The Daylight Moon and Other Poems

Americans seem to have an inexhaustible appetite for all things Australian, especially Australian films—and film stars. While Les Murray must certainly be accounted a major poet of the English language, whose poetry is universal enough to transcend his native roots, his work is nevertheless Australian in subject matter, attitude, and language. For the American reader, this easily accessible world, marked by its slightly exotic speech, is all the more interesting because of Murray’s outlook. Murray is no mere cataloguer of the flora and fauna of the Australian outback, or a superficial poet aiming for easy effects by quoting bits of “Aussie” dialect. As these poems reveal, he is a profoundly complex man who happens to have grown up on a dairy farm in Bunyah, Australia, but who is also a scientifically precise observer of mechanical and technological devices as well as a thinker with deep philosophical and theological concerns. He is a sophisticated manipulator of the language who would have written fine poetry had he been born in Santa Fe or Toronto or Canterbury. He delights in puns and clever plays on words, and he displays a high degree of literary sophistication, as shown by his range of rhythms and his impressive powers of invention (Murray makes metaphors out of the most unpromising subjects). The American edition The Daylight Moon and Other Poems is a compilation of the best poems to appear in Murray’s Australian editions titled The Peoples’ Otherworld (1983) and The Daylight Moon (1987), both published by Angus and Robertson Publishers of Sydney, Australia. At the core of The Daylight Moon and Other Poems is a group of what might be called genre poems, that is, poems about everyday life and common occupations. Murray can write persuasively about children, clouds, trees, short pants, boats, grass, and kitchens—an inventory of items familiar to virtually any human being. In “The Dream of Wearing Shorts Forever,” Murray composes an unpretentious and highly accessible poem that encapsulates Everyman’s
dream of freedom in a kind of woodland utopia: To go home and wear shorts forever in the enormous paddocks, in that warm climate, adding a sweater when winter soaks the grass, to camp out along the river tends for good, wearing shorts, with a pocketknife, a fishing line and matches, or there where the hills are all down, below the plain, to sit around in shorts at evening on the plank verandah. . . In “Midsummer Ice” he evokes the vivid impressions of childhood, symbolized for him by the characteristic gesture of carrying a block of ice for his mother: I loved to eat the ice, chip it out with the butcher knife’s grey steel. It stopped good things rotting and it had a strange comb at its heart, a splintered horizon rife with zero pearls. These “genre poems” include three memorable portraits, one of his mother, one of his Uncle Sandy, and even a ruthlessly accurate self-portrait. In “Weights” he recalls the burdens that his mother carried during her lifetime: she wielded handles in the kitchen and dairy, singing often, gave saucepan-boiled injections with her ward-sister skill, nursed neighbours, scorned gossips, ran committees. Clearly, he admires his mother’s charitable instincts, as well as her improvisational skills, just as he admires the sheer grit and perseverance of his Uncle Sandy in “Relics of Sandy”: He used to swim his horse through the flooded rivers with bags tied on the saddle when he was the mailman; he’d hang on to its tail: he couldn’t swim at all. The point here is not the individual heroism of these characters but the way they ennoble the entire species. All mothers and all uncles are somehow honoured in these poems, just as Murray celebrates every person who has ever agonized over those inevitable imperfections in a snapshot. In “Self-Portrait from a Photograph,” he unashamedly lists all the flaws dramatized by the pitiless lense of the camera: The chins are firm and deep respectively. In point of freckling the bare and shaven skin is just over halfway between childhood ginger and the nutmeg and plastic death-mottle of gr’eat age. The large ears suggest more of the soul than the other features. . . Murray’s considerable range begins to reveal itself in another kind of poem he habitually composes, a sort of technological analysis, reminding one of the precisely limned verse of American poets such as Marianne Moore, Elizabeth Bishop, and Philip Booth. In “Shower” he magically transforms the shower spray-head into a “metal poppy,” while seeing the streams of hot water as a smoky valet smoothing your impalpable overnight pyjamas off, pillar you can step through, force-field absolving love’s efforts, nicest yard of the jogging track, speeding aeroplane minutely steered with two controls, or trimmed with a knurled wheel. Murray is fascinated by all sorts of mechanical contrivances, as shown in his long poem “Machine
Portraits with Pendant Spaceman,” which contains a beautiful stanza on a bulldozer, a nominally ugly device which the poet suddenly sees “as a boot on its heel-high ripple soles; it has toe capped stumps aside all day, scuffed earth and trampled rocks.” In the same long poem, a mechanical crane with its magnetically powered grappling device drops a black danger on cars and the palm of its four-thumbed steel hand is a raptor of wrecked tubing; the ones up the highway hoist potridgy concrete, long spars and the local skyline; whether raising aloft on a string bizarre workaday angels, or letting down a rotatingman on a sphere, these machines are inclined to maintain peace like world war, in which we turn over everything to provide unceasing victories. Murray also writes powerfully about steam engines in “The Megaethon” and about the technology of butter manufacturing in “The Butter Factory.” Perhaps his best attempts at technologically centered poems, however, are “Infra Red” and “Max Fabre’s Yachts,” poems, respectively, about deep-space telescopes (“Infra Red” is dedicated to Professor Fred Hoyle and the IRAS telescope) and Australia’s entries in the America’s Cup yacht race. In “Infra Red,” the poet ponders the paradoxical existence of black holes in space and how light depends upon their darkness: That the visible stars are suburbs and slow towns hyped to light speed is the testimony of debris and the serious swarms at rest in migrant trajectories. Brilliance stands accused of all their losses. In “Max Fabre’s Yachts,” the poet marvels at Max Fabre of Sydney, Australia, who invented the trifoil or “winged” keel, which changed the nature of ocean-racing yachts: Nothing turns on a blade: allow glide on a lucky trefoil,a trinitarian trifoil,vision of a drowning man and first unveiled off Newport: Hermes, messenger of Heaven speeding with one winged foot dipped in the ocean. Even in these poems about palpable, mechanical inventions Murray reveals a curious doubleness of vision that allows him to describe and celebrate the physical object and use it simultaneously as a catalyst for spiritual or ethical speculation. Murray is a meditative and spiritually sensitive poet whose verse resonates with theologially loaded terms. In “An Immortal” and “Time Travel,” he begins to raise his concerns about the afterlife and the existence of a spiritual realm where immortals might reside. This speculation about other states of being informs the long, meditative poem titled “The Dialectic of Dreams”: “Real dreams are from home m back there. The light as it was,/ will be, might have been m all the receding dream-tenses./ The dreamer is even yourself m or you’re aware it is.” In “Easter 1984,” Murray meditates on the meaning of the Crucifixion in a poem that is easily his most formally Christian statement in the book. Mankind’s
reaction to Jesus is his focus: If this was God, we would get even. And in the end we nailed him, lashed, spittled, stretched him limb from limb We would settle with dignity for the anguish it had caused us. In “Poetry and Religion” he juxtaposes the two focal points of his life and finds them virtually congruent: “Religions are poems,” he observes. “God,” he adds, “is the poetry caught in any religion.” Many of Murray’s metaphysical and spiritual deliberations involve puns and wordplay, because language breaks down as it approaches pure spiritual expression. This principle is evident in “Bats’ Ultrasound,” where Murray “translates” the bats’ droning noises into possible human utterances and then concludes that these bats are like the Old Testament God Himself The passage is almost Joycean in its complexity: ah, eyrie-ire; aero hour eh?O’er our ur-area (our era ayeere your raw row) we air our array, err, yaw, row wry aura our orrery,our eerie u our ray, our arrow A rare ear our aery Yahweh This tendency to play with the very heart of language continues in “The Misery Cord,” a kind of prayer-poem based on the Latin word for pity, misericordia. The poet double- puns, making the Latin into “misery cord” and “misery chord,” ending thus: Just one man has snapped the misery cord and lived. He said once was enough. A poem is an afterlife on earth: Christ grant us the other half Theological speculations of this sort do not rule out levity and wit in the complex world of Murray’s poetry. Indeed, many of the poems depend upon an adroit handling of irony or other flashes of wit. “Letters to the Winner” concerns the ironic situation of a lottery winner who is inundated by letters from the poor, the suffering, and even the amorous, as shown in the humorous excerpts from the letters, misspellings included: “her’s my photoe Doll I’m wearing my birthday swimsuit! with the right man I would share this infallible system.” In like manner, Murray tries to re-create the strange-sounding world of those unfortunates who are going deaf in “Hearing Impairment.” The result is humour expressed in the form of Joycean language games: Hearing loss? Yes, loss is what we hear who are starting to go deaf Loss trails a lot of weird puns in its wake, viz. Dad’s a real prism of the Left you’d like me to repeat that? THE SAD SURREALISM OF THE DEAF As these examples tend to suggest, Murray is a self-conscious and deliberate craftsman with a wide range of tones and an even wider range of subjects. It would be misleading to pigeonhole him as merely an Australian poet, but he does, on occasion, celebrate some peculiar and unique aspect of that strange continent, as shown in this graphic, playful description of the emu in “The Emu and the Equalities of Interest”: Weathered blond as a grass tree, a huge Beatles haircut raises an alert periscope and staring
out over scrub. Her large olivine eggs clickoilily together; her lips of noble plastic clamped in their expression, her head-fluff a stripeworn mohawk style, she bubbles her pale-blue windpipe: the emu, Dromaius novaehollandiae. . . Murray’s eye for the particularities of the Australian scene is easily matched by his ear for the singularities of Australian speech, as revealed in his poem about Aboriginal workers, “The Kitchens”: Tommy Turpin the black fellow said to me More better you walk behind me today, boss. Might be devil-devil tell me hit you with the axelonga back of the head. I thought he was joking then I saw he wasn’t. My word I stayed behind that day, with the axe, trimming tongues on the rails while he cut mortises out of the posts. I listened. Perhaps it is now clear why Murray chose the somewhat enigmatic title The Daylight Moon and Other Poems for this collection of his work. His poetry, like the moon, tends to appear in an unfamiliar context, startling the reader. Murray is a great artist precisely because his vision is manifold: He can be evocative, descriptive, ironic, witty, meditative, and even patriotic. It is in his ability to shift his focus constantly, thereby reinventing himself that Murray does his readers a great service. The Daylight Moon and Other Poems is, finally, about all the possibilities inherent in even the simplest human moment, what Murray himself so eloquently described as “the rococo of being your own still centre.”

Bibliography


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