The Biplane Houses

Les Murray, by far today’s most famous Australian poet worldwide, has produced a volume replete with many of his characteristic strengths. Indeed, it is remarkable that, in a relatively short volume, so many of Murray’s favoured modes are sampled. The volume takes its title from a poem in the middle of the book. This poem shows the vernacular architect as craftsman. Unstoried, using local forms, the local architect nonetheless produces a house that can provide solid shelter as well as incarnate the soaring aspirations of art and hope.

“The Kitchen Grammars” is similar in emphasizing the jerry-built yet adhesive durability of cultural forms that are conceived locally and lived out bodily. Parts of speech are compared to ingredients in a recipe; a sentence with noun and verb is like a meat loaf with meat centered by an egg. “The Nostril Songs” also braids together language and physicality, a point fortified at the level of enunciation by the often ingenious puns that stud the volume. Many reviewers have remarked on the relative difficulty of the book. Indeed, The Biplane Houses may mark the point where the genuine demands this poet makes on the reader are foregrounded, instead of being buried by a focus on Murray’s equally genuine empathy for the common man. The reality that even committed students of contemporary poetry find Murray’s poetry at times difficult yields a more complex and ramified sense of his poetry. The volume is about equally divided between poems that can be understood at first glance and those which require far more scrutiny and study. Murray is surely saying something about the multidimensionality of his own response to experience here. “The Cool Green” whimsically if also savagely looks at the role money plays in American society. It has no intrinsic value, does not call forth any of the great human aspirations, but especially, Murray implies, in the current socioeconomic order has attained an unseemly position in the collective psyche. Murray writes with polemicism here, but also with panache; he is never
merely a crusader, but a scintillating one. “The Domain of the Octopus” both describes the octopus as a physical creature and as a figurative trope of resistance to straightforward acts of construction and clearance, epitomized in the poem by the figure of the ax. In its squishiness and sheer, insensate physicality, the octopus represents the flexibility and resilience of nature, which may be altered by human settlement but never entirely displaced by it. “The Newcastle Rounds” is set in the industrial city of Newcastle, which in Murray’s youth was the de facto metropolitan reference point for his region of northern New South Wales, although it was hundreds of miles away. Murray gives a compelling tribute to Novocastrians, as the citizens of the city are called, and their unique history, from early settlement to its prime as a steel-manufacturing town to its present prominence as a postindustrial city that is the outlet for much of the Hunter Valley wine industry and has a premier surfing site on its famed beach, Nobby’s. For any other poet, this would be a slight occasional poem; Murray’s sense of felt, durable loyalty to his place adds to his unfettered delight in the panoply of human diversity. Murray also shows here that, although he is most often associated with rural settings, he can also write convincingly about cities. “The Newcastle Rounds” in fact is reminiscent of the Australian poet Judith Wright, who, though similarly specializing in nature poetry, wrote several compelling late poems about Australia’s capital, Canberra. Yet Murray celebrates the common man on a more individual level with “Barker Unchained,” about a rural postman who faithfully delivers the mail in the most disadvantageous of circumstances. After a career of performing his duty, he retires, in a way free from a regimen as confining to him as making the mailbags has been for the prisoners who have done so; but the postman can take credit for getting mail to scores upon scores of people. The poem’s dedication to a professor of English implies that the poem concerns any kind of work, even more overtly mental work. A very different model of work is solicited in “Lifestyle,” in which Murray addresses people who work in large cities in coffeehouse chains such as Starbucks. Murray, who has continually satirized the pretensions of the urban intelligentsia to be up-to-date, sees the sort of work performed in such an establishment as transient and based on no enduring source or value. In this poem, Murray evidences his dislike of gentrification, an animadversion corroborated in “Gentrifical Force.” Murray is set equally and squarely against both the 1970’sstyle leftist poseur and the millennial-era smirking Yuppie. The postmodern lifestyle revolution has clearly left Murray unmoved. “Death from Exposure” presents a more tragic situation, yet one whose lineaments are far
closer to Murray’s values. A woman who lives a solitary life characterized, it is implied, by unfulfilled love dies of exposure, undiscovered for days. Murray sees her endurance through the neglect the community showed her in life as virtually sanctifying her, giving her experience the integrity of the honourably unrealized. “For an Eightieth Birthday” presents a happier and more consolatory portrait of a long life well lived, which has stood for joy and positive values. “Church” indicates that religious believers, marginalized in modern society, are possessed of a similar integrity they refuse to swim with the tide, they believe in a God whom they have never seen out of, in a sense, the courage to risk possibly being wrong, as opposed to the certainty in their rightness possessed by the secular elite. This trendiness-obscurity dynamic also informs “Me and Je Reviens,” where Murray jokingly reflects that since one of his ancestors was named Worth and had visited Paris on leave from fighting in World War I, his rural, working-class family was as much a part of the trendy international scene as anyone. Murray at once makes a claim to a privilege to membership in such a scene indeed, insisting that such is his birthright yet mockingly disdains actual inclusion in such a scene. “Pressure” brings Murray’s championship of the oppressed into the contemporary world, dealing with issues of immigration and asylum in contemporary Australia in the wake of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, and the incident involving the attempted landing of the refugee ship Tampa in Australian waters in that same year. A man whose suitcase is opened by security guards turns out to have nothing in the suitcase, suggesting that he not only does not pose a threat but also is too poor even to have any possessions. The Biplane Houses has many poems without a point of view, which delight in a kind of uninvested appreciation of nature. “Pastoral Sketches” observes a landscape from spring to winter and the yearning for a past and future spring, registering the eternal and cyclical yet with the thrill of a particular landscape being observed in a particular year by a particular poet. “Japanese Swordblades in the British Museum” registers the same delight in well-wrought craft; this poem is reminiscent of previous Murray poems such as “Roman Cage-cups.” “The Move out on the Road” depicts a far more active scene, as a near-accident on a country road reveals assumptions of class privilege and deference. “The Blueprint” and its shorter, more epigrammatic sequel, “Blueprint II,” return to the theme of religion and skepticism, proclaiming that the human need for an afterlife will triumph over science’s silence on the subject. The second poem, which transmutes bureaucratic language into joyful speech, is one of Murray’s winning achievements in short
forms, also seen in “The Test,” where Murray suggests that a culture needs both spectacular achievements and a general sense of overall, diffused quality in order to flourish. Murray returns to another idiom he has mastered in the past—the medium-length history poem that reasserts an often obscure past incident in order to prompt the reader to new reflection. “Norfolk Island” describes the transplantation of the heirs of the late eighteenth century mutineers on the ship HMS Bounty, for many generations living on Pitcairn Island in the middle of the Pacific, to Norfolk Island, an Australian island hundreds of miles east of the continent, famous for its pine trees. Murray contrasts the oppression and poverty of the Pitcairn refugees with the island’s current status as a haven for the wealthy jet set, but he does so less out of resentment than a kind of quizzical, bemused wonder. Murray is critical of the contemporary world, but not dead-set against modernity; he is no Luddite. Several of the poems in the volume concern train journeys. These poems not only give a conspectus of the various railway lines and areas traversed but also convey the thrill of being on a journey, hurrying through different areas and gaining the exposure to scenic and cultural diversity such a trip entails; in his way, Murray’s transportation poems are worthy successors to the twentieth century Australian poet Kenneth Slessor’s great “South Country.” Murray does not restrict himself to Australian settings; indeed, several poems in The Biplane Houses are about Britain, where Murray has toured frequently in recent years as he has become one of the few poets read by the generally educated layperson in that country. “The Physical Diaspora of William Wallace” celebrates the contributions and the perseverance of Scottish immigrants worldwide. “The Succession” captures this inheritance in a more complex way, as Murray mentions Hanover, where the British dynasty defeated the Jacobite Rebellions of 1715 and 1745, and Culloden, where the last of these rebellions was defeated. However, Murray, who in the past had called for an Australian republic, seems to be sympathetic to the current British royal family, descendants of the Hanoverians, as they are embroiled in tabloid media publicity. Murray practices here a sort of ambient historical lived reasoning, where his implied historical judgment manifests a deft, empirical, responsive applicability to different circumstances, where, the poet indicates, his immediate judgment may be different from general opinions he otherwise holds. Yet there are poems, such as “A Stampede of the Sacrifice,” in which Murray is unambiguously on one side: He shows empathy for Australian soldiers in World War I who riot in Britain, acting out the trauma of their battlefield ordeal, and who are subsequently unnoticed and passively discriminated
against by elites who begrudge them even a pint of beer at the local pub. Murray’s poems are dense with historical signifiers and contentions and other very concrete references, but he can distill abstract linguistic patterns from these references, such as in “A Dialect History of Australia,” which tells the country’s history through a series of capitalized proper nouns reflecting various stages in Australia’s history, from early Aboriginal habitation to relatively recent incidents, such as Australia’s intervention in East Timor in 1999. That “Timor” means “fear” in Latin closes the poem on an up-to-date but ominous note. To return to the issues about the collection’s difficulty noted by reviewers and mentioned earlier, it might be said that The Biplane Houses is an accessible volume, but not an easy one. Murray opens the door to explore linguistic, historical, and perceptual questions whose difficulty, for the poet, is part of their richness and wonder. On many people’s lists of likely Nobel Prize candidates, Murray is a poet who deserves and increasingly possesses a world readership.

Bibliography

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