

POETRY INTERROGATING ITSELF:

Sheila E. Murphy's *The Case of the Lost Objective (Case)*

by THOMAS FINK

Sheila E. Murphy's poetry and prose-poetry have often been praised for their distinctive music, for the expansiveness, especially imaginative plenitude, of a consciousness revealed, and for the diversity of her formal innovations. In my own prior writing on Murphy, I have been fascinated with how units of possible thematic development and resistance to meaning confront each other. *The Case of the Lost Objective (Case)*, (Rockhampton, Australia: Otoliths, 2007), her latest book, could easily sustain another such analysis, but I think it would be more interesting to address ways in which the poetry includes critical content. As in late Wallace Stevens, the John Ashbery of "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror" and other work of the seventies and beyond, A.R. Ammons, Charles Bernstein and various other "Language" poets, and David Shapiro, Murphy writes poetry that has much to say about itself and about general attempts to represent individual or collective experience or culture in language.

Murphy has taken up visual poetry (vizpo) relatively recently; one example of this in *The Case of the Lost Objective (Case)* provides a superb example of how her poetry can be seen to reflect on its own operations and status. In "Each of Her," the background consists of twelve squares across and fifteen down for a total of 180 squares, some of which are different shades of yellow, green, blue, red and pink, orange, purple, and violet. The poetry, in printed alternating lines of coral pink and a green just a little darker and less yellow than the darkest yellow-green background, is an uncapitalized interleaving of successive lines of two sentences. The first is: "each of her votes/. . . remained a proxy/. . . for behind-the-/. . . scenes thinking/ . . . that reflected some/ . . . deeply held con-/ . . . viction still tender/ . . . to the touch" (19).

First, let's focus on the sentence's self-referential play. "Votes" and "proxy" are tropes for the gap or delay between verbal representations and thought, which itself is "behind-the-scenes" (unconscious?) and a "re-flection" (a visual/conceptual "aftering") of a belief or proof of guilt ("conviction"). Kinesthetics ("the touch") and emotion ("tender") impinge upon whatever is "behind" thinking. And the separation of "con" and "viction" emphasizes how this belief involves "togetherness," perhaps with others in a community, and, paradoxically, splitting from the next two syllables. "Con," however, foregrounds duplicity as much as community.

While the first sentence explicitly problematizes the “message” in the poetry as it is being “delivered,” the second one, which (unlike its predecessor) has no period, goes even farther in identifying representation’s imperfections and yet finding value in the effort to communicate: “her mental processes/ . . . appeared to lack/ . . . transcendence even/ . . . transparency such/ . . . that to convey a/ . . . gesture might be/ . . . futile and yet worth/ . . . the inevitable stretch” (19). Strangely, “appeared to lack” is a pun, because it not only signifies “seemed to lack” but “showed up,” paradoxically, to “reveal” a “lack.” That these processes “lack. . . transparency” is clear from the disclosure of multiple mediations and ambiguities in the first sentence, but we need to ask: “transcendence” *of or from* and *to* what? Perhaps the “gesture” is intended to “convey” the subject’s “mental processes” fully and “transparently” to someone else, but faulty linguistic and physical conduits can make the exertion (“stretching”) “futile.” At the end of the sentence, mere assertion is not transcended, as proof of an optimistic stance is not attempted.

The visual format here lends itself to meta-commentary. Unlike the usual situation of the unnoticed (“blank”) page which black letters “fill” with “meaning,” the fact of the colored squares as a complex abstract composition (whose juxtapositions create an illusion of dynamic movement within an actual stasis) encourages a consciousness of the existence of a ground in contrast with the colored letters as figure(s). This effect is augmented by the complementary status of the two colors assigned to the lines.

Despite my sense that the colors of letters/background squares sometimes make the letters difficult to read—for example, the “t” in “tender” in the fourth to last is absurdly close in color to the vertically aligned squares that it straddles—legibility is always possible. Successful reading is delayed, and this is similar to what happens when we experience a disjunction between one line and the next but then realize that it is unimportant, considering the flow between the first and third, as well as the second and fourth lines. Though “to convey a/ . . . gesture *might be*/ . . . futile,” the “stretch” might also result in accomplishment, as it does here. Even if the text resists translation into a stable meaning, it is legible. Yet the form exposes this legibility as tenuous; the visual complexity of such a poem that is also an art work *could* be used to efface enough of the distinction between figure(s) and ground to make simple reading impossible.

The first poem in *The Case of the Lost Objective (Case)* is the easiest to contextualize as a poem “about” poetry. Even if “When You Learn to Draw Be Sure to Draw Dark Lines” literally appears to concern visual art, the reiterated word “lines”—so important to the

self-referential aspects of the sonnets of Spenser, Shakespeare, and others—tilts the thematics in a poetic direction. Here are the first two strophes:

When you learn be sure to know exactly
Where the lines occur, and to distinguish
Lines from not lines, and to own
The capability to say where lines are,
When you learn to draw dark lines.

And when you learn to draw, remind yourself
That teaching is the same as learning
To draw lines. You are the student
of your teaching, and your lines
will be remembered after you. (5)

The simplicity of Murphy's diction and her friendly, casual tone suggest that communication will be transparent, but experienced readers of her prior work will predict otherwise. With the unusual verb "occur," the poet suggests that the best places for lines in drawing and for line-breaks in verse are "waiting" to be discovered. "To distinguish/ Lines from not lines" applies to this poet's practice of writing verse, prose-poetry, whose "not lines" are sentences and paragraphs, and the American haibun, a prose-paragraph followed by a line or two of verse.

In the middle of the strophe, Murphy's notion of "ownership" of "the capability" of determining line-breaks and their placement in stanzaic or strophic units jostles the earlier assertion about "lines occur[ring]." The adjective "dark" attached to "lines" may signify somber, portentous, or emphatic attempts at communication. Is the authority of ownership of the placement of these "dark lines" conferred by properties of language, or by arbitrary conventions vaguely agreed upon by a community, or by the learner's increase in self-confidence ("be[ing] sure" of herself) through practice? How would human beings arrive at a judgment about language's properties that would stand as a consensus? How could language magically tell us how to use it? "Be sure" is the opening command that applies to the three successive infinitives of the sentence, so the instruction to "be sure. . . to own" such a "capability" implies that the individual achieves ownership in the act of claiming it.

However, a good deal of language in the rest of the poem undermines the authority of the composing self and emphasizes the audience's power. Murphy does not say anything as simple as: "You teach yourself how to draw, and so you teach and learn at the same time." Instead, "you are the student," not of yourself as *teacher*, but "of your [act of] teaching" yourself. Even though the "teaching" is "yours" (belongs to you), you are identified as the one who learns from a process of artistic composition only partly governed by your intention; the aspect that you cannot control, discovery, teaches you. In the last clause of the second sentence, the phrase "after you" suggests that the components of the drawing or poem "will be remembered" either "after" the addressee's completion of the work or after her/his human existence is over or both. However, "after" also implies translation, which involves displacement of authorial "ownership"/intention/awareness of process and transformation of the work into an entity reflecting an interpreter's discoveries and intentions. S/he who draws the lines and returns to contemplation of the work later would be included in the "after you," but s/he is temporally distant from her prior authorial status. Murphy explores various implications of these notions in the poem's last two strophes:

When you learn to draw and you are sure
That you have drawn dark lines, look
At the lines and ask why they are there.
Know that you may reason with the lines,
Infer what they have shown, and do not
Fail to be immersed in just these lines.
Already they will have transcended you.
They will have encumbered your availability.
They will have taken the attention
Otherwise allotted to your being and replaced it
For attention to themselves.

Then be sure to learn that they no longer are your lines.
That you have made them does not imply
That these are lines that have to do with you.
You are the way these lines arrived.
They appear to hold where you have placed them,
Those segments of the true lines,
The lines that you have drawn,
Not your lines. (5)

The process of “reasoning with” or about “what” the components of the finished work “have shown,” including the development of “inferences,” which differ from the presumption of arrival at “facts” of interpretation, supports the assertion about the lines’ “transcendence” of the artist/poet. If the work and artist were indivisible and the latter’s intentions controlled the former, the artist would not have to speculate about what the lines “have shown.” Therefore, it follows that an artist who perceives aesthetic creation as self-expression or self-representation should be reminded that the text does not make him/her “available” as a personality to others as much as it “will” prove to “have encumbered” such availability and have drawn attention to itself, rather than its maker. This territory seems close to that of Barthes’ “death of the author” and Foucault’s problemization of the author-function. Instead, Murphy focuses on how what was probably a necessary kind of ownership during the process of “making” is to be relinquished. The artist/poet can recognize herself as a medium, so that s/he does not believe that her/his placement of “those segments of the true lines” grants him/her an authority that fixes interpretation.

“When You Learn to Draw Be Sure to Draw Dark Lines” is an atypical Murphy poem, because it is so thoroughly discursive. Therefore, my last “specimen text” for an argument about poetry that analyzes itself will be a “typical” Murphy prose-poem, where so much defamiliarization of expected forms of communication transpires at the level of the sentence—even at times, of a phrase or clause—and of the paragraph that close reading may seem futile. Prose-poems like “Quit joshing this near the manure” provide an opportunity to see how departures from readers’ expectations can be said to perform a commentary on the *linguistic* features of the departures and the fragility of what readers have expected. Beginning with a difficult statement, “Quit joshing . . .” moves on to an alternation between obscurely framed questions and further declarative sentences:

implicit gravitas unleashes as you were from the meticulous
endowment that propels a wraith out of mere stitch. is that your
faultline or mere cinders after grackle call to various imposters? the
sheets are all untied. the dreams vie for indelicate emporia. recall the
window feed? the dreaded deep end? the dependable mobility of stun
guns pointed at dry laundry where the sky becomes a sure division
problem? whose story is the one about the tentative messiah grappling
for a job description without exclamation points? who tries to multiply

a posse times collective nouns endorsed by magistrates? some clip art looks best in the rain, some rain looks best in situ. and the snow light has to be the prettiest young blue I've yet inculcated into breathful and found selves, your own among them. (44)

The beginning of the text encourages our consideration of how grammar influences the reception of meaning and how ambiguity complicates attribution of particular influence. Conventional syntax would dictate that the active, transitive "implicit gravitas unleashes" be followed by *something* (an object) that takes the form of a noun or pronoun, but "as you were" seems to be a dependent clause. It is highly unusual that a dependent clause, however short, acts as a noun/object; the reader either has to adjust to the strangeness or to account—probably unsuccessfully—for the bizarre omission of an object. Thus, Murphy "teaches" the reader how a new "line," a new grammatical possibility, can be "drawn." And one might recognize that the poetic license she has taken can be used to facilitate an expansion of the complexity of reference in a single sentence. After all, "as you were" is much more suggestive than more conventional choices, "your past" or even "your past condition," because it also functions as a cliché signifying permission to relax *and* as an indication of a simile, something like ("as") your past state but not the state itself.

If I attempt to paraphrase the whole sentence, I surmise that the poet, performing an act of *double* personification (one seemingly rising out of another), encourages commentary on another meta-topic, personification as a rhetorical device, which relates to the grammatical binary of active/passive. This paraphrase constitutes a simplification: high seriousness "causes" your past state or something like that state to emerge "from" whatever has contained it, a certain potential cloaked in legal terms ("endowment") that itself is strangely figured as an active force, "propelling" a ghostly energy "wraith" (just as "gravitas" is "unleashing" the past condition) out of a joining of material strands or a linguistic or conceptual or perhaps psychological crossroads ("stitch"). Perhaps this "wraith" is the distorted representation emanating from the "endowment" of repression, and a repressed memory, formerly festering in the unconscious, can now provide the addressee relief by being brought into consciousness through the agency of a "gravitas" that itself is merely "implicit."

In the trope of personification, what common sense identifies as a passive subject often gets converted into an active subject. But, if my paraphrase is plausible, Murphy's examples question boundaries separating active and passive. In the first of the two

cases, one may insist that an emotion cannot free a memory's sensory data from the non-place of the unconscious, but that "gravitas" functions as personification because it is a handy metonymy for the mental processes that caused the emotion and drive its interaction with other aspects of these processes in order to produce "unleashing" effects. Similarly, in the second case, potential must be passive, unless it is a metonymy for forces that activate conditions inherent in that "endowment." However, the origins of these processes, the beginning of causal chains which themselves escape empirical measurement, seem impossible to pinpoint, and so what we think may be "active" may itself be "passive," or there may be varying degrees of activity and passivity. In such a light, isn't it quibbling to say that "emotion" is passive whereas its supposed causes are active? Murphy's complex troping and image-flinging may influence some readers to reach the point where they eye the terms "active"/"passive" with suspicion because of their imprecision. Nevertheless, the difference between "implicit gravitas unleashes" and "implicit gravitas is unleashed" cannot be erased, unless rules of English itself are displaced.

In the next sentence, questions of authenticity are the focus. "Grackle call," a ritual of attempted communication (similar to the later "window feed") from a disguised self to those who also turn out to disguise themselves, appears to be an inauthentic act that either results in (or is contiguous to) the succession of one of two phenomena.

"Faultline" seems to be a trope for the addressee's divided self, perhaps the split between unconscious/ consciousness or the Freudian id/superego/ego, or the self/other in Lacan's "mirror stage," or his triad of imaginary/symbolic/real. A term in tennis, as well as geology, could situate the trope as a punishable "unleashing" of transgression. If the "answer" is "cinders," residue can be considered waste, or else it might be a substantial trace, like fragments of what has been repressed. Language bears traces of the unconscious's "meticulous endowment," later refigured as "the dreaded deep end," and so "cinders" could comprise the tracing of a "faultline."

Without analyzing the prose-poem's remaining nine sentences as elaborately as I have the first two, I will discuss a few more patterns of theoretical speculation in the text. "The sheets" could easily be "united" in their usual arrangement on a bed or in a book's alleged aesthetic/conceptual unity or coherence, but they are "un*t*ied"; some split or faultline characterizes the addressee's or even the speaker's disrupted psyche or perhaps communication between the two. Thus, "dreams" need to "vie for" wish fulfillment; their existence reflects a lack and the "indelicate" id's will to mastery

(desire for imperious consumption of items in "emporium"), and language is the adjunct for this process in the realm of consciousness.

Those who demand that language capture a person's "essence," the transcendental signified of their unconscious, perceive this syntactically mobile medium as a "stun gun." The "self" might move around, but words can catch up. However, the speaker asks whether the addressee remembers the shooting of "dry laundry," *outer* material which is far less illuminating than the proverbial "dirty laundry." Any attempt to "divide" "the sky" is a "problem" that can't be solved. "The sky" can be considered a macrocosmic backdrop for the microcosmic "self," whose heterogeneity eludes capture, as does the sky's vastness. Perhaps the "division problem" is to determine whether a part of the sky or a "trace" of the self can function dependably as a synecdoche. We have no evidence that it can, and even the term "tentative messiah" may not prove an oxymoron. Perhaps the "multiplication" of supporters ("a posse") of a concept of collective improvement through rhetoric (including "collective nouns") does not have to be dogmatic and "exclamatory"; could the rhetoric feature evenhanded intellectual complexity, especially qualification?

Computer "clip art," a simplified representation of a representation that may involve further layers of mediation, seems to be a figure of fun: this "art" is so impoverished that it is aesthetically improved when transformed "in rain" (*by* rain) into blotches and puddles of ink—somewhat like a Morris Louis or Helen Frankenthaler abstraction. On the other hand, Murphy may also be commenting that clip art is enhanced by being framed within an image of rain or by being seen through actual rain's further mediation; in fact, all representations may seem less satisfactory than "the thing itself," such as "rain. . . in situ." Murphy concludes by presenting an aesthetic appreciation of natural elements, but this affirmation places the perception into a relationship with the teaching of ("inculcat[ion] into") "breathful and found selves," including the addressee. Converted into the imperfect medium of language, the speaker's aesthetic transport acquires significance (or "implicit gravitas") when it is shared with other people *and* enters "into" them, in some way changing the evolving composition of their "selves." The adjective "found" suggests both that the speaker finds the object of her address and that these individuals are discovering themselves during the "instruction," which evokes their "faultlines" and, to cite T.S. Eliot, "memory and desire."

Finally, why does the poet make the first word of each sentence lower case? And what does the title have to do with the prose-poem? While punctuation and, often,

conventional syntax tells us that Murphy is writing in sentences, the lower-case opening words suggest a weakening of boundaries between these basic units, especially in the case of the four questions beginning with "recall the window feed?" (One can judge "recall" or "do you recall" the implied beginning of the last three questions.) The "points" made in successive sentences may not be the same, but possible interpenetration of their thematic drifts is emphasized by the unusual device. As for "Quit joshing this near the manure," the prohibition against levity seems so arbitrary as to suggest that *it* should be laughed at; one should be skeptical about seriousness *and* serious about humor. "Manure" is a waste product ("mere cinders") that occasions humor, but it is also an example of a trace ("mere stitch") that is literally used for agricultural production and may figuratively help generate interpretation of past and present selves. Further, in the irony-laden prose-poem's contemplative space, isn't it difficult to tell the difference between "joshing" and "gravitas"?

The three poetic texts that I have examined, each reflecting divergent forms, all concentrate on and/or *provide* problems of composition and interpretation to such a degree that other subject matter—the unconscious/consciousness, the basic foundation of a self, interpersonal communication, teaching/learning, appreciation of nature—comes to be scrutinized only within the dynamic framework of these dominant issues. The poetry implies multiple choices of emphasis but argues for no solutions to the difficulties. Thus, the reader is placed in the position either to let "lines occur" as makeshift solutions or to keep the problems "breathful," "in situ" yet often changing shape.