, torture, whips,

thorns, nails, and blood. Vettori had already observed, in his introduction to *Addictive Aversions*, that de Palchi's complex relationship with sensuality "is construed both as an unclean act and as a light-producing activity." But he had also detected in de Palchi's unfettered speech "an unprecedented sense of freedom from the constraints of linguistic and social conventions:"

"I am the quandary disgracing  
the priestly cassock employed by the mind,  
and for your intact body  
I am the banquet's groom  
worshiped each night on knees  
by the bed naked as you are;  
the flawless robe off a hook is slowly dappled  
by unguents rubbed on sores of inner scourging  
while you try to stop the unreal hand  
that kindles and inveigles you in its power.  
The cell's window is closed, the door is barred,  
the mortared walls absorb the muted screams;  
nun-like you part the sizzled flesh  
and with saturnine mouth full of satanic  
snake-tongue you wind in your imagining  
my flaming calvary won over by the cult  
of your fleshy quintessence –  
take me as you like, in all your pink-fraught mouths,  
turgid with passion, fill  
yourself with your savior."  
(p. 344)

The poet of hermetic, epigrammatic cadences of the *Scorpion's Dark Dance* inexplicably veers to the larger movements of watery bodies, as if the blood of woman had been all along a signal or banner of something more vast: the Heraclitean flow, man's search for beginnings. Yet in the initial poems this direction is visible only in flashes, such as "The çdigé is your body, sinuously dry and powerful – eddy that welcomes my thirsty mouth." Otherwise, an erotic cavalcade is the Boschean logo of 'Carnal Essence,' where the woman's sex becomes a monstrosity that illuminates the man's face, her silty belly a holy altar where he

consumes his meal, her mossy triangle a new, magnificent constellation, the poet a martyred, cannibalistic Christ:

“I become you, Christ,  
my holy communion is manifestation  
of what you signify by breaking the bread  
“take it, eat it, this is my body”  
and offering wine, “drink, this is my blood.”  
I am the carnivore  
the cannibal that eats his own body  
and drinks the blood of his wound  
in remembrance.”  
(p.358)

And then a more melancholy mood sets in. Perhaps disturbed by his own frantic eroticism, de Palchi reverts to the image of pure waters and green grasses, as if sated by the sado-masochism of his strenuously baroque compositions. After so many drops of menstrual blood and “pomegranate rubies,” we are relieved to watch the erotic legend transformed into the earth, the mythical rivers of de Palchi’s youth, the concluded circle – a return to the limpidity of laved rocks, of windswept hills:

“Three quarters gone, my life  
insinuates itself into yours, young  
with every blade of grass, nettle, field flower  
that teems with color  
in the wild growth

I too at each season change pursuing  
your fleet-footedness, your eyes’ enthusiasm  
growing wider with backdrops  
of rivers and canals  
that flow with the smoothness of your figure  
wedged in the stony  
block I already am.”  
(p. 361)

The mood continues in *Last ones*, the collection that concludes *Paradigm*. The tragedy of old age creeping along, breaking the bones of his body, regrets, fear of *her*--the beast ready to claw him,

besiege the poet to the extent that he asks her: "Tell me how to go away or stay waiting for your violence." The ambivalent figure of Christ also plays a hypnotic, anguished role in *Last Ones*. Having rejected God's mercy as delusional, de Palchi uses Christ as a private symbol that acts in conjunction with (and submission to) the poet's off-center and areligious imagery. In this parable, woman is Madgalen in love with the man's 'awakening in a body of christ' that she watches descend from the cross and rest on her piteous knees to resurrect in the promise of blood.

This is heavy stuff, and do I detect here and there the smell of sulphur? I honestly don't know how legitimate or savory the poet's "imbibing of Christ" is in the long run. Devil aside, I personally prefer (and cherish) de Palchi's scream of defiance at the armed cowards of the world good only at attacking the helpless; his pained awareness of advancing old age and the reality of today that spits in his face with the face of his torturers; his defense of a total openness both of content and form in the name of freedom; his fresher handling of woman that becomes, like the OL231\f"Times NewRomanTUR"s12digŽ she represents, clear and turbid, calm and tempestuous, saving and damning, cave of illuminations and pit of hubris. She leads the poet from mud, filth, detritus, weeds, satanic obsessions, to a miracle of springs, estuaries, childish joy:

"You do not disappoint me if you flee  
and I run after you, a boy who dreams  
and catches you by the hair  
dyed with splendid lime tree  
tinted with shimmering  
lime tree this morning..."  
(p. 401)

In this reconquered solarly lies the beauty and the tension of de Palchi's (you can be sure not; he told me he has decided to live until he's 120...) penultimate poems.

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