Folie, Topography and Family in Murray’s Middle-Distance Poems

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Despite the rapidity of change in the character of Murray’s shorter poems, critics have made headway discussing and categorising his odes, verse essays and meditations, his satires, dramatic monologues and historical narratives, along with the recent confessional narratives. With two volume-length poems behind him, the preoccupations and characteristics of Murray’s verse novels are also emerging — the breakneck narrative pace, the psychologically troubled yet principled protagonists in search of action by which to prove themselves, and the criminal, lurid backgrounds against which these men struggle to win equilibrium. Less attention has been paid to the middle ground, to what I call Murray’s ‘middle-distance poems’: their length, of more than one or two pages but less than fifty or a hundred, imposes its own discipline. These poems have modes and preoccupations in common: they are topographical poems in which the protagonist moves through a landscape, observing and reflecting; or they are family memoirs and chronicles; or (and this has been little observed) they are combinations of both. As he moved from topography to more intimate terrain, Murray’s pastoral Australia became charged with a burden of private reference that gave his early mid-length poems an energy missing from other poets’ dealings with this landscape.

In speaking of Murray’s ‘early’ career and casting this synthesis in the past tense, I do not wish to suggest he has lost the capacity to return to the mode of ‘The Bulahdelah–Taree Holiday Song Cycle’, but rather to indicate that, in a recent volume like Subhuman Redneck Poems, the confessional lyrics and satires have made explicit impulses previously buried within topographical-familial poems. To hold up the ‘Song Cycle’ as the culmination of Murray’s
mid-length poems, however, is to indicate their centrality to his œuvre. It is also to specify an absence in Conscious but Verbal (1999) and Subhuman Redneck Poems (1996), and some thinness in preceding volumes. What defines the middle-distance poems chosen for discussion is not so much the number of lines as a manner of reference and closure. In these poems Murray will switch from a colloquial tone to sudden, concentrated passages (these are the explosive sprints), and end on lines which, even when they give a sense of closure, gesture to themes not taken up (this is accelerating across the finish). Murray’s middle-distance runs have a quality of ‘sprawl’, a capability that has precisions, but that ‘lengthens the legs; it trains greyhounds on liver and beer’ (Collected Poems 1991, 162). In describing the ‘middle style’ of an older generation of poets, Murray sufficiently commended their modulations of tone —

he [James McAuley] and one or two others made a certain ‘Augustan’ tone dominant in Australian poetry for more than a decade after the Second World War. In the latter, he never really prevailed against what I think is the central and best tendency of Australian poetry, an enlightened, inclusive, civil mode of writing which belongs ultimately to the middle style, but allows itself to dip up and down at need, and at best abolishes all the levels by reconciling them.
(Peasant Mandarin 189)

— but did not complain of a lack, in McAuley and Hope’s classicism, of the Dionysian dynamics in his own work.

‘Noonday Axeman’ is Murray’s longest poem in The Ilex Tree (1965) but does not otherwise qualify as one of the middle-distance poems tracked in this article. The poem’s logging persona is not only conscious of his pioneer ancestry; he is stolidly (that is, in measured phrase) their descendant. Tempted away at times by ‘the talk and dazzle of cities’, he is assured he would not ‘die of strangeness’ in the rain forest’s ‘Unhuman silence’ (CP 3–4). ‘The Away-bound Train’ approaches the manner of later topographical poems. In the shaking pane of the railway carriage the persona observes his image superimposed on the landscape, and feels himself shaken as to what he is headed away from. Despite its brevity, the last inclusion in The Ilex Tree (Gray 70), ‘Driving Through Sawmill Towns’, comes closest to Murray’s disorienting topographical poems. The persona’s relationship to ‘you’ and to the
third-person locals of the town he enters is unstated or unstable. Dangers and insecurities in the work environment, and in natural and familial environments, threaten to overwhelm the townspeople:

... women listen
for cars on the road,
lost children in the bush,
a cry from the mill, a footstep —
nothing happens. (CP 9)

The environment teems with more information than even the locals can absorb. While the prestidigitation of the last lines — ‘Men sit after tea ... rolling a dead match/ between their fingers’ (CP 10) — seems to foretell the decline of the town’s one industry, the gesture remains as choked as the winter drainpipes, as opaque as the creek’s ‘alive’ pebbles.

‘Evening Alone at Bunyah’, though it opened The Weatherboard Cathedral (1969), was omitted from Murray’s first selected poems. He then revised and restored it (placing it directly after ‘Driving Through Sawmill Towns’) in the 1982 collection that brought together ‘all of the verse, apart from ... The Boys Who Stole the Funeral’, that he wished to preserve (The Vernacular Republic [v]). ‘Evening Alone’ establishes the poet-persona’s social circumstances and his alienation from them. While his widowed father goes to the country dance where he is a sought-after partner, the son who ‘only dance[s] on bits of paper’ (CP 10) stays back, the poem recording the dance of his thoughts about his father and his dissatisfaction with himself. The 1982 revisions lessen the degree of the persona’s self-absorption, but blur the contrast between father and son, and obscure the reasons for the son’s self-castigation. In the deleted opening of The Weatherboard Cathedral version, the persona muses on his ‘first fruits’ as he hears the father return from showering and ‘The twenty-sixth year of [his] important life/ Approaches its end’ (1). A description of drought that explicitly refers to spiritual dryness —

Today, out walking, summer was all mirror
Tormenting me. I fled down cattle tracks
Chest-deep in the earth, and pushed in under twigs
To sit by cool water seeping over rims
Of blackened granite. There was no time there.
For a moment it was as if I’d been reborn
But, as always,
No such thing had happened. (*The Weatherboard Cathedral* 1)

— is robbed of its last three lines and moved to Part III in the revised version (cf. *CP* 12). From Part IV of *The Weatherboard Cathedral* version Murray cut lines referring to the ancestral Scots past and a dream of the future, in which ‘the Lady of Still Waters’ promises the persona ‘someone coming to you from a distance,/ Someone who means you well’ (3). Although the 1982 version still reveals the persona’s isolation — ‘Sitting alone’s a habit of mind with me .../ for which I’ll pay in ful’ (*CP* 13) — his spiritual aridity and sexual frustration are glossed over. Home alone, the persona spooks himself thoroughly, with a vision of a rabbit-excavated necropolis which Murray would later hand on to Fredy Neptune. This, then, exemplifies an early Murray persona, hounded by shame at his insufficiencies and by a fear of bereavement that speaks out of the landscape.

An Irish ghost also haunts ‘Evening Alone at Bunyah’. Murray echoes Yeats’s ‘The Apparitions’ in the ‘presence’ the son senses behind him; there might be an echo of the great house from Yeats’s ‘The Curse of Cromwell’ when dogs bark from a clearing ‘where no house/ has ever stood’ (*CP* 13); but the greatest debt is the persona’s fear of meeting his anti-self:

> Beneath this moon, an ancient radiance comes
> back from far hillsides where the tall pale trunks
> of ringbarked trees haphazardly define
> the edge of dark country I could not afford
> to walk in at night alone
> lest I should hear
> the barking of dogs from a clearing where no house
> has ever stood, and, walking down a road
> in the wilderness, meet a man who waited there
> beside a creek to tell me what I sought. (*CP* 13)

A like fear is transformed to imperious anticipation when, in ‘Ego Dominus Tuus’, Yeats’s ‘Ille’ leaves his book, ‘walk[s] in the moon’ and traces characters to summon an ‘image’ or ghost:

> I call to the mysterious one who yet
> Shall walk the wet sands by the edge of the stream
> And look most like me, being indeed my double.
And prove of all imaginable things
The most unlike, being my anti-self,
And, standing by these characters, disclose
All that I seek; and whisper it as though
He were afraid the birds, who cry aloud
Their momentary cries before it is dawn,
Would carry it away to blasphemous men. (Yeats 182–83)

Reading Murray’s lines as an allusion, it might be concluded either
that he is eschewing Yeats’s phantasmagoria for a poetry of simple
human contact, or admitting that superstitious fears and repressed
anxieties must be confronted to make him a more complete poet. In
Murray’s shorter poems moonlight often conjures the dead mother,
or an icy otherworld in parallel to the summer paddocks. There are
the ‘little moonlit claws’ of the ‘possum ski-ing down/ the iron roof’
(CP 2), and the mother making scones as the moon rises full
‘through the loungeroom door’ (CP 138). If the mother’s absence
helps define the ‘dark country’ of ‘Evening Alone’, it also
contributes that original frisson of fear through which the poem
moves towards closure.

Without advertting to the mother’s absence or the father’s
‘presence’, ‘Recourse to the Wilderness’ depicts a troubled
protagonist, ‘twenty-two year old with failings’, in search of what he
seeks. I have written about this mostly topographical work as a
poem about poetry, in which the invocation of ‘the is-ful ah!-nesses
of things’ (CP 21–22) synthesises the last line of ‘God’s Grandeur’
and ‘a Catholic reverence for quidditas with the Aranda concept of
aliúra’ (Pollnitz 379). I experienced some chagrin when Murray
told me that, from his perspective, the poem recounted his passage
through a bout of depression. He has since emphasised this
perspective in the essay ‘Killing the Black Dog’ (13–14) and told
Peter Alexander how the depression lifted while ‘riding in a cattle-
truck between Tennant Creek and Camooweal’ (Alexander 97).2 In
the 1982 version of ‘Recourse to the Wilderness’ Murray combined
the poem originally so titled with another from The Weatherboard
Cathedral, ‘The Wilderness’ (7–8 and 32–33), thereby creating a
superior, middle-distance amalgam of the two; but the obtuseness of
my earlier reading can hardly be pardoned on the grounds of textual
change. My excuse must be that the persona’s self-accusations seem
mild for depression, and that the emergence from depression is not
described. Rather than a passage through illness, ‘Recourse’ itemises the resources that sustained the persona through his trial. Memories of ritual high jinks with friends like Peter Barden (q.v. Alexander 81–83) were a help, as was the radiance of the central desert, when it came to exorcising dust-devils and nightmares (like this, from the Barossa):

Later that night
the horror of Hell stared down at me for a great time,
silent, with horns,
till I reared awake, and found
myself bedded down on hay in a dawn-wet paddock
with twenty curious rams forgathered round me.

If one passes over the quietly comic tone, these monstrous figures suggest a religious frame in which to view the persona’s desert wanderings. His recourse was like that of the saints who went into the Thebaid, like St Anthony’s pitting himself and his faith against demonic visions.

In Histoire de la Folie Michel Foucault selects saints and holy fools as exemplars of his contention that the Enlightenment ruptured the synergising relationship ‘European man, since the beginning of the Middle Ages’, had enjoyed ‘with something he calls, indiscriminately, Madness, Dementia, Insanity’ (Foucault xiii). Foucault’s account of Hieronymus Bosch’s Temptations of St Anthony, dwelling on the bestial chimeras which swarm around the saint, has particular pertinence to Murray’s poem:

What assails the hermit’s tranquillity is not objects of desire, but these hermetic, demented forms which have risen from a dream … In the Lisbon Temptation, facing Saint Anthony sits one of these figures born of madness, of its solitudes, of its penitence, of its privations; a wan smile lights this bodiless face, the pure presence of anxiety in the form of an agile grimace. Now it is exactly this nightmare silhouette that is at once the subject and object of the temptation; it is this figure which fascinates the gaze of the ascetic — both are prisoners of a kind of mirror interrogation, which remains unanswered in a silence inhabited only by the monstrous swarm that surrounds them. The gryllus no longer recalls man, by its satiric form, to his spiritual vocation forgotten in the folly of desire. It is madness become Temptation … (Foucault 20)
It should be mentioned how subversive this reading of Bosch is. In the central panel of the triptych, Anthony does not fix his gaze on a gryllus or monster, but looks out of the frame at the viewer, with grim irony; the only figure with ‘a wan smile’ on his ‘bodiless face’ is a spectral Christ standing by an altar. Relevant to Murray is Foucault’s idea that madness itself attracts the ascetic. No-one could be attracted by Murray’s recent accounts of depression — ‘my brain boiling with a confusion of stuff not worth calling thought or imagery: it was more like shredded mental kelp marinated in pure pain’ (Killing the Black Dog 6) — but this is not the tone of ‘Recourse to the Wilderness’. There the horned visions are less a source of torment than of interest, as if those Barossa merinos had opened their mouths and said: ‘we have come to give you metaphors for poetry.’

This medieval or Romantic rather than Enlightenment view of madness has yet to vanish from Murray’s poetry: one need only think of Heimann in Fredy Neptune. But Murray’s persona in ‘Recourse’ is more than just a holy fool: ‘At noon, far out in a mirage, I would brew/ tea with strangers, yarn about jobs in the North/ which I meant not to get’. In his writings Murray expresses sympathy with a Foucaultian crew of social outsiders — the unemployed and indigent, wanderers and those living rough off the land, eccentric scholars and theologians, poets and craftsmen of neglected guilds. Coming from their different perspectives, Foucault and Murray arrive, in the late 1960s, at a similar census of those marginalised or ‘relegated’ by folie.

In Murray’s next two volumes, Poems Against Economics (1972) and Lunch and Counter Lunch (1974), sequences predominate; the former volume consists entirely of sequences. While he continues to develop in these the themes and styles examined so far, the different structures of the sequences make for new syntheses and closures. A middle-distance poem from the second volume, ‘Their Cities, Their Universities’, most clearly builds on The Weatherboard Cathedral. This family chronicle voices a not uncritical ‘finechas, the feeling of kindred’ (Persistence in Folly 65), as it anatomises the melancholy which impelled the hospitality of ‘old Bunyah Johnnie’ (a pioneer settler and Murray’s great-grandfather) and the drunkenness of the generation that followed (including Murray’s grandfather, Allan). Murray bases the poem on a family photograph taken at John and Isabella Murray’s golden wedding anniversary in 1920. Tales of the
great-grandfather’s dinners lead to stories of the grandfathers’ sprees and how these impinged on the father’s generation. As chronicled in the poem’s first part, the binges seem no more than escapades in the palace of excess. Their sinister light appears only the ‘glitter’ around ‘older Murray houses’:

bottle-glass in the paddocks, rum necks and whisky ghosts,
Wolfe’s dark Aromatic Schnapps mostly grassroots-under now
and insulin, insulin
as if to help the earth digest such crystals,
the thousand year jag, the gullies of downtrodden light. (CP 84)

Discussing the ‘whisky cult’ in prose, Murray spoke of its allaying ‘spiritual hungers’ (The Peasant Mandarin 160). In the poem this revelation is held back till the last part, in which the drinking is characterised as defiance of and release from the Presbyterian Free Church, the puritanical splinter sect Murray too was raised in but broke free of:

Wives and sisters are forbidden the shamanism of glass;
they go busy, or proud
or brandish the Word, that soured woman’s weapon
cold-hammered by Knox, fresh-honed by the Wee Free Kirk,
hard splinter of that Faith
which overcame religion,

but the patriarchs are keeping their own time
like a door in the farm-dull days, and separate as logic. (CP 86)

Murray elsewhere refers to the ‘sad shamanism of alcohol’ (Persistence in Folly 123), but the spirits with which the grandfathers burned off surplus energy seem hardly to qualify as an alternative religion. The foretaste of drug culture and its resort to ‘religion-substitutes’ (Blocks and Tackles 61) is one explanation of the riddling conclusion, in which ‘The past [that] explains us and …
gets our flesh’ becomes ‘the cause’ and the future ‘we are going to … not coming from’ (CP 84, 86). The evils the ‘drinking Murrays’ immediately transmitted were exploitation and impoverishment of ‘their children milking a hundred cows in jig time/ and schottische time, as the fiddlers raised the sun’ (CP 85).

Child labour is an issue in the fifteen-poem sequence, ‘Walking to the Cattle Place’, which centres on dairying and cattle-raising in
Murray's home district of Bunyah, but also takes in herding cultures world-wide and through millennia of European prehistory, language and myth. In ‘4. The Artery’, it is a long day, including both Norse myth and the Laws of Manu, that Murray invokes as ‘the day of these beings who licked the glistening ice from the north returning world, from the still man-figures’ (CP 54). As he explained in a note, the myth is of Audhumla, the cow ‘said to have brought men and beasts to life by licking them as they stood frozen in the primordial ice; the metaphor of cattle making settled human society in Europe possible after the last Ice Age is, I think, an acute one’ (The Virtual Republic 213). In addition to such benign migrations into terra nullius, however, this Western expansionism was fuelled by fallen appetite and blood-guilt: ‘It was this horror beyond the great ice, that launched us. Luscious bone-fruit. What silk will tie this artery of knowledge?’ (CP 55). The temptation of Faust, and Soutine in his madness painting a rotting carcass in his Parisian atelier, are markers on a bloody clue that leads to the discreet horrors of the modern abattoirs. Christ’s blood streaming in the firmament is a sacred intervention in an allusive history of animal sacrifice, unstable dominion and madness. Although the sequence structure, the building of argument from antitheses, and the orotund rhetorical question that ends ‘The Artery’ combine to make Murray’s sequence seem Yeatsian, other influences are at work. Playing Christian allusions off against a Hindu, ultimately Sanskrit sense of the cow’s sacredness is not unlike strategies in The Waste Land. The rhetorical question itself is an adaptation of Eliot’s ‘Gerontion’: ‘After such knowledge, what forgiveness?’ (Eliot 38). ‘Walking to the Cattle Place’ is Murray doing modernism, but doing it in order to rustle its stock into his own Boeotian paddock.6

Murray ends his parodic ‘field’ poem, ‘The Boeotian Count’ — a calling of the cattle home, for milking — by gesturing to a deeper significance in the affectionate naming of livestock. The playful names strike a balance between the necessary labour of dairying (karma is necessity) and ritual jollity (līlā is ‘play’): ‘I pray that Hughie/ will send you/ safe home/ where ploughing is playing/ where Karma is Līlā’ (CP 61). While ‘Hughie’ might be one of the Murray clan, he might also be that tutelary rain-god invoked with the formula, ‘Send it down, Hughie’. It is in the self-reflexive aspects of the sequence, those concerned with language, writing and poetry,
that Murray comes closest to realising this paradisal equivalence of work and play; for 'the nature of artistic work ... is vocational, that is to say, the diametric opposite of employment' (The Peasant Mandarin 4). 'Where cattletrucks mount/ boustrophedon to the hills' (CP 52), the agronomics of cattle-raising becomes one with the paronomasia of discerning early alphabets in forms of the bos, or metrical feet in the ploughmen plodding behind bullocks. In '7. Stockman Songs' Murray sources a potential Australian poetry within the cattle industry: he composes a set of imitation nonc- verses such as might be improvised by Aboriginal stockmen still in touch with their Dreamtime sires (see Persistence in Folly 14–15). But in another Australian setting, his own home district, Murray recalls a Presbyterian tradition that denied dairymen any sense of spirituality in their work, and a pattern of child labour and youth unemployment that cut off a generation from adult work and childhood innocence. In '2. Birds in Their Title Work Freeholds of Straw', the children who spent pre-dawn hours 'stoning up cows' for milking, and the adolescents who engaged in the 'more frenzied guilt' of odi et amo with the beasts, 'will make ... sad bankers'— even sadder sexual adults, presumably. Yet, with 'a Wall Street tremor ... on the flesh-eating graphs/ ... no longer only the bright and surplus children/ get out of these hills' (CP 51). 'Perhaps we should forget', Murray continues in the poem's second part,

... the little children dead beat at their desks
Caesar got up and Milked then he Got his soldiers —
but birds in their title work freeholds of straw
and the eagle his of sky.

Dripstone for Caesar. (CP 52)

The obscurity of the mistranslation from De Bello Gallico and of the last line is mitigated by the context of the sequence, which makes clear that the migratory expansionism of '4. The Artery' is not always envisaged as benign. A rural childhood that has fed ambitions of conquering the great world might become a megalomania that returns to prey on (yet be sheltered beneath) that childhood (perhaps by enlisting recruits for war), just as an imperial eagle spreads its wings over lesser 'birds in their title': some such scenario seems to be posited in the elliptical conclusion.

When, in his descent to the underworld in '13. Boöpis', the bard
proffers apologies to the cow-eyed Hera for ‘the children of the overworld’ and their ‘instruments’ — ‘Babel in orbit’ and ‘missiles’ (CP 64) — he does not suggest the technologies of war are the antithesis of the goddess’s blessings and man-killing rites. Rather, such technologies are at the end of a long trajectory of ambition that began with ‘a boy ... a blood-porridge eater, / his ringlets new-dressed with dung, a spear in his fist’ (CP 53). The country fete with which the sequence concludes, in ‘15. Gölğa’, is set in a millennial future, in which old grudges, feuds and revolutions have been laid. In this ‘New World’, ‘people are touching the cattle/ not mastering’, there is ‘fullness of work’ and ‘equality seeks no victories’ (CP 66–68). People and cattle mingle as species and races. The ‘little girl feeding the clean beasts rainbow cake’ (CP 68) enacts an envisaged Hindu and a Judaeo-Christian covenant of innocence with innocence. While the sequence structure allows large-scale syntheses of cultural and religious traditions, it is possible to prefer the more anchored topographies and social worlds of more continuous middle-distance poems.

In its mode — a synoptic preface, followed by six dramatic monologues — the sequence from Lunch and Counter Lunch, ‘The Police: Seven Voices’, delivers on such cultural specificity. The stinging satirical preface suggests that state violence, or the threat of it institutionalised in the police and the police station (the latter being ‘The Knuckle Garden’ of the title), is the central prop of the Vailala madness endemic in Western consumerism:

    factory whistles would choke
    and the flag catch afire from its stars
    without these ministers

    Nor would the great Cargo come
    or keep on its shelves, without
    the Knuckle Garden. (CP 73)

The remaining six monologues, evenhandedly divided between good coppers and bad coppers, are spoken by specifically Australian characters or archetypes. In ‘4. Rostered Duty’ the speaker is the constable-keeper of the Crucified Bludger, one of those rostered on to drive the Bludger ‘slow-slow through the fibro-tile streets’ so that ‘the message gets through to moaners, to oversleeper,/ to migrants who dream dark police, to blokes thinking Sickie’ (CP 74). It is a
not-intractable puzzle why ‘Rostered Duty’ has never attained the popular-classic status of ‘An Absolutely Ordinary Rainbow’. There is no character in the poem with whom an Australian reader would identify. The keeper shares with the crowd to whom the Bludger is displayed an uncritical apathy towards the violence of this right-wing street theatre. The Bludger himself, ‘spread-andrewed on four bolts’ (CP 75), remains an intractably unlikable martyr, ready to bite the hand that feeds him. Whereas the ‘poet’ of the poem grows Murray’s memorable coinage ‘Misemployment’, the Bludger has neither vocation nor employment to be shy of; immobilised as he is, he is not even clearly a bludger. This may be a final reason why he has fallen short of iconic status in an angry satire. The good cop (to balance the keeper) fits in his interior monologue during a police siege. His ideal result he muses, unconsciously adapting Henry V’s rousing address at another siege, is ‘to keep the man and stop the breach’ (CP 78); yet he counterpoises this ideal against his experience of evil, pathological evil such as he has seen in human breaches: ‘I have struck men in back rooms late at night with faces you could fall a thousand feet down’ (CP 77). ‘The trick is’, the police-speaker ruminates, how to contain evil without becoming it — ‘not to be a breach yourself and to stop your side from being one’ (CP 77). Family life is the moly that enables the monologist to hope he can perform the trick: ‘if later goes all right I am going to paint the roof of our house/ on my day off’ (CP 78). The tortuous monologue of the decapitated head in ‘5. The Lips Move During Anointing’ transposes the stabilising influence of family experience into the surrealism of urban myth (The Vernacular Republic 216), while in ‘7. Sergeant Forby Lectures the Cadets’ knowledge of a community enables the sergeant to solve a domestic murder. ‘The Police: Seven Voices’ has a more equable perspective on state violence than Murray could afford to take in Fredy Neptune, with its panorama of twentieth-century atrocities and genocide, but foreshadows that exploration of social madness and how heroes with quietist principles might resist it.

It is worth overleaping other mid-length poems that might be fitted into this review of Murray’s themes, topography and family, mania and misemployment, to arrive in Ethnic Radio (1977) at the crowning example of his middle-distance poems, ‘The Bulahdelah–Taree Holiday Song Cycle’. Cataloguing the sites and activities of a
family holiday, Murray includes some reference to his family’s history in this cycle; and the poem’s geographical range, south to north through his and the Kattang people’s homelands, is crucial to the poem’s free imitation. In an essay on his use of Aboriginal lore, ‘The Human-Hair Thread’ (*Persistence in Folly* 4–30), Murray explains how, to model his cycle on R. M. Berndt’s translation of ‘The Wonguri-Mandjigai Song Cycle of the Moon Bone’, he had to transpose the Arnhem Land cycle to his ‘own spirit country, the one region I know well enough to dare comparison’ with the Wonguri-Mandjigai (24). It took over a decade for this modelling to be labelled cultural ‘appropriation’ in a post-colonialist critique (Perrett 73–79). I do not intend to enter into a theorised debate on whether Murray’s imitation is appropriation. He makes a worthwhile case for such borrowing, as a procedure ‘by which any culture makes part of its contribution to the conversation of mankind’, and as a means of calling attention to what Murray calls perhaps ‘the greatest poem ever composed in Australia’ (4, 22). He is on shakier ground asserting that he and white Australians know their ‘spirit country’ in the religious sense that Aboriginals understand theirs. Murray’s professed aim in writing was to produce ‘a longed-for fusion’ of ‘all three main Australian cultures, Aboriginal, rural and urban’. While such a synthesis ‘as yet perhaps, can only exist in art’ (24), he goes on to claim ‘a subtle process’ of ‘convergence’ between white and indigenous cultures is in train (27); presumably, if undisturbed, it will result in the ‘longed-for fusion’. Poem and essay are now a quarter of a century behind us at the time of writing of this article, yet if Murray’s cycle simply celebrates what white Australians do during their Christmas vacation and implies that thereby they are doing their bit for reconciliation — ‘integration’ as it would have been in the 1970s — the poem’s social agenda is something worse than appropriation: it is an argument for self-congratulatory complacency. While Murray admits to including elements of ‘irony and social comment’ in his cycle — ‘It would have been treason to the facts of modern Australian life if all conflict, all edginess, had been left out’ (26) — the emphasis in his commentary has led Peter Alexander to suggest that the poem has freed (presumably white) Australian writers from a ‘cultural apartheid’ and has given (presumably white) readers a ‘sense of possession, of being possessed by this land’ (Alexander 177). But one dissentient reader,
Lawrence Bourke, is not reading against the cycle’s grain when he observes that the cycle’s ‘Boeotian ideals’ are recoverable ‘only at special moments’, that ‘we’ as readers are conscious of having to ‘return to the car and drive back to the city’ (Bourke 91, 64). Murray’s cycle is as ‘convergent’ with National Lampoon’s Christmas Vacation as it is with the Moon-Bone cycle; so I would insist, to save Murray’s cycle from the implications of his commentary on it, and to direct attention to the fuse running through the cycle towards an ending that contrives both to unsettle and to renovate (yes, white) readers.

Berndt explicates the Aboriginal cycle’s underlying myths — relating to the lotus or water-lily, the Moon and the Dugong — as myths of death and regeneration associated with a particular clay pan. The Moon lives with his sister in the clay pan collecting ‘lotus roots (which were to become the Evening Star)’, but when both decide to leave, the Moon opts ‘to die and come back alive again’, whereas the Dugong prefers simple death: ‘I won’t come back and you can pick up my bones’ (Berndt 19–20). The creatures of the clay pan are totemic beings and, like the Moon, continuously regenerating, as in Song 6:

A duck comes swooping down to the Moonlight clay pan, there at the place of the Dugong

Taking the lotus, the rounded roots and stalks of the lily; searching and eating there as she ripples the water. ‘Because I have eggs, I give to my young the sound of the water’

Floating along on the clay pan, at the place of the Dugong.

(New Oxford Book of Australian Verse 242)

Murray refers to the ‘Sections’ rather than ‘Songs’ of his middle-distance poem; he wants it to be read as a whole, not as separate songs. While in Sections 4 and 10 of his Holiday cycle, he appears to imitate Aboriginal recognition of creatures as originative altjira beings, ‘always out there’ (CP 124), once human figures enter the frame, a time-frame enters with them. These beings have neither occupied the site from the beginning, nor are they continuously reincarnating in it, like the Moon-Bone’s lilies and duck. Although the man of Section 3 is re-entering territory he has known well,
walking out, looking all around, relearning that country’, his attempt to recapture childhood is just a little silly, childish rather than self-confirmatory:

stepping behind trees to the dam, as if you had a gun,
to that place of the Wood Duck,
to that place of the Wood Duck’s Nest,
proving you can still do it; looking at the duck who hasn’t seen
you,
the mother duck who’d run Catch Me (broken wing) I’m Fatter
(broken wing). Having hissed to her children. (CP 123–24)

By contrast, the children who discover for the first time the ‘Abandoned fruit trees ... the fruit trees of the Grandmothers’ are establishing a lasting bond with the place, which they name in the Aboriginal fashion, though without reference to Aboriginal artefacts:

the fruit has the taste of former lives, of sawdust and parlour song,
the tang of Manners;
the children bite it, recklessly,
at what will become for them the place of the Slab Wall, and of the
Coal Oil Lamp,
the place of moss-grit and swallows’ nests, the place of the
Crockery. (CP 128)

Allowing himself Bruegelian canvases in his sections, Murray avoids reductive generalisations on holidayers or locals; he offers cross-sections of satire and celebration; but the middle generation of males, the young men and fathers, seem least able to find renovation in the ‘season when children return with their children’ (CP 122). Involved in the drama of their maleness, the men live beyond Moon-like regeneration and flirt with Dugong-like death.

Although the blot of child labour has been expunged in the joyous Section 7 of the Holiday cycle, neither family nor work relations are a uniformly stabilising influence for these men. In Section 6, Legge’s Camp seems to generate all the family tensions of a migrants’ detention centre: toddlers and parents, dogs and masters, men and women, are at odds in their various forms of play and display, responsibility and innocence. Scenes in Section 5 relate to Murray family history. The baleful halo of glass around old houses memorialises conflict between generations living and dead. The grandfathers’ feckless polarisation of work and play elicits angry
asides from the younger-generation speaker(s):

We begin to go up on the ridge, talking together, looking at the kino-coloured ants,

at the yard-wide sore of their nest, that kibbled peak, and the workers
heaving vast stalks up there,

the brisk compact workers; jointed soldiers pour out then, tense with
acid; several probe the mouth of a lost gin bottle:
_Innuendo, we exclaim, literal minds! ..._ (CP 124)

Confrontation with the cousin on his stallion, that may hold sparks
of further conflict, provides instead a moment of reconciliation with
the grandfathers. Both sides appreciate the male style, the Flaunt, of
the cousin: ‘we murmur stone-horse and devilry to the grinners
under grass’ (CP 125). The obscurity and intensity of the section are
markers of the psychological disturbance Murray is probing, a
dilemma which has less to do with family than masculinity — with
the threatened ‘inner collapse’ of manhood among ‘white men
deprieved by fashion of their military and work-ethic themes and
scorned for their decency and lack of education’ _(_Persistence in Folly_ 29). This is the source of frenzy in the cycle, and will flare
into prominence again, of course, in _The Boys Who Stole the
Funeral_. ‘The warriors’ of Section 9 may be loggers or truckies,
farmers or mechanics, surfers or bikies, but their ‘words of power’
— unlike the power names or _bukalili_ seeded in the Moon-Bone
cycle (Berndt 17) — do not serve to unfold a regenerative mystery,
but to flaunt and exclude, to compete and threaten. ‘The warriors
who have killed, and the warriors who eschewed killing’ do not
come to blows, but neither can they untie the knot they observe in
themselves and in the ‘boys who think hard work a test, and boys
who think it is not a test’ (CP 127). The Western problem of how,
without any test or initiation, manhood is to be achieved is not a
dilemma that can be resolved by Aboriginal solutions embodied in
the totemic creatures nor by meteorological display, the rains of
Section 12.

Resolution is furnished by the actuality and symbolism of the
star-gazing in Section 13. In a reprise of the elders whose benign
speculations open the poem — ‘rolling a cigarette, they say
thoughtfully Yes, and their companion nods, considering’ (CP 122)
— the star-watching elevates the retirees, who have been granted a
new social time to exist in: the Cross sheds light ‘on the glasses of the Old People’ (CP 129). The constellations hold stars and myths enough for all watchers, but it is the Cross that speaks to the male holidayers and offers something more than nostalgia for the Aboriginal altjira:

the Cross is rising on his elbow, above the glow of the horizon;
carrying a small star in his pocket, he reclines there brilliantly,
above the Alum Mountain, and the lakes threaded on the Myall River,
and above the Holiday. (CP 130)

Older watchers may remember that, in popular song, a star in the pocket was useful for ‘a rainy day’; Kattang watchers (though not referred to) might think the Cross a karadji or ‘clever man’, with his crystal or soul shining through his person; Christians in the impromptu congregation might recall a promised eternity transcending the cyclical time of vegetation myth. ‘Brilliantly’ lolling, the Cross might suggest a Wildean artist, sure of his vocation and its uselessness, or (not to be confused with the Bludger) a vernacular worker confident about his hours and knock-off (like the workers at the start of Kangaroo). Above all, Murray’s Cross is male — is relaxed and brilliant about being so. He is also, almost literally, iconoclastic, more hip than ocker, with a shock of mild surprise for the socially conservative. Like one of Foucault’s fools or unemployed, he sails free of power relations and wealth distribution: the ‘small star in his pocket’ is no Victorian fob-watch. The Cross achieves his socially transcendent maleness, not by being possessed of lands but his own sense of time, of how to combine ‘Karma’ and ‘Lilah’. Carmel Gaffney has argued, against Paul Kane, that Murray is not a Romantic poet, that his pastoral and satire are based on a conviction of convention and community that is ultimately classical (Gaffney 108–22). Her reading can be applied to that part of the ‘Holiday Song Cycle’ I have largely ignored in the preceding paragraphs; but in Murray’s work up to Ethnic Radio his construction of childhood, family and community, and his positing of a folie at the heart of his own inspiration, are ineluctably Romantic.

‘But thereof come[s] in the end despondency …’ Murray’s middle-distance poems suffer a decline after the ‘Holiday Song
Cycle’, but it is not my purpose (indeed, it is contrary to my opinion) to attribute this to a biographical cause. Two poems which follow the pattern of Murray’s earlier mid-length verse are ‘The Steel’, an exclusively family poem from The People’s Otherworld (1983), and ‘Aspects of Language and War on the Gloucester Road’, a largely topographical poem from The Daylight Moon (1987). A consensus seems to have built up about ‘The Steel’ that Murray was still too close to the events surrounding his mother’s death, too angry and anguished, to control the tone.11 This, I suggest, disallows a poet the opportunity to recreate dramatic emotion and ignores Murray’s sure paralleling of his ‘case’ (CP 168) with that of his father. Rage and grief are too controlled —

The poor man’s anger is a prayer
for equities Time cannot hold
and steel grows from our mother’s grace.
Justice is the people’s otherworld. (CP 169)

— in a conclusion which impersonalises mother, substitutes a swipe at liberation theology for elegiac sentiment, and replaces the Romantic lunar otherworld of ‘Evening Alone at Bunyah’ with an orthodox afterlife. Like the ‘Bulahdelah–Taree Cycle’, the topographical ‘Gloucester Road’ poem surveys Kattang and Murray lands, but on an east-west rather than a south-north axis. As announced in the title, ‘Aspects of Language and War’, and the first line, ‘I travel a road cut through time’, this is a historical poem, of the kind Nicolas Birns has analysed (Birns 20–36),11 and one that frequently deals with etymology, with examples of the Kattang language which have survived in the district’s placenames and sociolect. A catalogue poem rich with implied yarns and sufficiently readable with its irregular rhymes, ‘Aspects’ only occasionally deviates into personal narrative:

We held Free Church services ...
in that hall. For months I’d cry aloud
at the rise in the east of any cloud
no bigger than a man’s hand.
A cloud by day led me out of Babyland
about when Hiroshima had three years to go. (CP 249)
There is obscurity here: Elijah’s ‘little cloud like a man’s hand’ (1 Kings 18.44) might refer to a terror of the Last Judgment instilled by Free Presbyterian teaching, and being led by a cloud, with ‘Hiroshima ... three years to go’, to fear of invasion or being taken to church. But any intensity is dispersed when another anecdote, about a meningitis-affected ‘baby of thirty next door in his wheelchair’, issues in a calmingly orthodox conclusion about the Last Things: ‘it is first for him/ that I insist on a state where lives resume’ (CP 249). In poems like ‘Aspects of Language and War’ and ‘The Steel’, Murray has indeed become the anti-Romantic poet of community and Catholic tradition of whom Gaffney writes, but has done so at the cost, I would contend, of folie, the folie which energised previous middle-distance performances.

Which is not to say that later mid-length poems are not fascinating in their own right. ‘Crankshaft’, in Translations from the Natural World (1992) is a collection of strangely oblique family histories which, I take it, allows dignity to neighbours by refusing to countenance the theory that family dynamics are governed by some guilty psychological secret. From the same volume, ‘Kimberley Brief’, a fusion of Byron’s tourist poetry with his ottava rima narratives, is cast in a stanza of couplets which can be wall-to-wall epigram. The form enables Murray to throw off some of his finest verse aphorisms. Nor is it to say that the holy fool disappears from Murray’s longer poems. Fredy Boettcher has visions travelling through the Rockies beyond Denver, a journey both in a boxcar and the sky. In his visions he is joined by another shaman and strongman, Iowa; he sees an angel — ‘The angel’s name is Moroni’ — and he recalls his loser friend’s dictum, ‘Jesus came to lose’ (Fredy Neptune 157–58). The passage is as intense and strange as anything in Murray’s work. Murray has not lost his fascination with folie or fools in his later work, but deals with them in shorter confessional poems and in his two verse novels. The Romantic in Murray has not been extirpated, that is, and is still aware ‘Those men that in their writings are most wise/ Own nothing but their blind, stupefied hearts’ (Yeats 182).
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NOTES

1. The spelling ‘Buladelah’, which Murray consistently adopts, is standardised here to ‘Bulahdelah’.

2. A misprint in the second place-name has been corrected.


6. For the reference to Faust, see Christopher Marlowe, *Doctor Faustus* V. ii. 126, and for plates representing Soutine's 'formidable series Carcasses of Beef' in 1925, see Marcellin Castaing and Jean Leymarie, *Soutine* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1965), p. 26, pl. XII and XIII. Of '10. The Boeotian Count', Murray wrote: ‘This was the first text in which I made reference to Boeotia; it became an important theme in my thinking later on’ (*The Vernacular Republic* 214).

7. Seamus Heaney probes these rites in *Wintering Out and North*.


10. See, for example, Andrew Taylor, *Reading Australian Poetry* (St Lucia, Qld.: U of Queensland P, 1987), p. 153; and Bourke 2, 30.

11. For the kind of local-historical data Murray calls on in the poem, see his 'A Generation of Changes', *A Working Forest* (Potts Point, NSW: Duffy & Snellgrove, 1997), pp. 45–52.
leading Danish composer Pelle Gudmundsen-Holmgreen, premiered in Copenhagen March 2001

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