

Radiance Versus Ordinary Light: Selected Poems by Carl Phillips

The Kenyon Review Literary Festival, 2013

For general discussion:

What formal elements or patterns are you aware of as you read the poems? Do the stanzas seem regular? Are the lines of regular lengths? Do you sense any clear rhythm or sound patterns? Do certain images recur?

In many of Phillips' poems, "there are smaller signs inside / the large ones" ("Here, on Earth"). How do these poems use myth or prophetic imagination to reflect on the mind's process of finding hidden meaning in everyday experiences?

Consider where Phillips chooses to break his lines. Do the breaks occur at the ends of sentences or clauses, or do they seem to happen mid-thought? Do some line breaks in these poems give certain words more than one meaning?

Find places where the punctuation choices surprise you. Does he use a question mark where you'd expect a period? A comma where you'd expect a period? Imagine these lines or sentences with different punctuation marks. Does this change the meaning? What effect does his use of dashes have on the reader? Why do you think Phillips made the choices he did?

Each poem is followed by the date on which it was published. What changes do you notice in these poems over time?

For Phillips, sexuality is not only an essential and ordinary part of life, but also a way by which we make sense of our experiences of pleasure, pain, uncertainty, and the search for meaningfulness in the world around us. What does the sexuality in these poems bring to the experience of reading them? How would the poems be different if they were devoid of sexuality? What do the mentions of sex illuminate for the reader about the poems' larger meanings?

“Cotillion”

In “Cotillion,” the speaker describes a party he is attending. Who else is at the party, and what do we learn about the other guests?

Think about the title of the poem: what is a cotillion, and what does the word have to do with this particular scene? How are the guests at the party similar to those at a cotillion, and how are they different?

At the close of the poem, the speaker tells us, “I’m dancing / maybe, but not on air: this time, through water.” What is the difference between the feeling of dancing on air, and the feeling of dancing through water? What is it about this party scene that makes “dancing through water” the best way of describing the mood?

How does the tone change in the poem once the “I” is introduced? As the poem moves from the first simile (“like when a small bird / rises, sometimes, like the difficult thing is not to”) to the image of the party as a torn bloom, what do we learn about the speaker’s understanding of desire? What should we take from that final image of dancing through water? What is implied by that punning phrase “rest for the wary?”

“The Pinnacle”

What does the repetition in the first five stanzas suggest about the speaker’s emotions or feelings about the relationship between the two people in the poem? Does the syntax in this poem strike you as strange? Why might Phillips invert the expected sentence structure like this? How might it reflect the state of the relationship? Does our understanding of the relationship change during the poem?

What is implied by simple images such as following the path, crossing the meadow, or a different view of the sea of ferns? What else seems to be described by this poem’s narrative of hiking a path? What does the speaker mean when he tells us that the ferns are an “over- /whelmingly green argument / whose point was that / not everything requires / light?”

What effect does the gift of feathers have on the speaker? Why is he hesitant to accept them? What change do they suggest in his feelings?

How should we understand the final lines? Why might the poem end *before* they reach the pinnacle? What does it suggest that the speaker is already thinking about the path that will lead them down?

What is the effect of line breaks have in sentences such as “Though I explained, / I was not understood / entirely” or “To agree was / easy, and not binding. I / liked that. Almost like / pleasure, for a small / distance”? Do they shape the way we experience the speaker’s emotions?

The poem draws attention to “sounds nothing visible / could account for.” How might this poem concern the disparity between memory and the present time? What does the geography of the setting have to do with the speaker’s relationship to the past? What role does the idea of the unseen play in illuminating the central relationship?

“As a Blow, from the West”

Dream poems are part of a long tradition, and they often take on a prophetic tone as the dreamer senses a deeper truth about the world than s/he can see while awake. What is the significance of this poem’s title, and how does it reflect the speaker’s dream? Do you see any prophetic elements in this poem? What does the image of living on the side of a volcano imply? What understanding does the poem’s speaker assign the gods?

How does the poem *change* the meaning of its initial images: the avalanche of flowers, the names of the moon, the sea, even the volcano itself? How does the idea of naming elements of the natural world play into this poem? Does the idea of naming flowers or naming the moon or naming the place at the end bring up any associations in your own mind?

The poem also refers to speed and pacing in several different ways. How does the formal structure of the poem interact with this thematic concern?

Why does the poem end with a series of questions? What kind of “refrain” do these questions ask us to imagine?

The “you” in this poem is “not so much / a man of few words.” What does the poem tell us about who he *is*? How does the poem’s tone change when it becomes a gift to this “you?” What is suggested when the man addressed seems to refuse this gift at the end? Should we see this as a love poem?

“Here, on Earth”

What kind of change does this poem describe? It begins with an image from a Homeric epic—a soldier removing his helmet—and so hints at much larger shifts in the tide of battle and the favor of the gods. But as in an epic, the stirring of the horsehair plume on that soldier’s helmet is *both* a sign of fate and just the breeze: “there are smaller signs inside / the large ones.” What *signs* does the poem give us here, on earth? What might signs like the opening of the peonies, a winter river touched by thaw, and the crash and spray of waves tell us about this poem’s speaker? To whom would these be revelations?

What descent is remembered in the poem’s second section?

How is the body a “hieroglyph of silence?” What does it suggest that the wind poses this question? Why does the world seem like “Radiance unrelenting— / no peace, no shadow, / no shelter now—” to this speaker?

Who is the “you” in the final line? Who would play this role—“You carried me. You took me. You hid your face”—in an epic poem? Who might play this role in *our* lives: here, on earth?

“Erasure”

What does “brindled” mean? What is suggested by beginning the poem with this word? Does it evoke other words for you?

What kind of tenderness “makes / more tender / all it touches?” Does the meaning of “tender” change here? Do the line breaks in this sentence call attention to that change?

What kind of need does the poem express in the phrase “There’s a need that ruins?”

Why might a poem so focused on the sense of smell contain so much imagery of violence? How is that imagery of violence related to the way that the horse smells “like the sweet wet earth, itself?” What does this poem have to say, in general, about physical violence? What words does Phillips use to clue us in to the potentially violent relationship between human and animal?

“Radiance Versus Ordinary Light”

How would you describe the movement of this poem? Could you liken it to swimming in rough water?

Does the poem simply describe the act of swimming, or is swimming a metaphor for some other experience? How does the experience of violation felt by the man in the first stanza relate to the idea of swimming? What does Phillips mean by “the swimming that the mind does in the wake / of transgression”?

What does the title add to the poem? What does the final line tell us about the poem’s real subject?

What is a semaphore? What might be the significance of the image of a semaphore in this poem?

“Almost Tenderly”

What is being described in this poem? Do we need to identify the “it” described in the opening lines to make sense of the poem?

What does it mean to describe the man as a brokenness? To describe love as “a corruption we chose together?” What is the role of restlessness in this poem?

How does the sea serve as a metaphor for wounds in this poem? What is the message in its singing?

This poem contains 14 lines, the traditional number of lines in a sonnet. What do you know about sonnets and the historical tradition of that poetic form? In addition to containing 14 lines, sonnets are characterized by a “turn”—that is, a shift in the poem from set-up to resolution. What is the point in this poem at which it turns from set-up to resolution? How do you know?

“Next Stop, Arcadia”

What is Arcadia in Greek mythology? How might the poem’s title reflect on the scene described in this poem? What is the relationship between pain and pleasure in the poem? Between pain and beauty?

What kinds of submission does the poem imagine? Is there a relationship between the man who looks like a rugged Jesus, the man begging to be flogged, and the field in which they stand, “like the one they say divides prayer from / absolute defeat?”

The field is described as “a constant stirring inside an otherwise great / stillness that never stops surrounding it, / the way memory doesn’t, though memory / is not just a stillness, / but a field that stirs.” In what way is memory like a stillness, or a field that stirs? Does memory require submission?

Like a number of Phillips’ poems in this chapbook, this poem ends with a series of questions. How does the poem resolve these questions? Is it possible to decide which is better? Is that the poem’s resistance, and our submission?

“The Life You Save”

This poem takes the form of a catechism: a series of questions and answers. How does that form shape the poem’s meaning? What is the relationship between questions and answers?

The answer to the first question is “History / ending; myth, as it starts / to stir.” What is the role of myth in a poem that seems so local (“After the pinefields, there’s the marsh—“you can / see it / from here”)? How does the movement of the reeds in the final lines lead us to the poem’s conclusion? Does that final sentence—“ “Soon it will be as if nothing had ever happened” — “suggest that the poem’s subject is larger than its local imagery?

What is the significance of the information that the reeds are both beautiful and invasive? Are these descriptions contradictory, or can they be reconciled?

Have you ever previously encountered the phrase “the life you save”? In what context? What does it make you think of?

“Capella”

This poem begins with the simplest possible expression of loss: “I miss the sea. // I miss the storms / that stopped there.” What seems to be the source of that loss in the poem?

How does the poem imagine luck? A windfall can refer to an unexpected stroke of good luck, like winning the lottery, or to the fruit that fall from trees in a storm. What does the speaker mean by “the windfalls of my mistakes?”

Is the “he” in the second section of the poem distinct from the “I” in the first section? Do their actions and emotions seem to be related? How? Does the poem’s final image—“My head; / beside yours” —“help us to make sense of the relationship between these two figures?

What changes in the third section of the poem? What is implied about the relationship between the figures in the poem by this description of “a light that estrangement / ... briefly leaves behind it?” What does it suggest that “the field / lays down its winded swords” in the final lines? How does that mythic image—like something from an epic poem—help to describe the resolution suggested in the final line?

The second section ends with a question—“Who’s to say brutality’s what he’ll be wearing / when he goes?” How is the effect created by that rhetorical question different from simply stating that image (“Brutality’s what he’ll be wearing / when he goes.”)? What does Phillips’ use of these rhetorical questions add to his poems?

The images in Phillips’ poems are often elusive, suggesting meanings or connections that lie just beyond our grasp. Does something about that approach to poetry help us to understand love?