



Ryan Murphy shows us the potential of the language collage. Evoking the Expressionist school of painting, Murphy distorts reality to enhance his poetry's emotional effect. Though populated by the features of our familiar world, the world of his poems is parsed, fragmented, its disparate images lashed together with the bonds of lineation and lyric space.

*"What black light
founders your words.
This ringing quiet.
Nostalgia debris in the shipyard."*

Murphy can trace his lineage to the juxtapositions in Kurt Schwitters' angular acts of assemblage, but Murphy is a poet at play in the architecture of his own time, a time when database-driven cultural objects proliferate, objects whose fundamental structure depends, as in Schwitters, on the act of assemblage: montage in film, on television, edited sequences of independent images over which trademarked names, advertising slogans, and scrolling headlines have been superimposed. Murphy's poems teach us there is a unique kind of beauty in these hyper - mediated forms:

*"patchwork bulk of sea-script.
Needlepoint night.
The last breath I hear
is always out
And the second hand."*

Murphy offers poetry for the present, and in doing so, gives us literature that is timeless. Its luxurious rhythms, linguistic precision and demanding silences are an antidote to the onslaught of that which is discordant around us. — Carlin M. Wragg, Editor

Note: This transcript has been slightly modified to enhance readability.



Ryan Murphy: [Reads: "The Matchbook Diaries"]

Carlin M. Wragg: Looking at this poem on the page, and the title, it kind of felt to me like each section took up as much space as you could actually fit on a physical matchbook. How do you understand the different very small parts contributing to a greater story?

RM: I think that the title does refer to the size of what could be written on a matchbook cover. The title came after the poem, which is most often the case. You know, I haven't looked at this poem in a while and I think it's actually an interesting poem for me because of that element, all the small parts, which are broken up by section breaks. To a certain extent, this strikes me as a pretty primitive for me, or early for me, attempt to piece

together things from pretty disparate elements into some sort of whole. Do I think that it's entirely successful in that? Maybe not, but I think that it was a way of thinking for me about trying to tie together a lot of discrete moments or images into the larger whole of a poem.

CMW: Is there, when you write, an intention from start to finish?

RM: There's no intention in terms of an endpoint. You know, I can't, nor would I want, to speak to the reader's experience of any poem, but I guess I don't think of it having any narrative, since I'm not trying to tell a story, as it were. But I do believe essentially that because of the proximity of words there will be some sense of coherence overall. And, as well, the arrangement is done pretty intentionally, so...

CMW: I'm curious about the use of "etcetera" in your poems, or in poems generally.

What does that do? Since this word is kind of a place-holder for so many other things?

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RM: You know I think that I tend to use the word etcetera from time to time... I think that there's no denying it has the quality of a throw-away word. I think that I try to use it very consciously in that way because I have a tendency, I would say, towards deflating elevated speech and elevating mundane speech. I think that as a device, when it enters into my writing, it probably enters in as a tool for deflating speech intentionally.

CMW: Do you find that your work is influenced mainly by writers? Are there other forms of art that have influenced your thinking, that come into your writing?

RM: I'm definitely influenced by writers. I imitate writers, I steal from writers, I think about writers. I'm responding in a lot of ways to all sorts of medium and circumstances around me, so all of those things get in to a certain extent, but I imagine that I am speaking most, or thinking most about writers.

CMW: This next poem seems to reference an artist in the title, is that true?

RM: Yes, Giorgio Morandi, he's an Italian painter.

CMW: What kind of work did he do?



RM: Still lives, almost exclusively, I think there're some landscapes that he did. He's from Bologna, Twentieth Century artist. [Reads "Morandi Sequence"]

CMW: This is a longer poem, longer than some of the other pieces in this book, and perhaps more

dense. Was this something that was a struggle, in that it differed from form, or did it emerge as it is?

RM: It is something relatively uncommon, I think, to my writing, but it just worked out this way. The form seemed to take place very naturally. You know, it's more prose blocks than how I typically write, but it seemed to demand that.

CMW: Is there any reason you chose to reference the painter you talked about before?

RM: The title came after the poem had been written, but I think that I had been looking at a lot of Morandi's pictures, and I think I'd read a little biography of him at about the time, and I think that I felt, in writing this, that there was something I wanted to try to say to Morandi. It wasn't foremost in my mind, but I think it was there someplace in the back of my thinking, which is what led to the title.

CMW: There are ways in which you create space on the page. There're these longer spaces between lines within the different blocks, and then there are these little stars—what do you think of as the difference between those spaces?

RM: Very specifically, the spaces within the paragraphs themselves were a sort of compromise on what I was struggling to do, which has to do with a statement and its negation, or making a statement and then altering that statement without emphasizing one over the other. The example of that in the first paragraph, as it were, would be "I have said everything I will say," which, of course, as a single statement would be "I have said everything I will say," or as two statements, would be "I have said everything." And then, to begin again, "I will say." And so the effort of those discrete spaces within the paragraph is to try to allow those two things to exist at the same time. Which, of course, makes it extremely difficult to read because I think one's voice gives away one meaning over the other, whereas on the page I think I would like them to balance themselves as well as they can.

CMW: Does that mean you feel like this is a poem that's maybe more successful on the page than it is animated by the voice?

RM: I think of poems as things on the page. To, essentially, perform a poem is something I am simply temperamentally not given to, which is why I am a writer, as opposed to a performer, I think. So I think I definitely experience poems, and my poems as well as others' poems, as something on the page, which is simply my temperament. The same as, I suspect, a photographer is taking pictures, as opposed to appearing in pictures for the same temperamental reasons, for the most part.

CMW: Have you heard actors read poems, for example?

RM: I haven't. Oh, well, no, that's not true, I have.

CMW: Did you think it was different, the experience of hearing that, versus a writer reading their work?

RM: I mean, actors are more polished at it I suppose, though I always find that they tend to dramatize things as well. I think that's perhaps part of their job. It comes to mind, thinking this, because the last word of the Morandi poem is "endeavor," which is Beckett's pun on "endeavor," which is to try to do something, and "end ever," which would be "to end."

Bill Erwin did some of Beckett's *Texts for Nothing*, which, again, does that sort of beautifully, the "I can't go on I'll go on," and Bill Erwin, of course, is a magnificent performer, but hearing it out loud he had to dramatize that text and privilege one utterance over another which, the lack of that has always been what struck me as what is so successful about a lot of Beckett on the page.

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You had asked me earlier about some poets that I admire as influences, and one of the things I thought that I would read a little bit of is Barbara Guest's "Red Lilies," which is one of my favorite poems, and has certainly been a pretty direct influence on my writing. So I'm just going to read it.



{Reads "Red Lilies."}

And the reason that I wanted to read that poem, aside from the fact that it's a pretty beautiful poem, is I have a poem called "The Mingulay Boat Song," I'll just read the opening stanza, because it essentially takes its construction directly from "Red Lilies."



[Reads the opening stanza of "The Mingulay boat song."]

Which is pretty exactly, "the tree is you, the blanket is what warms it, snow erupts from thistle to toe, the snow pours out of you." So I basically copied that.

CMW: What do you think about that? How does that work in writing?

RM: I think it's very interesting to work from the writing of one's betters, as it were, in this case. You know, I think there's a lot to learn in trying to mimic and imitate, whether it be the words, the construction, the form, what have you.

CMW: Is there a point where that becomes something of your own?

RM: Well, it becomes something different. I mean, as Borges would say, even if I wrote "Red Lilies" word for word it wouldn't be "Red Lilies." I don't think that my poem is anywhere near as successful as "Red Lilies" is but again, as the writer it's a very useful experience to try to do that, to replicate the construction or the tone, I mean one can do with anything, I think.

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CMW: Is there any other poet you'd like to read?



RM: Let me just read the final poem of *The Orangery* by Gilbert Sorrentino because it's one of my current favorites. And *The Orangery* is a book published in '78 from the University of Texas Press, and every poem in the book has the word "orange" in it. And this is the last section of the last poem, so I'm giving away the ending!



[Reads: "The Crown," Section 7]

CMW: So why that poem? Why is that with you right now?

RM: Why do I love this poem? I just think that the balance of striking images with that kind of dull, "nothing is the thing that rhymes with orange," and the repetition of, "Laredo, Laredo, chime and chime, corona, corona." It has a sort of hypnotic structure that I think I find at once soothing and startling. You know, I don't think I can express directly what it is that I find so appealing about it. That I find it mysterious and moving is what keeps me interested in it.

I think if I knew exactly all of the elements and how they all went together it would somehow become a less compelling poem, but it still remains a little bit out of reach to me at this point.

CMW: How many times do you think you've read it?

RM: That poem? I don't know, fifty?

CMW: Is that perhaps the mark of success then?

RM: Yes, I think that is the mark of success. Of wanting to return to these poems, and hearing something in them, or feeling something in them that can

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tug you back after a week, a month, a year, whatever it may be. There are poems that are fascinating, and then sort of stop being fascinating. I think for me that happens as their structure unfolds and their mechanics become more familiar, or clearer, or more transparent. And then there are those poems that can be transparent as hell and yet can somehow remain mysterious. And again, surprising and inevitable at the same time, which is just a very, very hard thing to be, I think.

CMW: You've named a couple of people who have influenced you or who's poems you really like, when you think about them, is it a body of work that you think about?

RM: With someone like Sorrentino I think of the entire sequence of *The Orangery*. The same with someone like Ted Berrigan, I think of *The Sonnets*. I'm a great admirer of poetic sequences because I think they can bring so many things into the poems and still have them work so well together that they're again, sort of a constant delight. With someone like Barbara Guest I suspect that I read more discrete poems that have meant the most to me.



CMW: I thought we could go on to "Blossom Studies?"

RM: Yeah, again this actually owes a certain amount to a visual artist, Kurt Schwitters.

CMW: What kind of work does Kurt Schwitters do?

RM: Primarily a collagist, although he was a writer as well. But again, the same sort of thing, just browsing and felt an effort to try to say something toward Kurt Schwitters.



[Reads "On Violet Street."]

The chapbook that that poem belongs to, that was sort of everything I had—that was sort of my first book, if one's first book is eighteen pages long, sort of the collected poems of Ryan Murphy in two thousand and whatever, two? So my thinking about it at that point was that it was everything that was worth a damn that I felt I had written. I

don't know, and perhaps half of them, more than half of them, made it into my first book. I think that the way I think about chapbooks has changed. I definitely thought of *On Violet Street* as as close to a first book as I was capable of writing at the point that it was published. My thinking about the role of the chapbook within publishing has gotten a little bit more sophisticated since then, just in terms of the way the poems will work together. I think it's a wonderful format for poems in sequence, etcetera, etcetera.

CMW: You do a bit of publishing of your own chapbooks. When you're looking at other people's work and selecting that work for publication, how do you make your decisions editorially?

RM: I don't do a lot of editing at that point. We've published single poems that have been chapbook-length, sequences, individual poems in and of themselves. I'm typically trying to publish work by poets that I admire and, for the most part, trust, and am trying to stay out of their way as much as I can. I don't think that I contribute a great deal to an editorial process.

CMW: What about the physicality of the chapbooks that you make? Have you made decisions about their look and feel based on certain ideas?

RM: I try to respond to the work in an individual way. Again, doing my best to not get in the way of the poems. Sometimes jokes between the author and myself, or connections in that way will contribute. I mean, I think pretty hard about the materials that will go into the book and the paper stock and the binding method and what the cover looks like. All of these are in part dictated by my own limitations, technologically, economically, what have you. But at the same time that can be a kind of liberating experience as well, to work within those limitations.

CMW: Are there other chapbook publishers that you admire a lot?

RM: Probably way too many to name, and if I just name ones that are doing work right now... Hot Whiskey Press, Effing Press, Fewer & Further, CARVE Editions, Portable Press at Yo-Yo Labs,

obviously the men and women at Ugly Duckling Presse, Insurance Editions, Kitchen Press... a few are certainly slipping my mind, which I'll feel bad about later... Cuneiform, Atticus Finch — Atticus Finch does terrific work.

CMW: Do you want to read one more poem?



RM: [Reads: "Four Portraits of Kira Sleeping"]

Ryan Murphy is the author of "Down with the Ship" from Otis Books Seismicity Editions as well as the chapbooks "The Gales," "Ocean Park," and "On Violet Street."

He has received awards from "Chelsea Magazine" and The Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art as well as a grant from The Fund for Poetry.

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To download the podcast of this program and to read additional information about Mr. Murphy, go to www.openlooppres.org