

BIPOLARITY IN SHEILA E. MURPHY'S *TETH**

Much of Sheila E. Murphy's poetry balances on a fine line between pure ineffable abstraction of the kind found in some of the more "pure" Language poets and an attention to an ordinary, autobiographically-oriented daily life, often perceived in a broader socio-cultural context. The dynamics of this balance, which includes deep incursions into both of its poles, is what makes her poetry so appealing and is what I wish to discuss by focusing on her remarkable recent book *Teth*.

"Teth" is the 9th letter of the Hebrew alphabet and 9 is the numerological key to the poems' length and the books: 81 words per poem and 81 poems in the book. Even the price, \$9.00, is an amount deliberately set, according to the author, to fit into the arithmetic scheme. (Too bad the ISBN check number does not fit, though the date, 1991, and the number of pages, 91, do!) This rather arbitrary scheme, aside from lending the book a certain magical or hermetic aura, forces certain economies and ellipses on the poems, which, although present in her work as a whole, are more pronounced in this book, and are a vital part of its expressiveness. (The poems in *Teth* tend to be shorter than much of her other work.) The numerological scheme also seems to be related to another characteristic of the book, which is the frequency of religious references, usually Catholic: the work appears to be a kind of disciplined meditation process, with part of its discipline being the arbitrary counting of words, rather like the counting of breaths in certain Zen or Yogic practices. Not unrelated to this meditational aspect is that fact that *Teth* seems to reflect a basic contentment with life, a basic sense of centeredness, which does not exclude a critical socio-cultural consciousness and is not blind to pain.

One of the first of the bipolar or balancing techniques to strike the eye is precisely the visual presentation of the poems, which are printed one to a page: all lines are centered on the pages, which tends to emphasize those lines as discreet phrases, which, in fact, they often are in a syntactical sense. Adding to this impression is the fact that no punctuation is used. So even those lines that are discursively connected have a quality of separateness about them that is much greater than would be the case if the poems were left-justified. Thus the poems, which are balanced down a central axis, are also balancing between cohesiveness and a mere chance association of elements.

The poems' visual presentation creates another effect: many times the centering of lines creates a "shape" for the poem, which adds a purely visual experience to the cognitive/imaginative one of reading it. For example, the poem on page 21 has a

rather totemic shape, suggesting a hand mirror or a person perhaps, and its text refers to solitude, introspection, pain, and the concept of stasis/evolution. Another example is on page 42, which looks rather like a bowl with something rising from it. The poem refers to food, hunger, the womb. There is an additional balance, then, between the simultaneous visual and cognitive presentations of these poems.

As I have suggested, these poems have two structural tendencies: a discursive or “essay” structure and an allusive/ellusive, or seemingly ineffable one. All poems contain elements of both, but some have predominantly one or the other. The poem on page 72, for example, is primarily in the “essay” mode, which is rather like Murphy’s widely published Haibun (consisting of a paragraphlike “essay” followed by a one-line “haiku”), though shorter, is a poem dealing with meditation or prayer as a subject, and is directed toward an other, as is frequently the case in her discursive passages: “prayer is lying still/thought such as the only heart/in two is until separation/stops each making sense”.

An example of a poem using the opposite or allusively connected lines technique is on page 67. This poem is not directed clearly toward an other, and only becomes discursive in the last three lines: “as if dance were parody of light/and light stood often still/awaiting dance form”. The poem, which can be read as a kind of *ars poetica* for this book, refers to words in the present, rotating and connecting, still and moving, emanating from “the inner quiet self”? or “god”. The “rotating” or separate-phrase passages predominate, (“a spree of evanescent brim ballet/comes the corresponding lime/sequester paperweight/is god the elbow room”), but come to a clear resolving conclusion in the passage quoted above ending with “awaiting dance form”. The two types of structures then, though conceptually opposite, are intimately connected in these poems and feed into each other, with the ineffable/allusive emanating from and rotating around a center or other, and then resolving itself or focusing in discursive speech to that other. It is rather as if the haiku at the end of her essayistic haibun had been blended into the essay passage —and made an integral part of it, rather than a separate following statement.

The fact that many of these private, meditational poems seem directed toward an other is in itself, of course, a kind of balancing between the private and the public. The poem on page 53 addresses this kind of balance rather explicitly: it refers, apparently, to the illness of a family member, perhaps an aged one, which leads the poem into an awareness of a broader social reality in which ownership, social identity (“a sex to call your own”) and “talk show hosts”, i.e., mass culture, are referred to.

Another kind of bipolarity in this book may be found in the many individual phrases that make use of ellipses to create a double or multiple meaning, as in the marvellous last line of page 73, which refers to a sock “left in the middle street”. This kind of phrase would seem to be a fortuitous result of the need to reduce the poems to 81 words each, although it is a technique the author has made much use of in other works. Other such phrases are “I have contributed attention span intact” (85), “with sufficient finish biochemistry?” (38), and “dark circles crowded space” (57).

One might ask the old, rather misleading question of whether these poems are “about” anything. One of *Teth*’s poems, on page 66, addresses this very question: “about gleams happily from theory”, the poem begins, and goes on to suggest that the wish for things to have meaning is a kind of illusion, a kind of linearity or, “multipli-

cation table" "that will accomplish/no release of thirst but will protect/bare vulnerable feet"; that is, that although the concern for meaning provides a sense of comfort, it really consists of "the wrong worms to go fishing"; that is, it will not provide the sense of balance or wholeness that these poems both refer to and create. That wholeness is the result of the simultaneous and equivalent apperception of self and experience, and suggests that the concept of "bipolarity" itself, is, while useful as a tool for discussion, an illusory construct.

Finally, I want to quote one poem in its entirety, the previously mentioned one on page 21, which is exemplary of almost all the issues I have discussed: it has a suggestive visual shape (mirror or person), both discursive and separate-phrase passages, a resolving ending, and allusive/ineffable connections (in some cases created by oral and/or conceptual echoings, an important aspect of these poems I have not addressed):

*leave me a quiet will
 the things of yours I want
 a non-denominational long day
 translating the discovered mystics
 breeding world from raw resources
 newspaper a precursor of papier-mache
 solutions to divestiture
 dysfunction leaning etiquette
 on stampface
 scrapbook mention of the reason
 people go in droves to campsites
 where pretend indulgence
 in the lesser things
 transpires out-take
 rocks me to sleep
 until the spirit
 drifts into elapsed seafoam
 and musters a correlative
 for lower back
 without something pending
 the sore places*

I think that *Teth* is one of Sheila E. Murphy's most finely worked-out books, and should not only be one of her most enduring, but should serve as a key to the understanding of much of her other work.

John M. Bennett

* Murphy, Sheila E. *Teth*. Tucson: Chax Press, 1991. Preface by Gerald Burns. ISBN: 0-925904-05-8. 91 pgs. \$9.00.