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Poet Signature

Philip Murray

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POET SIGNATURE



Philip Murray

IN THESE poems Mr. Murray is trying to make the sonnet over to his own purpose. His purpose, I gather, is to align a fairly elusive content with a traditional form that has been altered to permit special tonal and verbal effects.

The experiment goes well. The poems all feel like sonnets but with a difference notable in at least five of them. And the difference is enough to stir our interest without distracting us from what is being said. In *Polar*, *The Natural Cave*, and *The Fugitives*, the fourteen-line pentameter has been maintained without rime, while in *The Scotograph* and *Laughing Boy* a fairly regular rime scheme is apparent in iambs of irregular line quantities. *The Coffee Ensign* is the only strictly conventional sonnet in the group.

By lightly reworking the sonnet form in this way Mr. Murray is free to pursue more particular matters of word allusion. Of one

aspect of the associative process which is part of his creative method, he writes:

I am trying to get as much meaning and significance out of each word as possible within the context of the poem. Therefore some of the words are ambiguous and even more, referring forward and/or backward in the poem, words like many faceted jewels that give a fluid and kinetic effect both to the meaning and to the poem itself. Perhaps I've been freighting my words too heavily but I've been trying to achieve the kind of poems that cause an endless mental rhythm of aesthetic experience, something like the chain of circles that grows when you drop a stone in a pool.

And of his parallel concern with the symbolic process, Mr. Murray has this to say:

"The Coffee Ensign" was a Naval Officer. "Coffee" because there was a strong odor of coffee on the trolley which I associated with the Ensign sitting beside me, perhaps a bit too arbitrarily. The overall intention of the poem was to show how we confuse the ideal as represented by the book of Indian Mythology I was reading, and the real, the Ensign. For a time, he became the dragon in the myth, and as if he sensed this, he "gets off." And "the dragon reassumes its form." Indra is the god of rain. In the legend he slit the belly of a dragon over the then dry world letting the life-giving juices pour down and thus making the earth fertile.

Taken not as statements to judge the poems against but as the poet's afterthoughts concerning his intentions, we observe that there is more than the impression of facility in the form to contend with. The reader must at least be wary of resting in the familiar comfort of the form without following the hidden signposts of the meaning. How well he can proceed through their stabilized diction toward a grasp of their shifting verbal allusions becomes in a different way each reader's test of the value of these poems.

—E. H.

POET SIGNATURE

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POLAR

When in our black Pacific my love burns
 A mass of candles lit by wicked fish,
 Receives the thin and jagged wafer of ice,
 And bleeds the winter wine, the snow I breathe,
 Then are we purified, then are we cleansed
 Holy and choate by this sacrament
 Gleaming the long night in a crystal cave
 Where we have cached our mystery from the world
 Whose northern lights explore our iceland lore;
 But as the season changes we are found
 By large amphibious white bears who come
 Climbing the pole star from their frozen cliffs
 To break our seal upon a floe of dreams,
 Wild dark impressions marking us for death.

THE NATURAL CAVE

How much we freeze, how much we star-lit flow,
 They count, they measure by the clock of night,
 The moon, the weather and longitude
 Where we should climb full blown upon the hours;
 And when we stalk the quarry in our cloak
 Of tree, seamless, spun on looms of love
 So fine our nakedness is clear to hope,
 They shout their maledictions on the bond
 And clothe their eyes in coarse and costly silk
 To peer forever in our natural cave
 Where unrestrained we celebrate ourselves,
 The unitary beast, voracious lust,
 Whose relics line the walls, blunt testaments,
 On which we pricked our names and mounted death.

THE SCOTOGRAPH

The scotograph is septic. What is written in
The dark will have the darkness on it like a brand.
In fairy tales, the prince who has a withered hand
May wear a glove successfully and even win
The princess; but the unlit eyes
Will never hide the blank surprise
Of never having color. Spin
What fictive threads they will, their sunlit strand
Is negative. There is no substitute for light
Though every other sense be twice as sharp, and those
Who ply the useless instrument
Learning from braille what words are meant
To be, deceive themselves. The darkness filters through.
Weep for the veils on every mind that never can be rent;
The blind are not a few.

THE FUGITIVES

They searched our bodies, but their only clues
Were broken glintings, splinters of a few
Deserted mirrors on a heap of death
Where shadowless lovers haunted darkful rooms.

Once light, substantial, shook the house of glass
With bright refractions in a frieze of fire
That burned to madness by our careless flame
Lit in their ancient attic; trapped by smoke
We hugged the floor like roaches, 'til the walls
Came tumbling down, crossing our crisp brows
With scarlet letters flaring in revenge;

To bite the dusty hands that fed us doom,
We choked identity into the ground
And kissed our hearts into each other's mouth.

LAUGHING BOY

The laughing boy, when laughing, has a crimson throat
 Of thick columnar joy upon which base his ball-
 Like head is balanced carefully. It must not fall
 Into the pools of merriment, for heads don't float;
 They sink into the sand or sea
 Trailing their hair hysterically
 Above. But one small anecdote
 To his starved brain within this house of dead may call
 His body into spasms of erotic mirth,
 Tilting the swollen base until the axis breaks.
 The laughing boy alive is dead;
 He can not live without his head.
 If there were hands to clasp the crimson throat and hold
 It steady with increasing strength until the stem were shred
 That choking would be gold.

THE COFFEE ENSIGN

The coffee ensign with his hair cut long
 Is aromatic on the trolley car.
 He needs a shave, his coat and trousers are
 Extremely mussed, his breath comes foul and strong;
 Is slightly drunk, he laughs a bit too much
 And leans too close; his wide and wild eyes swing
 Upon my book; is he remembering?
 His hands unclasp, he is about to touch—
 And I am Indra over the dry worlds
 Ripping his bloated belly wide to sluice
 This arid earth with that life-giving juice;
 His mind recoils; his body then, uncurls;
 He leaves the seat, vacant but still warm;
 Gets off; the dragon re-assumes its form.