Les A. Murray Critical Essays

Analysis

Readers of Les A. Murray’s poetry are often attracted by the coherence of the thematic concerns that reappear consistently in his work and that are presented lucidly and imaginatively. Moreover, the stylistic features of his verse, though varied, have themselves cohered into an identifiable style uniquely his own and flexible enough to allow for the wide range of his poetic interests. Broadly, these interests may be grouped under categories of the religious and spiritual, the societal and cultural, the historical and familial, the linguistic and poetic. Murray has strong opinions about many issues facing contemporary society, and his poetry often bespeaks them. In their most reductive form, these issues would require consideration of such propositions as the following: Western people must rediscover a core of religious values and recover certain traditional modes of being; society should embrace a more democratic egalitarianism, avoiding the twin perils of elitism and false ideology; Aboriginal attitudes regarding nature and the environment need to be better understood by white Australians and to some extent adopted; Australia itself represents an island of hope in the world, as a place where many of the divisive features undermining modern society might be finally reconciled.

“Driving Through Sawmill Towns”

In an early poem, “Driving Through Sawmill Towns,” Murray renders the remoteness and tedium of life in the rural towns, those “bare hamlets built of boards,” where “nothing happens” and “the houses watch each other.” The evocative detail, the careful diction, the sense of quiet control convey both an appreciation of this as a way of life and an acknowledgment that it is a lonely and even desperate existence. A woman gazes at a mountain “in wonderment,/ looking for a city,” and men sit by the stove after tea, “rolling a dead match/ between their fingers/ thinking of the future.” It is a place one only drives
through, not a place in which one wishes to live. In that sense, this poem contrasts with
others in which the country life appears more salubrious, as in “Noonday Axeman” or
“Spring Hail,” where isolation is not necessarily loneliness.

“The Buladelah-Taree Holiday Song Cycle”

Murray’s most famous poem of rural Australia is also the one most indebted to Aboriginal
sources, “The Buladelah-Taree Holiday Song Cycle.” It is a long poem, in thirteen sections,
based in part on a translation by R. M. Berndt of “The Moon-Bone Song,” a ritual poem of
Arnhem Land Aborigines that Murray claims “may well be the greatest poem ever
composed in Australia.” His poem is an attempt to use an Aboriginal mode and structure to
“celebrate my own spirit country,” a stretch of land on the north coast between the two
towns of Buladelah and Taree, where he grew up and lives as an adult and where many
holiday vacationers go in the summer to enjoy the beaches and the countryside. In the same
way that the Aborigines celebrate their unity as a people and their harmony with the land,
Murray sees the returning vacationers, many of whom have family ties to the area, as a
cyclic affirmation of ancestral values and a joyous communing with nature. In his vision,
each new generation rediscovers the spiritual significance of commonplace things, as people
come to possess the land imaginatively. Each section of the poem presents an aspect of this
summer ritual, from the preparations made by the local inhabitants to the journey from
Sydney along the Pacific Highway (represented as a glowing snake) to all the adventures,
experiences, and tensions that go with a summer holiday. The poem ends with a linking of
the region with the heavens above, as the Southern Cross constellation looks down on “the
Holiday.” The poem is unique in its successful wedding of an Aboriginal poetic structure with
the matter of white Australian culture; in particular, Murray’s use of place-names and
capitalization seems to give mythic status to the events and locations of the poem,
analogous to the Aborigine’s sense of a “spirit of place.”

The Boys Who Stole the Funeral
In 1979, Murray published The Boys Who Stole the Funeral, a verse novel consisting of 140 sonnets of considerable variety. This unusual poem picked up many of the concerns and opinions prevalent in the earlier work and fashioned them into a narrative, both effective as poetry and affective as a story. In this work, two young Sydney men, Kevin Forbutt and Cameron Reeby, steal from a funeral parlor the body of Kevin’s great uncle, Clarrie Dunn (a “digger,” or World War I veteran), to take him back home to the country where the old man had asked to be buried. Clarrie’s relations having refused to pay for or honour this request, the boys have taken it on themselves. In doing this, they set out on a journey of self-discovery as well. Such familiar Murray themes as the value of community and respect for the ordinary person are underscored repeatedly in the poem, as when the two boys get to Dark’s Plain, Clarrie’s old home, and are assisted by people there with the burial and with evading the police who have come to arrest them. The novel later culminates with the shooting of Cameron by a police officer. The shocked and distraught Kevin flees into the bush, falls ill, drops into a coma, and has a vision of two figures from Aboriginal legend, Njimbin and Birroogun. In this vision, the central event of the novel, Kevin is put through an initiation where his soul is healed by the symbolic “crystal of Crystals,” and where he is instructed by Njimbin and Birroogun (whose name modulates to Berrigan, connoting a blend of white and black Australians) in the mysteries of the spirit. Kevin is offered the Common Dish from which to eat, the vessel of common human joys and sufferings by which most people in the world are nourished. As an act of solidarity with common humanity, Kevin takes it and eats and then wakes from his comatose vision. Having been in effect reborn, he returns to live at Dark’s Plain, to “keep faith” with the rural “battlers” who are the spiritual inheritors of the land. The poem as a whole is a virtuoso performance, displaying Murray’s ability to handle the complex interplay of form, narrative, and character. He holds the reader’s attention and, once again, interweaves Aboriginal material in a convincing way.

The Vernacular Republic

One of Murray’s preoccupations is with the notion of the vernacular; indeed, when he titles his selected poems The Vernacular Republic (three separate collections), he is reflecting on the colloquial nature of his language and simultaneously reflecting a passionate concern that the world of his poems addresses: the need for Australia to fuse its three cultures,
urban, rural, and Aboriginal. Murray’s vision for Australia is for a culture of convergence, where the sophisticated city dwellers, the more traditional rural folk, and the indigenous blacks can all come together to forge a society in harmony with the continent. In this, he is close to the position of the Jindyworobaks, a literary movement of the 1930’s and 1940’s that emphasized the uniqueness of the Australian environment and sought to align itself with Aboriginal culture. Although not as narrowly nationalistic as that earlier group, Murray does see a need to avoid repeating the mistakes of Europe and America and to develop in accordance with the character and values of Australia itself, not in submission to alien and imported fashions or ideologies. For him, Australia has the possibility of becoming truly egalitarian, a place of justice and virtue for the common man, a place where what is traditional is recognizably Australian. This, for Murray, includes a certain dry sense of humour and an appreciation of an unhurried mode of living, which may be primarily a rural manner but nevertheless seems a national characteristic.

“The Quality of Sprawl”

His poem “The Quality of Sprawl” is a good example. “Sprawl,” in this poem, is defined through the course of eight stanzas as a way of being, at once nonchalant (“the rococo of being your own still centre”), laid-back (“Sprawl leans on things”), generous (“driving a hitchhiker that extra hundred miles home”), unpretentious (“the quality/ of the man who cut down his Rolls-Royce/ into a farm utility truck”), classless (someone “asleep in his neighbours’ best bed in spurs and oilskins”), unflappable (“Reprimanded and dismissed/ it listens with a grin and one boot up on the rail/ of possibility”), and so on. It is also defined by what it is not: “It is never lighting cigars with ten-dollar notes”; “Sprawl almost never says Why Not? with palms comically raised”; “nor can it be dressed for.” Murray presents it as a very attractive quality indeed, but, characteristically, he is aware of the negative element, the price one sometimes has to pay for independence of mind. “It may have to leave the Earth,” he says, but then he gently undercuts his own hyperbole: “Being roughly Christian, it scratches the other cheek/ and thinks it unlikely.” While not exactly turning the other cheek in Christian fashion, he does conclude with the mild warning: “... people have been shot for sprawl.” Sprawl, then, is the opposite of the uptight, aggressive, overly sophisticated self-consciousness that Murray sees around him and that he considers foreign and inappropriate for Australia—a place, perhaps, where Mark Twain’s Huck Finn might have
been at home. While “sprawl” may appear a public attitude and manner, it rests on a more essential inward feature, which Murray terms “equanimity,” in a poem of that title.

“Equanimity”

“Equanimity” is a poem that draws together several strands of Murray’s work: His populist, bardic stance mingles with a more purely prophetic strain. Here, his democratic vistas are underwritten by a transcendental authority, based on a personal and even sacramental experience. That experience, which he calls “equanimity,” is like an influx of quiet power, an exaltation of the spirit grounded in love. “There is only love,” he says; “human order has at heart/ an equanimity. Quite different from inertia,” a place “where all are, in short, off the high comparative horse/ of their identity.” This is the place at which people join together in a “people’s otherworld,” a vernacular republic of the spirit that allows for a “continuous recovering moment.” It is an effortless effort, reminiscent of a Buddhist or Kantian disinterestedness: “Through the peace beneath effort/ (even within effort: quiet air between the bars of our attention)/ comes unpurchased lifelong plenishment.” Yet, foremost for Murray, this is a Christian quality; it is at the very heart of Christ’s teachings and is the place from which he taught: “Christ spoke to people most often on this level/ especially when they chattered about kingship and the Romans;/ all holiness speaks from it.” To experience such equanimity would be tantamount to experiencing holiness itself, and that is precisely the sort of graceful redemption Murray seeks to convey. There can be nothing programmatic about such an attitude, but no program of reform, be it social, political, or cultural, can possibly succeed without it. That, for Murray, is the basis on which all else proceeds, including his own poetry. For Murray, writing is like playing on an instrument, finding out just what it can do and learning how to do it. His poems have an energy and inventiveness that reveal a delight in the resources of language and a conviction that what needs to be said can be communicated through the adequacies of poetry.

Blocks and Tackles

Murray’s faith in the redemptive possibilities of poetry was sorely tested during the 1980’s, when it became increasingly clear to him that the production of literature in Australia was tied to a commercial system fundamentally at odds with the spirit of poetry, and that the
academic and critical establishment that controlled the terms under which literature was to be studied and understood was itself run by a “cabal” of “elites,” notable for their “moral cowardice.” In response, there was a discernible retrenchment in Murray’s poetry and prose, a willingness to accept his embattled position in the cultural field as a necessary corollary to his role as a virtual poet-prophet to his people. In the essays collected in Blocks and Tackles, Murray became more assertive about the sacramental and mysterious qualities of poetry. As he writes in “Poems and Poesies”: Poetry models the fullness of life, and also gives its objects presence. Like prayer, it pulls all the motions of our life and being into a concentrated true attentiveness to which God might speak. “Here am I, Lord,” as Samuel says in his book of the Bible. It is the plane or mirror of intuitions.

Dog Fox Field

In the poems published in Dog Fox Field, however, the poet attends more often to his function as social critic, particularly in his denunciations of “relegation,” the denial of the full humanity of others. In a poem titled “To the Soviet Americans,” a working-class man (here the abstract object of much false Marxist piety) ironically declares: Watch out for the ones in jeans who’ll stop you smoking and stop you working: I call them the Soviet Americans. The tone of these poems is often stern and unyielding, written in an age in which one finds “self pity and hard drugs everywhere.” Yet, this hardened voice does continue to yield up poems of sympathetic feeling, as if, once protected from the incursions of a hostile world, there is ample room for the common enjoyments of a shared living: Never despise those who fear an order vaster than reason, more charming than prose: surely are those who unknowingly chime with the noblest and love and are loved by whom they rhyme with best. So let your river be current and torrent and klongas far and intricate as your love is long. . . .

Subhuman Redneck Poems

The title of this collection, which won for Murray the 1996 T. S. Eliot Prize, indicates Murray’s unrepentant determination to diminish the idea of poetry as the exclusive purview of the intellectual elite. The book is as outspokenly angry and tonally excessive as anything
he has produced, and, on occasion, goes a bit too far in expressing his disillusion with the
new Australia: Ethnics who praise their home ground while on it are called jingo chauvinists.
All’s permitted, though, when they migrate; the least adaptable are the purest then, the
narrowest the most multicultural. His politics swing sometimes crazily into conservatism,
and there is a sense that he is not always free of a kind of ungenerous rant. The book,
however, contains several lovely lyrics. Murray’s gift for this kind of work is often ignored in
the sound and fury of his politically engaged poems. “The Warm Rain” brandishes palm
trees like mops, its borders swell over the continent . . . Fruit bumps lawns, and every country
dam brews under bubbles . . . Murray’s eye for detail and witty transformation of such into
poetic image is quite charming in “Dead Trees in a Dam”: Castle scaffolding tall in moat,
tareethe dead trees in the dam flower each morning with birds. Once away from argument,
the poetic juices run magnificently riot: . . . it may be a misty candelabrum of egrets lambent
. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .Odd mornings, it’s been all blood flag and rifle green: a stopped-motion
shrapnel of king parrots. . .

Fredy Neptune

Murray’s Fredy Neptune, a “novel in verse,” follows the life of an itinerant World War I
sailor/soldier of German ancestry across two hundred pages. The narrative, through unlikely
adventures and plot twists, follows Fredy’s attempts to return home after having been
kidnapped and forced onto a German battleship. He experiences both moral outrage and
physical disability in response to the atrocities of war—the burning of Armenian women, for
example, causes him to lose his sense of touch. The theme of survival in a chaotic world
reaches its climax when, upon finally making his way back home, Fredy discovers that war
has destroyed his homeland and he must re-enlist. The language in which Fredy’s
picaresque experiences are related—full of Australian, blue-collar slang and hit-and-miss
rhymes that work to reflect the lunacy of Fredy’s experiences—garnered glowing reviews
from critics.

Conscious and Verbal
The title of this collection echoes the Australian press reports when the nation’s celebrated poet, after three weeks in a coma, awoke. He eventually recovered, and this collection was one of the results. Murray renders his experience here in “Travels with John Hunter,” named after the hospital where the poet worked his way back to health. The poems in this collection examine God as a presence in nature, the Australian character, racism and Murray’s outraged stance against it, and other typical Murray themes. Also characteristic of Murray are his moral pronouncements, his deploring “that monster called the Twentieth Century,” and his didacticism. In “The Instrument,” for example, he answers the question of why he writes poetry by stating simply that one must “[work] always beyond/ your own intelligence.” Although critics gave the volume mixed reviews, these poems remain a fitting tribute to Murray’s reawakening.