Learning Human Analysis
Les A. Murray

Summary The central theme of Les Murray’s poetry is his commitment to the region in New South Wales where he was born and raised. Though he moved to Sydney as a young adult to study at a university and work as a translator, as soon as the success of his poetic career permitted, he returned, at the age of thirty-seven, to the town of Bunyah in New South Wales, where he settled in, supporting himself as a writer and editor. The long sequence near the beginning of Learning Human, “The Buladelah-Taree Holiday Song Cycle,” comes out of Murray’s love of his homeland’s countryside. Australians driving north along the highway on their way to their summer vacation are likened to the Aborigines of pre-settlement days. Their movement from place to place is envisioned as a spiritual pilgrimage not unlike that of the nomadic Aborigines. Whereas other poets would denounce the presence of the automobile in the Australian landscape as an intrusion of modern technology into primeval space, Murray braids humanity and landscape, dreaming and waking consciousness, and the joy of fellowship and the ecstasy of nature in all its splendor. This powerful cycle embraces the totality of sensations in the Australian environment and presents it as a world of wonder. Throughout his poems, Murray champions the experience of ordinary people. This is not a result of the familiar patronizing condescension to the locals on the part of the more educated denizens of a rural region, but is the outcome of a genuine, spontaneous feeling for his fellows. In “Sprawl” and “The Dream of Wearing Shorts Forever,” he embraces the relaxed, unpretentious, and amiable way of life of the average Australian, celebrating the Australian ideal of “mateship” that aspires to an equal, supportive companionship with other people. Murray is alert for possibilities in experience easily passed over by superficial or snobbish renderings of the world. In “The Hypogeum,” he attacks the banality of a modern shopping centre but also shows how it becomes a forum for vibrant human interchange. In “Driving Through Small Towns,” he once again eschews the traditional intellectual posture of condescension and pity toward small rural communities. Unlike the metropolitan sophisticate who may look down on small-town residents and pity their constricted lives, Murray depicts the small-town people as far from
being fixed, but instead trending, psychologically, into the unknown quantity of the future; they are changing and growing in a spiritual way beyond any observer’s knowledge. In his country poems, Murray is a poet of the animal as well as of the human world; additionally, he dwells on inanimate as well as animate objects. He writes about comets, molluscs, shale, bats, eucalyptus trees, echidnas, and, especially, cattle with the same brio he brings to human subjects. In “Bats’ Ultrasound,” for instance, he undertakes the bravura feat of trying to write in what bat language might sound like if it were translated into English. At the end of “Bats’ Ultrasound,” God is explicitly invoked by means of a Pentecostal mutual translation in which all languages, even animal ones, are interconnected. Murray does not write many autobiographical poems, but two poems in this volume, written in the 1990’s, address very personal aspects of his life. In “Demo,” he speaks of the people who persecuted him in high school, particularly the girls who taunted him about his weight and made him believe he would never be attractive to women. Despite his Christian convictions, which would encourage forgiveness, Murray remains intransigent; even decades later, he will not forgive his schoolmates. They have never asked to be forgiven, and Murray suggests that, in a large sense, the crimes of the heart they committed against him in his childhood still persist in the form of powerful systemic transgressions that perpetuate the evils he experienced as a child, especially the hardening of social class into a virtual caste system. In this sense, his schoolmates are experiencing a form of perdition. Another trauma of Murray’s early years, the sudden death of his mother, is echoed in several of his poems; there is in many of his poems a general sense of loss and deprivation that serves as a counterpoint to the poet’s temperamental optimism. In yet another autobiographical poem, “It Allows a Portrait in Line-Scan at Age Fifteen,” Murray writes of his autistic son, Alexander, in a way that brings insight into the experience of autism. That Murray, a poet of great intellect, is so proficient at writing about the very different cognitive state of his son demonstrates that, as great as his intellectual gifts are, they are always in the service of a higher mission involving the achievement of empathic resonance or emotional truth.

In general, Murray’s poems demonstrate compassion for those whose lives are, in conventional terms, unfulfilled. In “Australian Love Poem,” he writes of an eccentric bachelor who cares for an old widow, even though none of her relatives or members of the larger society are grateful for his sacrifice. This attention to the marginal is an aspect of
Murray’s refreshing lack of egoism, shown in “The Wedding at Barrico,” an epithalamium (wedding poem) for his daughter Christina, in which he speaks of his daughter and her husband as now at the centre of things, his own generation retiring to the rear.

Sources for Further Study


Gaffney, Carmel, ed. Counterbalancing Light: Essays on Les Murray. Armidale, N.S.W.: Kardoorair Press, 1997. This anthology, with contributors from Europe and the United States as well as Murray’s home country, includes two essays on Murray’s relationship to spirituality by Robert Crawford and Nicholas Birns, covering themes of nature and history, respectively.


Christian Themes In “Poetry and Religion,”
Murray sums up his position on the relationship of his poetry and his Christianity. He notes that although poetry is fluid and mobile, unlike the gravitas of religion, both are complementary modes of apprehension: just as birds shut their wings and then open them to fly, so does experience alternate between responding to the world in a mobile poetic manner and a more firm and fixed religious fashion. Using birds as a metaphor here points to the way in which, in so many of his poems, Murray renders nature as the arena in which poetry and religion combine to witness the full amplitude of meaning. Sometimes, Murray goes further and hints that the natural world has a kinship with God that human sovereignty often arrogantly dismisses. Unlike some other poets who have become Catholic converts, including the Australian James McAuley (1917-1976), Murray does not want to be seen as overly fervent. In a profile of Murray by Rosemary Neill in the April 8, 2006, issue of the Weekend Australian newspaper, Murray describes himself as a “middle pew” rather than “militant” Catholic. He specifically articulates this mission in “Sprawl,” in which he praises the generally Christian, suggesting that Murray is prepared, as a poet, to take transcendence wherever he can find it, not restricting himself to approved dogmatic channels. Throughout his poetry, he insists on an Australian ordinariness, as opposed to those believers who would set themselves apart from everyday life and everyday people. His poems also suggest the inadequacy of a standoffish intellectual attitude with regard to religion; all his poems affirm faith even in the face of its unfashionable status among the elite. This sentiment can be summoned up in his poem “The Last Hellos,” an elegy for his father, Cecil Murray. Here Murray steps beyond a secular encounter with death and mourning, and openly wishes the experience of God for his father. Murray is universal rather than narrow in terms of his Christian perspective. An infinitely refracted sense of God’s indwelling in the world is as powerful for him as a more conventionally Christian epiphany. His profound sense of historical, liturgical Christianity embraces the world’s particularity as a testimony to the glory of God.

Analysis

Every generation seems to have an Australian poet who, alone of all Australian poets, attracts recognition across the world and possesses an easy entrée into the literary and publishing worlds of New York and London. In the generation of the early to mid-twentith
century, it was A. D. Hope (1907–2000); in the mid- to late twentieth century, Les A. Murray merits the distinction; for the generation of the late twentieth century to the early twenty-first century, it is shaping up, as of 2000, to be John Kinsella (1963-). Murray is arguably the most distinguished of these three, yet his work presents a paradox. Murray’s origins are rural and working-class. Brought up in Bunyah in northern New South Wales, he went off to university in the metropolis of Sydney, only to return to his home territory in midlife to settle there for good. His poems celebrate the vigour and character of the ordinary people with whom he shares his country life. Murray, though, is above all a dazzlingly erudite and resourceful poet, and the knowledge required to fully understand his poetry is possessed by few university professors, let alone ordinary country folk. This paradox, however, enhances Murray’s poetry rather than interferes with it. The title of this collection, Learning Human, can be seen as enacting this dichotomy between learning and humanity, knowledge and being. In the course of the book, the reader sees the split, if not necessarily resolved, at least brought into stunning verbal harmony. Learning Human contains selections from most of Murray’s previous poetry books, excepting only his two verse novels, The Boys Who Stole the Funeral (1980) and Fredy Neptune (1998). The first four poems in Learning Human are among Murray’s most famous. “The Burning Truck” starts out as a vivid pictorial description of a truck in flames, reeling on a path of destruction through a small village. By the end of the poem, though, the truck has been metaphorically transfigured into a terrifying vehicle (in all senses of the word) of religious awe, with the townspeople who watch it being its “disciples.” “Driving Through Sawmill Towns” is animated by a contrast between speed and stasis, perspective and containment. The narrator is driving through a series of working-class, rural towns, his only contact with the “locals” being to ask for directions. It would be easy for the narrator to patronize the townspeople as lacking his opportunities in life (not least of which is his ability to leave), but instead, at the end, the old men of the town are seen “thinking of the future”; there is a possibility for them beyond the assumed superiority of the traveller. “An Absolutely Ordinary Rainbow,” in many respects Murray’s signature poem, begins amid the bustle of workaday, prosperous Sydney, filled with frenetic stock trading and classy restaurants. In the middle of this hubbub there is a solitary man, weeping. No one knows why he is weeping, but the pure emotion he displays mesmerizes sophisticated Sydney out of its dynamic stupor. Murray could easily paint the weeping man as an angel who has come to redeem the contemporary city or as a saint who has come to
rebuke it, but the poet insists that the weeping man is neither. His impact on the Sydney scene is like that of a rainbow after the storm, but it is not miraculous; the rainbow is, as the title of the poem indicates, “absolutely ordinary.” Murray’s readers will note that both “absolutely” and “ordinary” have other undertones of meaning: “absolute” as in “absolute truths” and “ordinary” as it relates to the idea of “order,” or rule. These undertones give the weeper a slightly more transcendental cast. On the poem’s narrative level he remains just a man weeping, asking no more from the world than the opportunity to weep. Like the burning truck, the weeping man attracts disciples, but he disdains them: “Evading believers, he hurries off down Pitt Street.” “Vindaloo in Merthyr Tydfil” heralds what may be Murray’s most typical mode in the shorter poem. Merthyr Tydfil is an industrial city in south Wales. Vindaloo is a particularly spicy Indian curry. Stereotypically, the last place one would expect to eat vindaloo is in Merthyr Tydfil, and the last person one would expect to write about this conjunction would be an Australian poet. With humour and gusto, though, Murray takes on the challenge. The poet orders the hottest curry possible, partially as an act of arrogance, partially out of a kind of creative bravado. Though the spiciness of the food verges on causing physical pain, the poet persists, his folly in the end becoming an act of mad purity that gives this conjunction of Australian poet and Indian cuisine a distinctly Welsh cast after all. “The Buladelah-Taree Holiday Song Cycle” is a poem of a very different tenor. Written in the style of oral Aboriginal poetry, it shows how contemporary Australians on vacation unconsciously re-enact ancient ritual patterns of the people they had displaced. This sequence, with its long, unrhymed lines and dependence on verbal rhythm and assonance rather than strict meter, is characteristic of Murray’s practice of prosody. Even though his poetry is often narrative and turns to time-honoured poetic themes, Murray does not write all that often in traditional measures. Perhaps the Aboriginal aesthetic seen in the Buladelah-Taree sequence provided an alternative model. Although totally of European ancestry himself, Murray sympathizes with the Aboriginal attachment to the land. His regret over how Aborigines were treated does not preclude him from claiming that nonindigenous Australians can also participate in some of the sacredness ascribed by Aboriginal religion to the Australian landscape. Another kind of attachment to the earth is figured in “Quintets for Robert Morley.” Murray, a man of considerable girth himself in his mature years, writes in praise of “the fat.” Except from a merely physical point of view, the fat, from Stone Age times on, have been the thinkers and the intellectuals. Murray contends that the fat may
have greater wisdom in that they have adopted a free and easy stance toward life; when he says “never trust a lean meritocracy,” he implies that thin people, their appetites unsatisfied by food, will be more hungry for power. “The Dream of Wearing Shorts Forever” is another vehicle for Murray’s informal philosophizing. Wearing shorts is an image of a casualness that still possesses its own dignity, a token of “sprawl” (a word to which, in a poem of that title, Murray lends positive connotations), an incarnation of a world without undue hierarchies, where, as Murray puts it in “Equanimity,” “nothing is diminished by perspective.” “The Mitchells,” where two rural men bantering are shown at the end to be just as possible to envision in an urban context, and “The Powerline Incarnation,” where an electrical wire is shown as if it possessed natural or even human feelings, display Murray’s ability to use many different registers of imagery and language to produce comprehensible though startling poetic patterns. Toward the middle of the book, the poems begin to draw on not only Murray’s deep attachment to the Australian landscape but also his various connections to Europe. Murray served for several years as a translator of European languages in Sydney (“Employment for the Castes in Abeyance”); he married Valerie Morelli, the daughter of Hungarian immigrants (“József” and “Immigrant Voyage”); and he converted to Roman Catholicism, the religion of his wife’s family. Religion becomes an increasing concern for Murray as his career progresses. Murray’s religious poetry, though, does not conform to what everyone’s idea of religious poetry should be. Murray is not particularly cloistered or prayerful. He witnesses the glory of God in myriad places, from the strange frequencies of bats’ ultrasound to the accretion of refuse in a subterranean vault beneath a supermarket complex. In “Poetry and Religion,” Murray sets forth as close as he will come to a credo concerning the relationship between religion and poetry. Religion is larger and more total than poetry, but each within its own terms is complete and self-sufficient. Some thinkers opine that religion and poetry cannot coexist—that any dedication to faith must eschew purely worldly artistry or that a full delight in poetry entails an aesthetic of pleasure that confines itself to the secular world. Murray sees it as possible to weave between religion and poetry, as “[b]oth are given, and intermittent.” The poem closes with an unforgettable image of birds closing and opening their wings, much as human beings can alternate between religious truth and poetic beauty. In “Easter 1984,” Murray directly addresses the experience of Jesus Christ as related in the Gospels. In crucifying Jesus, humankind tried to reject its own capacity for beauty and ennoblement. Even afterward, however, the good
qualities in humanity increased. The hope manifested by Jesus could not be stilled by a merely human evil. Murray’s interest in religion and his awareness of European history come together in “The 1812 Overture at Topkapi Saray.” The mother of the Turkish sultan in the early 1800’s was, in fact, a Christian woman from the French Caribbean. Aimée Dubucq de Rivery had been captured by pirates and forced into service in the harem of the current sultan’s father. In the poem, though she suffers her own degradation and witnesses the torment of others in an unjust society, she wins her own place in her new world and comes to terms with herself. Now that her son is the sultan, he gets to decide whether or not to sign a peace treaty with Russia. If he signs, he might risk danger to his kingdom. Yet he decides to sign mainly because Russia’s enemy is the French emperor Napoleon I, who had once disobliged a friend of his mother. On this very personal basis, the destinies of nations are forged. This privileging of the emotions of the individual over reasons of state is at the heart of Murray’s religious poetics. The poem, though, does require a detailed knowledge of the history of this era, or at least a readerly ability to infer this knowledge. Though Murray’s stance is always democratic, the poem’s many intricacies and triumphs are best enjoyed by a person who has some of Murray’s vast reservoir of knowledge and insight. The last part of the book contains poetry written in the 1990’s. Here, Murray becomes more personal. He writes moving poems about the death of his father (“The Last Hellos”) and about the teenage years of his autistic son (“It Allows a Portrait in Line-Scan at Fifteen”). Both poems play upon the emotional situations they describe without exploiting them. Murray also becomes more forthright about his political views, which are often seen as right wing and which are certainly opposed to the class of sophisticated left-wing intellectuals that he sees as dominating Australian cultural life to the detriment of the rural working poor. In “The Beneficiaries,” he attacks these intellectuals for their complacent opposition to Christianity. His point here is perhaps made a bit too bluntly and in a mode that detracts from the far more subtle advocacy of the Christian tradition made at so many other points in his poetry. Murray sees himself, despite the personal laurels he has earned, as part of a subordinated rural class that has been exploited by self-satisfied urban intellectuals. If Murray, as many would argue, is a great poet, he is notable for letting in much more informal and political material than a reader might be used to. Appreciating this balance of lyrical intensity and sprawling equanimity may be part of the reader’s task in understanding what Murray fully means by the phrase “learning human.”
Sources for Further Study


The New Republic 222 (June 6, 2000): 52.