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George Murray, *The Rush to Here* by Adam Beardsworth

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REVIEWS

George Murray. *The Rush to Here*. Gibson, B.C.: Nightwood, 2008. ISBN 0889712298

ABIDING TOO CLOSELY to the principles of "thought-rhyme," the neologism George Murray coins and employs as the controlling formal device in his fourth poetry collection *The Rush to Here*, may leave fans of Canadian progressive rock icon Rush disappointed. In spite of the title's homophonic implications, Murray's book does not itemize essential Rush songs. Nominated for the 2008 E.J. Pratt Award, the collection contains a sequence of fifty-seven sonnets (four sections of fourteen plus one) that subject quotidian themes to Murray's rather paradoxical systematization of arbitrary meaning. In a recent interview with *www.northernpoetryreview.com*, Murray claims his thought-rhymes were born out of his distaste for the "faux Elizabethan sing-song sound that comes from the linguistic acrobatics necessary to complete the rhyme contract" (Couture). While poets, including sonnet writers, have not felt bound by that Elizabethan-era contract for a couple of centuries, Murray's approach invests the form with a distinct and playful logic of association. According to Murray, abandoning a rigid aural rhyme scheme in favour of a more cerebral rationale broadens the scope of signification that inheres in each pairing: "instead of rhyming 'night' with 'fight', I can 'rhyme' it with any of a series of a [*sic*] associations. So, the synonym 'evening', the antonym 'day', the homonym 'knight', the anagram 'thing', a synonym of a homonym 'soldier' (for 'knight'), a homonym of an antonym 'dais', across phraseology and idiom 'silent', etc." Based on this logic, and since Murray's associative pairings are open to internal and slant rhymes as well as end rhymes, it is possible to read the title as an imperative claim about the most essential songs of the band Rush, as this book contains The Rush (homophone for the titular "Rush"), "to" (which shifts from a preposition indicating the completion of a movement to a preposition indicating an imperative claim); Hear (homophone for the titular "Here").

While Murray's command of this technique is admirable, the insinuation that it is new is perhaps a stretch. Consider, for instance, Shakespeare's "Sonnet 55" where the aural rhyme doesn't exclude further associative connotations:

> Not marble, nor the guilded monument,
> Of Princes shall out-live this powrefull rime,
> But you shall shine more bright in these contents
> Then unswept stone, besmeer'd with sluttish time.

Here the rhymes "monument" and "contents" imply, according to the logic of "thought-rhyme," that there is substance, either literal or figurative, to the monument in question; "rime" and "time" imply, for instance, song or verse. Or, to take a more recent example, John Berryman depended heavily on a similar, if unnamed, notion in his *Dream Songs.* Note, for example, the thought-rhyme pairings "done"/ "before," and "one" / "more" that express a compulsive infatuation with death in the opening stanza of song 384:

> The marker slants, flowerless, day's almost done,
> I stand above my father's grave with rage,
> Often, often before
> I've made this awful pilgrimage to one
> Who cannot visit me, who tore his page
>
> Out: I come back for more.

The notion of thought-rhyme, therefore, seems grounded in the familiar poetic and linguistic notion that meaning exists in a system of relations; poets exploit this notion — sonically, intellectually, serendipitously — as a means of producing the verbal tensions, tropes, figures and ironies that demonstrate the dynamic and playful production of meaning.

Murray may be the first to foreground this strategy by constructing formal poems based entirely on its principles. The coupling of the conventional sonnet form (Murray employs several varieties) with the sense of epistemological instability highlighted by the slipperiness of his thought-rhymes creates a tension between traditional notions of poetry as a potential reservoir of singular truths, and more postmodern concepts of meaning as inherently, and infinitely, regressive. While the associative nature of his thought rhymes conjure Freud's analyses of parapraxis in *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, Murray's name-drops of contemporary theorists such as Michel Foucault and Jean Baudrillard heavy-handedly draw attention to the concerns of postmodern linguistics. Consider, for instance, "The Unequal Gaze" where Murray's thought-rhymes pun on Foucault's notions of discipline, power, and panopticism:

> M. Foucault, I think I know what you mean
> when you say visibility is a trap.
> You'd think I'd be ready to ambush
> the power, but I still worry I'm being watched.

On the level of wit and irony, this poem displays a playful discord between Foucault's theoretical discourse and the discursive nature of meaning within Murray's system of relations. While the somewhat ambiguous thought-rhyme between "mean" and "trap" evokes the pursuit of truth as a type of epistemological quagmire, the relation between "ambush" and "watched" conjures Foucault's notions of the panoptic gaze as a form of discipline and surveillance and adds a self-reflexive element by highlighting Murray's awareness of his own artifice. While there is nothing particularly stimulating about Murray's gloss of one of contemporary theory's most recognizable ideas, the final couplet successfully evokes one of the collection's recurring tropes: the poet's own uncertain aesthetic position between experimental poetics and the conventional lyric. While he wants to "ambush / the power" centres of poetic tradition and meaning, he worries about "being watched," or about public reactions to private aesthetic experiments.

In the interview noted above, Murray admits his own hesitance about the production and reception of experimental works: "I've written many works people would consider 'experimental' or 'avant garde', but have declined to publish these for personal reasons" (Couture). As experiments of a formal nature, Murray's thought-rhymes are at their best when they foreground hesitancy, indecision, and uncertainty as affects of a lack of linguistic transparency. Take, for example, "Days of Glass," included here in full:

> These are the days of glass, each pane clear
> enough to show what's beyond, yet stacked up
> against one another, they begin to blur.
> Faint warps, lone motes of dust, fingerprints raised
>
> in ghostly stains; each insignificant
> and nearly clear to the unaided eye,
> but seen through, back to back, and in quantity,
> twisting distance into a barrier to sense.
>
> Lined up like atoms in a brick, these unseen
> flaws wait, and the further you try to look
> through, the better odds what's next will be missed.
> Polish them as you like, see what you see.
>
> This dust can only be cleaned by hammer.
> To reach the quick, one must go through the nail.

The layers of glass stacked against one another evoke the uncertainty conveyed by the polysemantic thought rhymes. The image of seeing through distorted glass, which recalls Stevens' "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird"

(amongst others), conveys a sense of confusion, which Murray conjures with the play on days/daze in the title. These barriers to meaning leave the speaker frustrated, looking for a violent means of breaking out of the depressive scenario. However, the poem's diction, which apart from approaching a loose pentameter forgoes the conventional prosody associated with the sonnet form, emphasizes a sense of listless despair in which the lyric voice's actions are dictated by the arbitrary nature of meaning rather than by the deliberate action and energy suggested by metre and rhythm.

The primary weakness of both the poem and the collection is implicit in this connection between language and despair. The depressive tone of the poem, which, according to the thought-rhyme system, is controlled by the invigorating spontaneity of arbitrary meaning, demonstrates the poet's unwillingness to relinquish authoritative control. In spite of Murray's experiments with linguistic slipperiness, the rigorous acting out of associative pairings betrays a desire to impose order on the random and chaotic. In this sense, the despair evoked by the poem is reified as a sort of false despair, one that resides somewhere between linguistic arbitrariness and authorial contrivance.

In spite of that weakness, the collection still contains several intellectually and linguistically engaging poems, many of which take up themes similar to those of "Days of Glass." "Line of Sight," for instance, meditates on solipsism and perspective; "Silence is a Dead Language" posits a tension between aesthetic passivity and innovation; and "Collusion" evokes the rupture between thought and its aesthetic articulation. Murray's thematic emphasis on uncertainty, indecision, and desire for action seems to culminate in the collection's final, stand-alone poem, "Go," which, ironically, implies a desire for the struggle between thought, meaning, and action to *stop*: "To lie down and sleep under a full wolf moon / and end the quiet effort with snow."

While Murray's thought-rhyme experiments display wit and engagement with issues of language and authenticity, the collection suffers from the sense of indeterminacy that the thought-rhymes often exploit. Murray's reluctance to relinquish the authority of the lyric mode pushes his formal experiment towards determinism rather than allowing the poems to develop playful connotations of their own. In a sense, the authoritative control of the lyric voice appears to prescribe patterns of association, mediated through the thought-rhymes, rather than allowing those associations to manifest themselves uniquely in the minds of readers. While many individual poems stand out because of their linguistic playfulness, the systematic nature of the thought-rhyme delivered under the authority of a singular lyric voice tends towards New Critical hermeneutics and results, in Murray's words, in "no catastrophic difference / felt, no recognizable consequence made."

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Deannie Sullivan-Fraser and Hilda Rose (Illustrator), *Johnny and the Gipsy Moth*. St. John's: Tuckamore Books, 2009. ISBN 1-897174-40-3

REVIEWING A PICTURE book or illustrated story for children presents many possibilities for evaluation. Does one assess how the supposed audience will receive the work? To what degree should the review address aesthetic concerns? How important are cultural and historical contexts? Limits on those possibilities may come from the final destination of the review — a periodical focusing on pedagogy (for educators) or distribution (for librarians) usually gives more attention to the needs of the audience than do periodicals focusing on literary or cultural topics. A focus on aesthetic and cultural concerns shows that the book in question here, *Johnny and the Gipsy Moth* written by Deannie Sullivan-Fraser and illustrated by Hilda Rose, is a pleasant book in which the verbal text (words) and visual text (pictures) are both well executed and have interesting tensions within themselves and with each other. It also speaks of and shows a piece of Newfoundland's past; and in doing so, represents some of the tensions inherent in that past.

Johnny and the Gipsy Moth's story fulfills many of the conventions of stories for children. Its main character, Johnny Sullivan, is a child who feels isolated and lonely. His family has recently moved to a new community, and he has no friends yet. His initial attempts to make friends with the boys in his neighbourhood are met with derision. Only when he is placed in an extraordinary position, singled out for a ride in the eponymous Gipsy Moth biplane, do the other boys accept him. This story thus has the familiar theme found in many children's stories of the isolated child gaining a community.

The story's unique qualities come from its setting, both in geography and in time. Set in Grand Falls in the early twentieth century when airmail delivery first began in Newfoundland, it suggests the isolation of the place, similar to Johnny's own, and the potential for connection through shared technology. Johnny and his new friends at the end of the story are together building model biplanes and a tree house. With the Newfoundland setting are a number of elements that take the universal theme and make it particular: one of the reasons the boys reject Johnny because he is a townie. Particular attention to class difference intensifies that urban-rural rivalry. Not only is Johnny from St. John's, but clearly his family is well-to-do, as signified by his velvet and lace suit. The Morrow brothers, Kevin, Georgie, and