Les Murray, the most celebrated poet of Australia, belongs to a select company of postmodern writers who have extended the range and potency of the English language, even though their native country is not Great Britain. Such writers include the distinguished novelists Nadine Gordimer, V. S. Naipaul, and Kazuo Ishiguro, and the poets Seamus Heaney and Derek Walcott. Like these award-winning authors, Les Murray brings a keen and unbiased eye to the events of the postcolonial world, a curiously international milieu in which high technology allows the daily mixing of American English, Oxfordian English, journalese, rock-and-roll lyrics, business English, and the vernacular expressions of former colonial subjects. To read these authors is to appreciate that the global spread of English may well be the most important political event of the twentieth century, for English has the phenomenal ability to absorb and domesticate any foreign words. It is not surprising, then, to hear Les Murray proclaim in one of his poems ("Employment for the Castes in Abeyance") that “we are a language species.” Indeed, the whole of The Rabbiter’s Bounty amounts to a cornucopia of language, not merely the special artistic language of metaphors, puns, and rhymes but literal words of Sanskrit, Greek, Latin, French, Hungarian, Gaelic, and German, to say nothing of the various Australian slang terms and aboriginal words Murray freely employs. Having grown up on a dairy farm in the rural fastness of New South Wales, Murray is the proud possessor of many levels of discourse. He creates his own language at times, and he regularly uses a kind of meta-English that taps the entire spectrum of the language, from academic and technical nomenclature to “Aussie” tavern slang. In “Elegy for Angus Macdonald of Cnoclinn” (Murray’s Gaelic tutor), the poet insists, “I am not European. Nor is my English.” The American reader of Murray’s poetry should be prepared for purely British words such as “pannikin,” “kirk,” and “lorry,” and Australian terms such as “dingo,” “billabong,” and “bandicoot.” Murray also manages American slang quite fluently, as suggested by his use of words such as “freak” and “zap.” Les Murray is, quite simply, a
world-class poet. He is adept at manipulating all manner of languages and poetic forms. One finds ballads, haiku, epigrams, sonnets, verse-letters, and syllabic poems in The Rabbiter’s Bounty. All of these technical and formal accomplishments would be meaningless if Murray were not also an intensely readable and accessible poet, an artist who focuses on the memorable moments of life. His poems about childhood, natural disasters, unforgettable relatives, and personal failings will appeal to virtually any reader. Murray can be tender, lyrical, nostalgic, and powerfully humorous. He is a man forever in love with language and with the joy of existing from moment to moment. Thus, many of the poems in The Rabbiter’s Bounty are portrait poems, descriptions of people whose lives touched Murray deeply (such as the Hungarian immigrant Mórelli József Károly, or Max Fabre, the inventor of Australian racing yachts). Many of these poems are about members of his immediate family, especially his mother, father, and uncle. Quite a few of the poems are autobiographical, such as “Self-Portrait from a Photograph,” which contains an unsparingly accurate description of the balding, overweight poet:

The hair no longer meets across the head
and the back and sides are clipped ancestrally
Puritan-short. 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 great age.

This kind of self-deprecating humour is, in fact, typical of all his autobiographical poems, even the most philosophical ones. There is a healthy lightness in this poet, a refusal to take himself too seriously. This tendency is apparent in his elegy entitled “Quintets for Robert Morley,” which is actually a poem in praise of fat people, “the Stone Age aristocracy” among whose numbers he includes himself. The lazy, fat people had their place, jokes Murray, because they had time for all sorts of cultural pursuits: It’s likely we also invented some of
love, much of fertility (see the Willensdorf Venus) parts of theology (divine feasting, Unmoved Movers) likewise complexity, stateliness, the ox-cart and self-deprecation. Some of that extra weight probably derived from a memorable Indian curry dish that Murray writes about in another self-deprecating poem, “Vindaloo in Merthyr Tydfil”: “I spooned the chicken of Hell/ In a sauce of rich yellow brimstone.” Murray also excels at poems that celebrate the small moments of everyday life, the little pleasures that are often undervalued or overlooked entirely, for example, the act of taking a shower. For Murray, this humble ritual of personal hygiene is transmuted into a moment of aesthetic and sensual pleasure. Speaking of the high-pressure stream of water enveloping his body, Murray notes: Some people like to still this energy and lie in it, stirring circles with their pleasure in it—but my delight’s that toga worn on either or both shoulders, fluted drapery, silk whispering to the tiles with its spiralling frothy hem continuous round the gurgle-hole….

Describing water by turning it metaphorically into a kind of classical Greek garment is typical of Murray’s style: He is a master at metaphors and phrase-making. His simple, autobiographical poems are often not so simple ways of talking about deeper matters. In “The Dream of Wearing Shorts Forever,” the ostensible subject (wearing shorts) is a metaphor for heaven as only a poet could imagine it: 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 bends for good, wearing shorts, with a pocketknife, a fishing line and matches, … For Murray to be at ease in the vast Australian “outback” is perfection itself, as the outback is the ideal place to think and to write more poems: to be walking meditatively among green timber, through the grassy forest towards a calm sea and looking across to more of that great island and the further topics. Some of those “further topics” appear in Murray’s intimate “Extract from a Verse Letter to Dennis Haskell,” in which he explains his decision to leave “Yuppie City” and take up residence in the country, beside the river Swan which flows by his vegetable garden. His schoolteacher spouse is on leave, he explains, learning the country ways. One child attends a special school, another a regular school, and all the while the baby plays. Most important, he concludes, the season of spring “delivers days you could dance to,/ given a chance to. And that is our news.” Much of the “news” in the rest of The Rabbiter’s Bounty deals with the influence of his parents and relatives, and all these poems have the honesty and precision of personal letters. Of this group, perhaps the most powerful is the long elegy to his mother entitled “Three Poems in Memory of My Mother,
Miriam Murray née Arnall.” In this deeply moving poem, Murray’s entire political and sociological life is defined by the circumstances surrounding his mother’s death. A thirty-five-year-old country wife and mother, Miriam Murray actually was allowed to die by a city doctor who would not order an ambulance to transport her to the hospital. Her death poignantly symbolized the class divisions of Australia, and after her death Murray understood his rural roots as he never had before. He was also deeply influenced by his Uncle Sandy, an authentic Australian outlander, whose rough-and-tumble style was tempered by a sense of justice and fair play. To Murray, he was always a “big fair man,” a born hero and risk-taker: 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. Murray also writes persuasive and highly successful poems about members of the animal kingdom, many unique species of which inhabit his home continent. With the exquisite detailing of a Marianne Moore, he composes an uncannily graphic description of Dromaius novaehollandiae, the emu, in “Second Essay on Interest: the Emu”: Weathered blond as a grass tree, a huge Beatles haircut raises an alert periscope and stares out over scrub. Her large olivine eggs click oilily together; her lips of noble plastic clamped in their expression, her head-fluff a stripe worn mohawk style, she bubbles her pale-blue windpipe… Interestingly enough, the emu described here figures into a much larger discussion on the nature of banking, usury, and interest in the contemporary world. Being an Australian poet, Murray includes kangaroos, wild rabbits (hence, the title of the collection), horses, and crocodiles in many of the poems, but there are three other noteworthy animals in his poems: the pelican in “At the Aquatic Carnival,” the plover in “Spurwing Plover,” and the bats in “The Flying-fox Dreaming”: “Upside down all their days/ Antipodean,/ Night wardrobes their singleness for them.” It is in his writings about cows, cattle, and bulls that Murray shows his poetic mastery of the animal kingdom, as in the magnificent fifteen-part poem entitled “Walking to the Cattle Place,” which draws profoundly on the poet’s childhood memories of dairy farming. The third section of that long work deals, predictably, with the language issue, especially the etymology of cows, including the Greek bos, the transition from “cattle” to “chattel,” and proper nouns such as “Jersey” and “Charolais.” Then, in his splendid conclusion, Murray ties the workaday dairy cattle to the sacred cows of Hindu mythology, linking them to the whole cycle of life, death, and rebirth in the grand order of the universe: When heifers processing the planet’s unaccountable crop butt, or
show horns, glower, jump fur-marred aside and afterwards lick they are establishing the order of precedence of the Sun King’s court a needed concern the risen will have cast off.

“Walking to the Cattle Place” is just one of several outstanding long poems included in The Rabbiter’s Bounty. Other long, multipart poems include “The Police: Seven Voices,” “Four Gaelic Poems,” “The Sydney Highrise Variations,” “The Idyll Wheel: Cycle of a Year at Bunyah, New South Wales, April 1986—April 1987,” and the eloquent philosophical poem, “The Broad Bean Sermon.” In this “sermon,” Murray “preaches” his belief that all creations, even beans, suggest the plenitude and essential fullness of existence. The poem is a “sermon” only in the sense that Murray is expressing a profoundly religious appreciation for what he calls elsewhere the “is-ful ah!-nesses of things” (“Recourse to the Wilderness”). The beans suggest in their fertility the powerful potentiality of all living things. Beans appear in a variety of forms: ...ripe, knobbly ones, fleshy-sided, thin-straight, thin-crescent, frown-shaped, bird-shouldered, boat-keeled ones, beans knuckled and single-bulged, minute green dolphins at suck, beans upright like lecturing, outstretched like blessing fingers.... Whether the catalyst takes the form of bean fields, native Australian animals, or his pioneering relatives, again and again Les Murray is moved to the core of his being. He experiences a kind of transcendent or crystallizing moment during which idea, feeling, and language are fused into that special creation called poetry. The Rabbiter’s Bounty represents Murray’s personal selection of his best poems drawn from more than twenty books. Readers will appreciate those special moments that define Les Murray as man and artist, and they will surely agree with him when he says, in “Satis Passio,” that “most knowledge/ in our heads is poetry.”

Sources for Further Study


The Georgia Review. XLVI, Spring, 1992, p. 150.


