The Chimes of Neverwhere Analysis
Les A. Murray

Themes and Meanings

Although Murray writes in a simple and direct fashion, hoping thus to express his ideas to a wider audience, he never descends to sentimentality or suggests that there are simple solutions to life’s problems. In “The Chimes of Neverwhere,” the poet does not ignore either the fact of suffering or the existence of evil. Individuals suffer from the cruelty of others, as Abelard did; nations are oppressed, as Armenia was; and one tyrant like Hitler can bring about a terrible, destructive war. There is always the possibility of evil; not once, but twice, the poet places the Devil in the country of what could have happened, but did not. If one is to rejoice that such evils did not come to pass, one must lament the good that remains in Neverwhere, unrealized. Like Gray, who wondered if a poet who could have been as great as John Milton lay in that quiet churchyard, his epic of sin and salvation never written for the illumination of humankind, Murray believes that unfulfilled potentialities are to be lamented. They may even be considered a passive evil. No one’s life was made easier by poems that were not “quite” finished or by inventions that were blocked from reaching the market. Similarly, though one cannot know that the love affair suggested in the fourth stanza would have turned out well or that the birth of children would make someone’s life better, the fact that these possibilities are marooned means that good never had a chance. More specifically, divine grace did not have a chance to operate. That the grace of God is the real subject of “The Chimes of Neverwhere” becomes clear in the last three stanzas of the poem. Because of Christ’s sacrifice for the sins of the whole world, saints have been saved from martyrdom, and “billions” of human beings from agonizing death. The poet concludes by suggesting a new dimension to the question he posed at the beginning of the poem. At that point, one might assume that by “Church” Murray meant Roman Catholicism and that he was about to examine the peacemaking efforts of that body. At the end of “The
Chimes of Neverwhere,” however, it is evident that the word has a very different meaning. The Church, or Christianity, has brought peace not by its temporal efforts but by merely existing, thus enabling individuals to avail themselves of the grace bought by Christ’s sacrifice. Finally, Murray returns to his whimsical construct. If there are failures of the Church in Neverwhere, at least those attempts at good can perhaps shield the children, unborn because of human evil, who are doomed to spend eternity in the presence of the Devil.

The Poem While Les Murray is much admired for his realistic descriptions of life in his native Australia, his poetry also reflects the broader literary heritage common to all English-speaking peoples. It may not be far-fetched to wonder whether “The Chimes of Neverwhere” was inspired by the famous poem by the English writer Thomas Gray, “Elegy Written in a Country Church-yard” (1751), in which Gray wonders how history would have been different if those buried around him had lived somewhere other than in their obscure, isolated village. “The Chimes of Neverwhere,” too, deals with what did not happen, but in a very different manner. Murray’s poem is composed of eight four-line stanzas. In the first, italicized stanza, Murray asks, “How many times did the Church prevent war?” He then answers himself by pointing out that one cannot count events which did not occur. These nonhistorical wars, he then suggests, live in a place called “Neverwhere,” where they are “Treasures of the Devil.” In the second stanza, the poet explains that Neverwhere contains everything that did not happen or has been lost. In the five stanzas that follow, Murray lists examples. In Neverwhere are the lost buildings, those destroyed after the German leader Adolf Hitler started World War II. There are also events that never happened. There was never a second chance for the Manchu dynasty in China or a written language for the Picts. Cigars were not imported into England early enough for either James I or James II to smoke one of them. The history of Armenia has long been a sad story of oppression, starvation, and misery. As for Peter and Heloise Abelard, they had only one child, for her parents had Peter castrated, and the lovers spent the rest of their days apart. Murray continues with his odd assortment. There is an anonymous girl with whom the reader might have had an affair but did not, along with poems never written, inventions never finished. The Australians never gave anybody a title, nor did they have to fight in a Third World War. In the sixth and
seventh stanzas, Murray moves to the subject of religion. Neverwhere, he says, contains “half the works of sainthood,” for divine grace has saved many of those threatened with martyrdom. Because of Christ’s sacrifice, the poet adds, much evil that would otherwise have found its way to the earth will remain in Neverwhere. The final stanza is again italicized, and it starts with a variation of the poem’s opening question. This time, however, instead of answering the question, Murray indicates that a reply is unnecessary. It is enough to know that the Church, the earthly manifestation of God’s grace, is always attempting to act for the benefit of humanity on this earth. Sometimes it does not succeed, and therefore in Neverwhere there is peace that never came to be, but then, Murray muses, such goodness is needed where there are also so many unborn children, a place which, by and large, is the home of the Devil. Forms and Devices “The Chimes of Neverwhere” is unlike many of Murray’s poems in that it is more theoretical than realistic. However, while it lacks the detailed descriptions of the Australian landscape and the stories of rural life for which Murray is so much admired, it is consistent with Murray’s poetic theory and with his other works in that it is clearly directed not toward an elite audience but to the average reader. Murray’s poetical populism is evident even in his choice of words. Words of one and two syllables dominate the poem; in fact, several lines have no multisyllable words at all—for example, “is hard to place as near or far” and “in which I and boys my age were killed.” Even the longer words are familiar: “happiness,” “waterbed,” “pointlessly,” “enslavements,” “sacrifice.” In his effort to be reader-friendly, Murray devotes his second stanza to explaining just what he means by Neverwhere. Moreover, even his allusions are either common knowledge or easy to trace. The girl with the come-hither look, for example, needs no annotation, nor do poems, inventions, soldiers, saints, or Christian concepts such as divine grace. Admittedly, outsiders might not know that the “Third AIF” was meant to remind one of the Second Australian Imperial Force that fought in World War II or that, unlike the mother country, Australia has no hereditary hierarchy. However, other than those rather localized references, there are only six allusions, all in the third stanza, that might require a glance into an encyclopedia. Despite the fact that “The Chimes of Neverwhere” often alludes either to the possibility or to the reality of human suffering, the tone is generally good-natured, even lighthearted, in part because of the whimsical nature of the underlying idea, in part because of the poet’s skillful use of meter and rhyme. In lines such as “and the mornings you might have woke to her” and “in which I and boys my age were
killed,” anapests speed up the tempo; if in the second instance a rollicking rhythm seems inappropriate, one must remember that the poet is celebrating the prevention of war. The poem also jingles with a profusion of rhymes. Sometimes they are exact, placed at the end of a line, as “Neverwhere” / “there” / “despair” “far” / “cigar” / “are”; and “took” / “look” / “book.” They can also occur at the ends of alternate lines. More often, though, either conventional rhymes or near rhymes are sprinkled into the poem just often enough to keep the sound alive. Thus, as in a musical composition, one can hear not only “her” and “were” but also slight variations, such as “war” / “occur” / “Neverwhere” / “near” / “far” / “there.” These sounds are found just in the first two stanzas of the poem. As a result of this intricate patterning of meter and sound effects, “The Chimes of Neverwhere” has a lilting quality that is perfectly in tune with the poet’s thematic intentions.