Themes and Meanings

“Easter 1984” is at once a traditional devotional poem and a departure from the mainstream of religious poetry as it was written for much of the twentieth century. Most of this poetry, as typified by the work of T. S. Eliot or W. H. Auden, starts from a position of alienation or despair and then reaches a position suggesting wholeness or redemption. Murray, on the other hand, starts from the position that Christ’s victory has already been won and that the task of humanity is to understand the nature and terms of this victory. The Easter theme is explicitly elaborated in the poem, but why is it titled “Easter 1984”? Murray may simply have written the poem in 1984, but there seem to be larger reverberations. To most “literary” readers, “1984” is most likely to suggest George Orwell’s novel of that name (published in 1949), which depicts a Soviet-style totalitarian system in which Christianity, or any religion, has no place. Murray, writing from the vantage point of the “real” 1984, does not have so pessimistic a vision. Christianity, though hardly triumphant, has persisted and endured. This is the thrust of the mysterious “Three fell, two went on” line, which expands the poem from a consideration of the Crucifixion as such to include the course of Christian history. By going into the historic fate of humanity’s belief in Christ, Murray includes both the defeats and victories of Christianity on the worldly level. Murray is a convert to Roman Catholicism, but this poem seems less an extension or application of religious dogma—which, characteristically, the zeal of the convert poet might produce—than an expression of religious feeling. Murray wishes to bear witness to the beauty and majesty of Christ’s resurrection, not to castigate those who are indifferent to it. His treatment of the theme of “humanity” is crucial. Human nature—human “meanness,” for lack of a better word—is what makes people refuse the challenge of the redemption Christ offers them. At the end Christ’s love becomes “the baseline of the human” instead of being completely above the here-and-now. Christianity is a higher humanism, so it can still have relevance to humankind, just as Murray’s references have made clear that Christianity is a force in human history as well as spirituality. Murray’s Australian nationality may contribute to his unusually forceful exposition of the Christian theme. Unlike the United States, so long
ideologically anchored by the Puritan vision of the “New Jerusalem,” Australia has had no founding or sustaining religious myth. Against this background, the function of religious poetry is somewhat different. Although Murray is very much his own person as a poet and should not be considered a part of a general Australian trend, his preference for testifying to Christ’s glory rather than proclaiming the authority of his dogma may well reflect his nationality.

The Poem

“Easter 1984” is a short lyric on the subject of the role of Jesus Christ and Christianity in human history. The first section of the poem evokes the crucifixion of Christ. Christ is referred to in the first couplet as “human dignity,” the humanity of the Saviour healing people “in the middle of the day”—not only referring to the time of day but also meaning in the open rather than in secret. The second couplet relates humankind’s hostile, uncomprehending response to Jesus’ generosity: “we moved in on him slowly,” too used to old systems of law, vengeance, and the strange mixture of anarchy and retribution that is at the root of purely human systems of justice: “If this was God, we would get even.” The Crucifixion, it is implied, was an act of fear, of humans fearing their own potential, fearing the opportunities that Christ’s healing would have brought them. Christ’s dual divine-human nature redeems humankind, yet humankind fears being redeemed, wanting instead to continue the normal state of affairs. “We’d send it to be abstract again,” the poem says, suggesting that by crucifying Jesus humankind had made divinity once again abstract, loosed it from being incarnated in humanity. Therefore, a hesitant and uncomprehending humankind falsely feels liberated. However, as the second section of the poem suggests, this was not the end of the story. The killing of Christ did not extinguish the qualities he brought to the world. “It would not stop being human”; in other words, the divinity did not totally fade from humankind. Christ’s gifts were now a permanent part of the human character. Eventually, this process of evolution will result in humankind’s total redemption and the fading of the need ever to torture or kill anyone again. The third stanza is the most difficult of the poem. “The day when life increased” is Easter—the first Easter, the day of Christ’s resurrection. On Easter, human life attained an unprecedented dignity, became “haloed in poignancy.” For once, the guards, who usually arrest people, were themselves
arrested, and human liberty and potential were at last released. The lines “Four have been this human/ night and day, steadily” refer to the four canonical Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, through which the message of Christ has been communicated. “Three fell, two went on” refers to the historical fortunes of the religion Christ founded. As the Christian church grew, five principal patriarchates, where the main leaders of the church lived, were established. These were located in Antioch, Alexandria, Jerusalem, Constantinople, and Rome. Three of these cities fell to Islam in the seventh century, but two, Constantinople and Rome, “went on,” yielding today’s Eastern Orthodox Church and Roman Catholic Church, respectively. The poet then refers to the Shroud of Turin, once thought to be an actual relic of the Crucifixion but found unauthentic through a scientific laser probe. The implication is that if the shroud had been real, the laser would have revealed what Christians know already: that Christ made human dignity no longer something to be futilely strived for but an essential part of human identity.

Forms and Devices
The poem is written in three sections of seven couplets each. Les Murray’s choice of a couplet form is unusual, because in English this mode of versification is usually associated with satire. Perhaps Murray was influenced by the ghazal, an Urdu poetic form whose couplets have a generally spiritual and lofty tone. Also, unlike the traditional English couplet, the lines of “Easter 1984” do not rhyme directly; at most they are linked by a sort of off-rhyme that does not intrude upon the reader. Off-rhymes such as “dignity” and “day” at the beginning of the first section, “again” and “risen” in the last couplet of the first section, or “human” and “on” in the fourth couplet of the third section are very close in sound even though they do not completely rhyme. Alternately, there are some true rhymes such as “him” and “limb” in the fifth couplet of the first section, as well as one instance (increased/poignancy/ecstasy/released) at the beginning of the third section where there is an abba rhyme scheme stretched across two couplets. Sometimes these almost-rhymes have definite undertones of meaning, as in “forgotten” and “human” in the last couplet of the poem, where the first word represents a deprivation that is healed by the second. It is not symbol-hunting in a Christian poem to hypothesize that the three sections of the poem allude to the Holy Trinity. (Equally, the couplet form could be expressing the dual divine-human nature of Christ.) The “O” placed at the beginning of each of the last two sections is also worthy of note. “O” traditionally begins an invocation or prayer in Christian worship. It is a call, whether it be a call to God, to Christ, or to the speaker’s fellow worshippers. It is not only the meaning but also the verbal shape
of the “O” that matters. “O” connotes roundness, a kind of perfection, much as God is perfect and is as inaccessible to human reason as a circle is to purely rectilinear geometry. In this way, the poem can suggest the fullness of God even though, as an imperfect verbal artifact, it cannot completely convey it. Murray thus joins much earlier Christian poets in English such as George Herbert in using the shape of a poem to aid him in fashioning his sacral verse. The diction of the poem is an interesting mixture of traditional religious language and colloquial speech. Murray is not afraid to make allusions that puzzle the reader, as with the different numbers (four, then the seemingly incompatible three and two) in the third section, or to be unabashedly sentimental. “Human,” drastically overexposed as an adjective, gains new force from the way Murray explores the willingness of many humans to disallow any sense of divinity in their ideas of humanity