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Devotions: Poems by Timothy Murphy (review)

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Christianity & Literature, Volume 66, Number 4, September 2017, pp. 732-736
(Review)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press



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does not accomplish this. Simply stating that these works “bear witness” is inadequate. Ultimately, these projections are unnecessary, as nothing is demonstrably added to Pederson’s excellent account of postwar critiques of atonement by his appeal to trauma theory. And at the risk of being too beholden to the vicissitudes of scholarly fashion, it is fair to say that trauma and witness testimony theory are rather passé and this makes the text appear critically anachronistic. This could potentially detract from a work that otherwise possesses considerable merit.

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Devotions: Poems. By Timothy Murphy. Fargo, ND: North Dakota State University Press, 2017. Pp. 160. ISBN 978-0-911042-91-7. \$ 24.95.

In his preface to Timothy Murphy’s *Devotions*, Dana Gioia reminds readers how large a role devotional verse has played in the history of English poetry. It’s a worthwhile reminder because this sort of poetry remains rare now. Certainly there is religious poetry in abundance; magazines arise and thrive on it, like *Image*, *Christianity and Literature*, and the various theological reviews. But religious poetry done Murphy’s way is something out of the ordinary.

It’s unusual first of all because it is actually verse. It metes and rhymes. Its rhymes are true, not slant, and its meters are constant, usually a bucking accentual rhythm rather than a liquid iambic flow. And it’s unusual because it is unabashedly devotional. Many of the pieces here are frankly prayer, or discussions of prayer. Some are metrical translations of the psalms, a venerable form used by the most famous poets who wrote in English. Some are meditations on the varied pains and joys of his North Dakota life. The book is unusual also in that its devotions are to worldly things, as well as to God, since the poems make clear that Murphy is also devoted to poetry, to people, and to the natural world.

Murphy’s life is an interesting one, in its present situation and in its troubled and lively past. As Murphy fans know, his poetry is so frankly autobiographical that it conveys all the pleasures and the discomforts of intimate knowledge of another person. Most remarkably, it combines staunch Catholic orthodoxy on some points with unashamed acknowledgment that Murphy is gay, and that for decades he shared life and poetry with the late Alan Sullivan. (Readers curious about Sullivan’s life and work can still consult his blog, *Fresh Bilge*.) As in all the Murphy books, one of the pleasures is getting the life story:

Interment

One boy with a guitar and dreadful novel,
another, poems crammed inside his head—

one led the other to his basement hovel
and slung the slender stranger into bed.

They would find seven hundred trees to tend
and eighteen types of apples to be grafted,
dogs to be fed and watered, and God send
the manuscripts of poems to be crafted.

So it went on for decades, so we grow,
but now one digs beside two teenage trees,
acorns unearthed, transplanted years ago,
slim oaks, leaves yellowed by last night's freeze,

I delve a deep hole in the orchard soil,
singing my lover's favorite Latin song,
Tantum Ergo. The digging is no toil.
My friend? Let me pretend he did no wrong.

The poems about Sullivan's illness interwoven with the two men's shared conversion, about Sullivan's death, and about the lonely aftermath are sober, facing the events head on. At times the combination of eros and agape makes for an image that stops the reader cold:

Live on, *mon vieux*, in words you sometimes wrote
When Jesus seized his servant by the throat.

Murphy is equally forthright about his decades-long struggle with alcohol, as here, in one of his meditations on the deadly sins—

Aquinas clad in flab—
punishment for a sin
which I am innocent of.
Distance runner thin,
I was no muscled slab—
no Greek, with olive skin—
when mastered by the love
where all my dreams begin.

“Such gluttony!” I cry.
But drink? I am unmanned.
Pour me a shot of rye
and still my trembling hand.

—or here, about his time spent in rehab and recovery:

Sister Marie was strolling up the sidewalk,
 munching a raw potato. Many inmates
 watched from our fenced enclosure, bleakly smoking.
 Sister Marie, between bites of potato,
 wimpled and radiant in her brown habit,
 sang in her foghorn voice *Salve Regina*.
 Blue-eyed Corinne, enslaved to oxycodone,
 said, “Whatever she’s on, I want to have it.”

The story of his return to faith after a long time away is another main theme, but told here in calm, allusive retrospection:

Born to go astray,
 I fled the Catholic fold
 when I was twelve years old,
 a lamb who ran away,
 prey to the wolves, the cold.

My shepherd piped me home.
 Filing into a pew,
 I learned what Caesar knew:
 all roads lead to Rome,
 where wolves are mothers too.

The book has a distinctly Catholic flavor, in both its accidents and its essence, to borrow the vocabulary of sacramental theology. The accidents are such surface matters as Murphy’s absoluteness about matters like angels and his fondness for the liturgy and the liturgical year:

Advent, what does it mean? It means get ready.
 Take a tot of rum if you must, to steady
 hand and voice before you go the altar,
 leading the ass you are by its greasy halter.

He loves the Latin of the Vulgate and makes use of the traditional titles of psalms and prayers—*Asperges me*, *De profundis clamavi*—to add allusive layers to certain poems. He’s fond of the style of prayer that characterized the Catholic school of the 1950s, a style and time I share with him. (Readers who want to get to know that style better should read the preface to *The Sin-Eater* by Thomas Lynch.) Those are the accidents. The essences are as described in Gioia’s preface: the sense that Christianity is “primarily a mystical community, composed of both the living

and the dead united by Christ through the sacraments.” Murphy’s whole past and his whole present participate in all his books.

His most devoted present audience is the community of farmers and hunters in his own North Dakota. The poems aimed at them seem at first glance to be works of artless simplicity, marked by straightforwardness, plain-spoken diction, and unreserved, pointedly orthodox faith. In fact, they are densely artful, although Murphy avoids the usual sorts of difficulty in poetry. The chief art of these poems is in their music and in their concision. The meters and rhyme schemes, repeated though they are, vary constantly, predictable and unpredictable as a Renaissance motet.

The poems also gain levels of complexity from the vocabulary of hunting and sailing, of weather, geography, geology, and wayfinding, particular features of the landscape and sea, particular trees:

Alan riding his first horse from Big Sandy
to celebrate his thirty-seventh birthday:
his mare reared in the lodgepoles when a spruce grouse
flushed and nearly pitched him down a switchback.
My own gelding stampeded through a meadow,
and our young wrangler called those ponies “gentled.”

Relaxed and conversational as it sounds, this is actually very precisely metered, every line-end a feminine ending. And constantly mixed in are allusions to all the other poems and poets stored in Murphy’s brain: Frost, Richard Wilbur, Carlos Drummond de Andrade, the classics:

A gale had blown. The shredded nest was strewn
across the yard, eviction come too soon.
The hen shrieked in the walnut overhead.
One thumb twist, and the baby birds were dead.

“Nest in the willow, lass,” I told the hen,
then said, “Limitless are the hearts of men,”
misquoting Frost, who knew his trees, and knew
more than I, his devoted student knew.

Another of the pleasures we look for in poetry is pure human connection, another person’s story and outlook on the world. In addition to his own stories, Murphy loves to tell other people’s, often addressing them directly, living or dead. There are poems to people from his childhood, like “Father Jack,” and people in his life later, or now, like “Ode to the Mahli Boys,” densely compact and allusive little stories that weave through his own. An added pleasure for those who know his poetry and his poetic connections is that a number of the people addressed are

other contemporary poets: Rhina Espaillat, Paul Stevens, Gail White, and others. For a reader who knows their work too, the poems that name them gain still another level of intricacy.

The typical book of contemporary poetry is a slender thing, designed to be tightly unified, readable at a sitting without much difficulty. In this respect also, *Devotions* is atypical. At 160 pages, it is best sampled, not wolfed down. Murphy has no hesitation about treating some themes over and over, which is exactly what the human mind does. A very few of the poems seem to me not to earn their keep; for example, plain recital of what happens at a Holy Week liturgy comes across to me as pale beside the liturgies themselves. Read at length, the book's repeated themes might feel repetitious; dipped into briefly, they satisfy the urge for devoted connection.

If a criticism can be made about the book, it is that it includes many poems that have appeared in Murphy's earlier books, although there are many new ones as well. But a poet with Murphy's baggage needs that much room; the poems do their best work when the story is there in full. There is a point to the repetition: to gather the devotional poems for the precise purpose of devotional reading. So if *Devotions* restates too much for readers who are Murphy fans already, it's a fine vehicle for making new Murphy fans, which it will do when it finds readers hungry for frankly Christian poetry and alive to the exacting beauties of North Dakota and of meter and rhyme.

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