

An Interview with Ralph Angel

LAWRENCE SUTIN & SUSAN SOLOMON

Ralph Angel is the author of four collections of poetry: *Anxious Latitudes; Neither World*, which received the James Laughlin Award of the Academy of American Poets; *Twice Removed*, a finalist for the Washington Book Award and nominated for the *Los Angeles Times* Book Awards; and his most recent, *Exceptions and Melancholies: Poems 1986-2006*, winner of the PEN USA Poetry Award. His fifth book, *Your Moon*, is forthcoming. Ralph also translated Federico García Lorca's collection, *Poema del cante jondo / Poem of a Deep Song*, for which he received a Willis Barnstone Poetry Translation Prize. His poems have appeared in numerous magazines, including *The New Yorker*, *Poetry*, and *The Antioch Review*. Recent literary awards include a gift from the Elgin Cox Trust, a Pushcart Prize, a Gertrude Stein Award, a Fulbright Foundation fellowship, and the Bess Hokin Award of the Modern Poetry Association. He is the Edith R. White Distinguished Professor of Creative Writing at the University of Redlands as well as a member of the M.F.A. faculty at Vermont College of Fine Arts. He lives in Los Angeles.

This public interview with Ralph Angel was held in front of a live audience on March 13, 2012, during his visit to The Creative Writing Programs at Hamline University. The two interviewers were Lawrence Sutin, a member of the faculty, and Susan Solomon, a student in the M.F.A. program at Hamline.

SOLOMON: When I first read the poem "There was a Silence," I didn't understand it. I probably still don't understand it. I was stunned by that poem and don't think it matters that I didn't understand it. As a reader, I think I connect to it beyond understanding. I once read an essay by the poet Reginald Shepherd, who said that he didn't understand some of his favorite poems, either. So that's what I'd like to ask you about: the understanding of the poem.

ANGEL: There are different kinds and levels of understanding. We can come to understanding in a cognitive, rational, linear way, and we can come to an understanding in an ineffable, permanently mysterious way. We understand things in our minds—we understand things in our hearts. There are times when I understand things in my knees. And I trust all those layers and kinds of understanding, it seems to me. I hope that helps.

SOLOMON: Yes, it does. Yesterday in our master class with you, you talked about how people crave meaning in poetry. Meaning is different from understanding, though, right?

ANGEL: I think meaning does involve the mind. The brain is a receptor. It's like a dream machine. It receives impulses and it receives image upon image upon image upon image, but the mind craves meaning. The mind is assembling stuff all the time. It's what makes the human species pretty interesting. We crave meaning by our very nature and by the size of our brains. If you think about language, it can be understood, it seems to me. You have twenty-six abstract symbols that mean absolutely nothing. And yet, in any arrangement, arbitrary or contrived, any arrangement whatsoever, we are orchestrating meaning. Those symbols, as they interact with one another, generate something greater than themselves. So it's kind of like the brain itself. Impulse upon impulse upon impulse, and yet the mechanism is constantly, without our having a whole lot of say in the matter, making meaning out of what we receive.

SOLOMON: I think your work leaves a lot of space for the reader to enter into. To me that shows a lot of respect. You think readers are smart enough to fill in whatever it is they don't understand. They fill in what they need. Where do your ideas come from? What inspires you?

ANGEL: It's my job as an artist to pay attention. To be attentive and to be present. It sounds easy, but it requires discipline. One has to work at it. It's difficult work, especially in a distracted reality like American culture. Ideas are secondary to me; the fact of my reality is primary. What *is* will become meaning and ideas or it will reveal ideas, but it's not what generates or drives the poetry. To be honest, in the early days of this lifelong apprenticeship, I did believe that I needed an idea. I've learned over time that that was a silly way of approaching things, a kind of limitation. The language is more powerful than I am, and life is bigger than I am. I have less and less need to control either one of them. I'm much more interested in discovery than I am in being in control, and having it my way.

I often hear from graduate students, "I've run out of ideas" or "I don't know what to write about—I'm all blocked up." I've never heard a writer or a poet complain about such a thing. Every writer and poet I've ever met or read about complains about *time*. You don't need ideas, you just need time and you fight for time. I could drop my reading glasses right now or spill my water and there you go. I'm working. I'm working.

SOLOMON: Whose work do you turn to—you know, if you ever do get a little bit stuck? I think that everybody does, once in awhile.

ANGEL: Oh, yes. I tend to get jammed up in the middle of things. Not between things. You know, I work in longhand. Even if I'm working on a long, extended piece, I always compose in longhand. I will be in my trance and find myself putting down a line or two that jams me up—either because it was ingrained in me by authoritative figures that I should not do that, or I broke one of my own rules. And it can derail me for long periods of time. But I dig it. I like getting jammed up in the middle of things because it keeps me fresh and it keeps me present. I've got to work it through. More often than not, it's not something I scratch out or throw away. There was a reason for it if I was in my

trance, if I was in a pure place and I was hearing language in a way that wasn't distracted. It's just another problem to solve. Sometimes solving it is going with it and doing exactly what you've been taught not to do or what you've taught yourself or told yourself not to do. It's like painting: most painters arrive at the understanding that mistakes are part of what makes something rich and complicated and layered and real. So even mistakes can be something that ultimately is part of a greater perfection.

What do I turn to? I turn to life. I have 10,000 gods, you know? Painters, musicians, sculptors, writers, philosophers, scientists, people on the street. I'm a fortunate person. I turn to everybody. Some of my best friends have been dead a long, long time. Long before I was born.

SOLOMON: I really like how you work with negative space. It's kind of an art term, but it applies to writing as well. You write about the space between the raindrops where the hummingbirds fly, and the time between the ticks of the clock, those little, liminal spaces. I had a painting teacher once who said it's hard to talk about something that's not about words, and you write about things that aren't about words. I'm thinking especially of your poems, "To Mark Rothko" and "Interior Landscape," the poem dedicated to Helen Frankenthaler. To me, it's really easy to see how your poems relate to their big, color field paintings. Those painters throw away the narrative as well as you do. Would you please read "Interior Landscape" to us?

ANGEL: Reads.

Interior Landscape

In the blink of an eye, a light rain.
Among the ten-thousand synapses, the sound of rain, but
delicately, the sound of leaves.

In the blink of an eye, a pure-cold air.
Were I swimming there, how clearly I could see my hands and
everything they touch.

Among all shapes growing here and dying, a sweet
and earthy smell. The weight and feel spread thinly, my own
blue house below,

SUTIN & SOLOMON

as if the port were sighing, the cliffs
hauled in from afar, a wave of rolling tiled roofs and lamp stain
splashed against the walls.

In the blink of an eye, no wonder.
In the blink of an eye, an empty room. The unread paper. The
space I've cleared.

SOLOMON: What do you respond to in paintings?

ANGEL: What do I respond to in their (Rothko, Frankenthaler) paintings? They're fucking gorgeous, man. Every art object to me is a revelation; something is revealed. You're asking me about two very abstract painters. There's an interiority about both painters' work. They're so good at what they do—they find a way to open a door for a viewer and allow a viewer into this very internal space. What a magical thing and accomplishment that is to me. They're very meditative painters and I appreciate them for that as well. They quiet a room. A great art object spins a reader or a viewer or a listener into her or his own interiority, internal reality, private space. Those two painters do that for me. That's certainly part of my experience when I'm standing before a great Rothko or a Helen Frankenthaler.

SOLOMON: Your work is so confident. Do you have friends you show your work to? I know you hate editors.

ANGEL: I don't hate editors. I really don't. I love editors. And critics and reviewers, I love them. And publishers, I love them. And interviewers, I just love them. I love everybody. What was the question again?

SOLOMON: Do you show your work to anybody?

ANGEL: You know, I don't. I wish I could, and that I had people to show it to. There's a couple of reasons for that. One, people I have shown my work to—they love my work. So, why would I show it to them? So that I can be told, "this is a great poem Ralph"? I have no wish to participate in the writing circle sort of reality that many great writers engage in. It's a very solitary sport. One of my favorite wives was a great reader. She was not a poet and she didn't really

read poetry, but she was an extraordinary editor. She would read things and let me know if she was in there or not. And if she wasn't in there, she would let me know where in the piece she was outside of the experience. That was extraordinarily helpful. I really loved that. Because that's all I'm asking for: I'm asking that a reader or a listener be made present, be made part of an immediate experience. I don't ask anything else. If a reader is made present by the orchestration of the language, I have succeeded and I feel really good and grateful about that.

Poetry isn't here to perform or persuade or promote world peace. I wish it did. It isn't here to end war. I wish it did that. It doesn't drive the GNP, doesn't tell history. I'm not interested in the story of my life; I'm interested in the *fact* of my life. It's why poetry has lasted for tens of thousands of years. It's outlived everything—every economic theory, every political ideology. Poetry exists because it is the language for which we have no language. We have language for everything else. What do you do when you can't explain it? What do you do? How does one articulate profound and genuine grief? How does one explain profound and genuine joy? How does one do that? That's as much as I can say about it.

SOLOMON: There's a poem of yours that I would like to read back to you, because this is how I feel about your work. Reads:

And More

I open my eyes again. So be it,
 good. Don't leave. The dark slides into slippers
 easily. The quiet finds a robe. The room
 rises and is falling with your
 breathing. As if
 I'd never seen you sleeping,
 in this house and warmth,
 at this hour, this bed
 I can't quite
 put my finger on
 and like.

ANGEL: Thank you.

SUTIN: It is interesting to me as a prose writer that the tradition is very powerful within poetry that wonderful poets translate. In prose, it happens, but it's

not often that it happens, and it's not regarded as so integral to the creativity of a prose writer as it is to a poet. That's how I perceive it. Whereas in poetry, translation is something that many poets engage in, and translating is a deep tradition in poetry. Why are poets, or yourself if you just want to speak to yourself, so drawn to translation in addition to their own work?

ANGEL: I don't know. I didn't know that that was even the case, that it was more in the tradition of poetry.

SUTIN: It's true.

ANGEL: Thank you.

SUTIN: When you decided to translate Lorca—obviously, Lorca is a very great poet, and you love his work. But what goes into your decision to translate another poet? What guides you?

ANGEL: I was living for a brief period of time in Granada, in the house of a painter, a friend of mine, and was introduced to his circle of friends—a lovely, strange, wonderful group of people. They were all very much being Granadinos—they were deeply committed to cante and to flamenco and to dance. One of my friends was an aunt of a young gypsy singer, Marina Heredia, who was making her debut. It's a very formal affair, in Granada, when a young singer is introduced. My friends knew my love of music and invited me to her concert, which was held in a 13th century courtyard. It was an extraordinary little place. My friends had reserved seats in the first three rows, up close. They were able to get me a ticket by bribing somebody, so I was in the back by myself. And this young woman came out with a single accompaniment, a guitarist. Now in traditional cante, a singer isn't allowed to speak to the audience. No patter at all. No introductions of songs. She can only communicate with the audience by singing, and with her hands. So this young woman comes out and for an hour, without any break, she sang. And I wept. I'd never heard a vocalist who moved me so deeply as this young woman. It was like being in heaven.

I began listening to and collecting cante. I wanted to know what some of these songs meant. In the singing, it's very difficult to discern the actual words. So I began translating some of these songs that were especially moving

to me. And that took me to Lorca's deep love and obsession with *cante jondo*. He and the great Spanish composer, Manuel de Falla, worked tirelessly to support and sustain this music that was being eliminated in Spain by the Catholic church, by crass commercialism, and by the government. de Falla organized a festival, *Concurso de Cante Jondo*, at the Alhambra, where Lorca, who was about twenty four at the time, boasted to the audience that his great book of poetry would be out the next year. Of course, this book didn't come out for ten years. It was an expression of his deep devotion to and love for gypsy music, which also was informed by ancient Arabic and Jewish music.

I began reading Lorca's *Poema del cante jondo*, which no one would publish at the time. He wrote another book dedicated to gypsy culture and music, *Romancero gitano*, loosely translated as *The Gypsy Ballads*. Unlike *Cante jondo*, it is very traditional Spanish ballad poetry, narrative poetry, folk poetry. Of course, it was a huge success and made the publication of *Cante jondo* possible. When I began translating, I was allowed into the archives and given an approved copy of the original text in Spanish. I thought, *Wow. Why isn't this more widely known?* It became an act of love and took me four years. I didn't work on it continuously, but it was one of the hardest things I ever did.

I found out later that there was one full-length complete edition of *Poema del cante jondo* translated into English in the United States, and it's not very good. After I read it, I asked people to help me to find translations of these poems which had been published sporadically. At some point, as a translator, you have to ask yourself if you are bringing something new to the work, something that isn't there, something that needs to be there that is in the original but is not in the translations. I knew I was on to something. And so I went for it.

SUTIN: This is actually based on a conversation we had earlier, when you made an interesting remark. We were talking about Pierre Reverdy's short novel, *Haunted House*, which was translated by John Ashbery recently, which you and I both read and loved. We both praised that translation. You said, and correct me if I'm misquoting you, that sometimes when people are translating surrealist or intensely avant-garde text into English, there is a tendency on the part of the translator to show off a bit. I'm wondering what you think about that showing off temptation, and did you have to fight it off with Lorca?

ANGEL: No. I wish I had to suppress my deep need to show off. Actually you're interpreting that a little differently, but I like the way you're doing it. A lot of what drove my early work was not American work. Ever since World War II, Americans have been gifted with translation. I don't know where I'd be if it weren't for work that had been rendered from another language. But sometimes a translator will take highly avant-garde or fragmented or surreal or edgy work and try and reproduce that in English, a language where that doesn't really work so well. Each language has its own particular quality. For example, our language is very concrete. French is very spherical, and Spanish is very lyrical. Sometimes you're reading a surrealist poet, and in English it is just gobbledygook. It's the job of the translator. If you're translating from another language into English, and it doesn't work in English, you fail. No matter how true to the poem you are. Or how literal you are. You fail because you have not rendered the spirit from one language to another, so it can be experienced as it was intended.

I think there are times when I wanted to make Lorca less poetical. I wanted to tamp him down a bit—because he's so romantic, in an erotically charged way, which is really the beauty. It wasn't the eroticism that was the romanticism. I realize I was fighting that every now and then. I had to take some real risks and make for some real vulnerability to get to that romantic place.

SUTIN: Thank you. Let's open it up to questions from the audience.

QUESTION: What's it like for you as a writer living in L.A.?

ANGEL: I learned in my early thirties, and I'm not proud of this, that I was a helplessly urban person. Because of a teaching contract, I lived in a small, suburban, beautiful, peaceful, upscale town. And I went fucking crazy. I was paranoid. I couldn't sleep. I was on the freeway into the city every night. I became the lunatic I thought everybody thought I was. Friends—this was pre-CD days—were making me cassette tapes with breaking glass, with people yelling and gunshots and sirens, and I would use it to go to sleep at night. Like I said, I'm not proud of it, but it's true. I've no need to call attention to myself. I need 10 million people around me. I need a highly diverse demographic and population. I need 160 languages around me. I need to be able to make a phone call at three in the morning and order a martini and know that someone's going to deliver it.

SUTIN & SOLOMON

SUTIN: Do people deliver martinis?

ANGEL: You're damn right. One of the first things I learned in L.A. is that if you dress well and pretend to have money, you can do anything you want.

QUESTION: Last night you said writing a poem is a form of violence. Is it sometimes also for you an act of love? If so, how is the process experienced differently?

ANGEL: They are the same. Not that love is an act of violence, of course, or that violence is an act of love. But they're the same. They involve human expression. And it cuts into the silence that will overwhelm us and swallow us up. When you enter into making a poem, if you make lyric poems like I do, you don't know if you're worth your salt. You don't know where you're going, but it's your job to go there. And you don't always want to go there; you don't want to find out what's there. Because we all want to be liked, and we all want to spin things in a way that will make us look interesting and important and likeable and smart. And what you often find is that you're empty and bereft and in pain, and at a loss and alone. But it's our job to go there. It's why not everybody is an artist. It's a risky business.

