Les Murray’s essay ‘How Fred and I wrote Fredy Neptune’ (Craven 304) begins with a discussion of the book’s dislike of ‘the lofty class-terminology of literary studies’. This critical obstacle is also a clue to Fredy Neptune’s significance in the creative modulation of poetic traditions which Murray has been engaged on since his first book. He made this explicit in ‘On Sitting Back and Thinking about Porter’s Boeotia’ (Elkin 171–84) and signalled it in titles such as The Vernacular Republic, The Peasant Mandarin, The Rabbiter’s Bounty and very loudly, for those who had not been listening, in Subhuman Redneck Poems. Of course, Murray is not the only poet in what he defined as the ‘Boeotian tradition’ but he is perhaps the only one currently writing in English who has sedulously cultivated it as a comprehensive artistic philosophy and therefore developed its radical implications. This is what gives his poetry a distinctive quality that sets it apart from poetic traditions symbiotic with ‘literary studies’ and keeps it open to a wide range of readers, though it may sometimes lead to obtuse criticism. It is implicitly clear from Murray’s work that his ‘Boeotian’ art was not created as the result of an intellectual decision to write against dominant trends and fashions but to keep faith with the impulses which

... concert
our daylight and dreaming mind, our
emotions, instinct, breath and native gesture

into the only whole thinking: poetry. (‘Poetry and Religion’ 51)

Both Murray’s creative and discursive writing suggests that this conception of poetry unfolded through artistic practice and its continuing significance is apparent from ‘The Instrument’ in his latest collection, Conscious and Verbal (1999).
The connection between the idea of poetry as ‘the only whole thinking’ and the Boeotian philosophy elaborated in Murray’s work is not cognitive but imaginative. The definition, or re-definition, of a Boeotian cultural tradition, which is traced back to Hesiod and is paralleled by poetic cultures in several non-European languages, has been the inevitable outcome of following the ‘wholespeak of poetry’ (‘Poems and Poesics’ 179). Thinking about Peter Porter’s ‘On First Looking into Chapman’s Hesiod’ may have been as important an event in Murray’s career as first looking into Chapman’s Homer was for Keats, for it enabled him to formulate the direction poetry was taking him. He has not returned to an explicit discussion of the Boeotian tradition since he wrote the essay on Porter’s poem but the idea continues to reverberate and evolve in his poetry as it accumulates into a Bocotian counterweight to the Athenianism of literary culture.

Fredy Neptune adds significantly to this because it brings together artistic preoccupations which have been present in Murray’s work from the beginning and amplifies them. The complex multiplicity of the book will unfold only as it is read and re-read in different ways by different readers, for it has a sustained double aspect; a dynamic narrative thrust related in verse which invites reflection as it impels the story. At every point events converge along the various dimensions of fable, poem cycle and novelistic narrative as these elements are integrated into an extended verse form. Fredy Neptune is simultaneously an Australian poem in tone and story, stylistically and thematically linked with Australian literary traditions, and a fable on the challenging topic of survival in the twentieth century, explicitly informed by a comprehensive theory of poetry. Its fiction is enmeshed in historical details and its protagonist’s career intersects with those of historically documented persons. While these might be considered attributes of epic, Fredy Neptune does not depend upon or affirm the heroic and hierarchical values of epic. By its very existence it addresses the question of the viability of epic at the end of the twentieth century and the possibility of representing its momentous events in epic conventions and answers it by substituting a many voiced Bocotian narrative.

From the opening stanza it discounts an epic voice and epic forms of address. It is not a song for chanting but a yarn told in Fredy’s two languages, English and German, but primarily in a
vernacular Australian of the first half of the twentieth century, before the complete atrophy of oral culture. Murray suggests that it is a rural vernacular because it derives from the place in which he grew up and the speech of his father (Craven 366) but while the language of Fredy Neptune is rooted in the speech of a particular time and place it is not represented as a regional variant set off against an implicit or explicit standard. The language of the poem is not defined by selecting distinctive features as a conventional means of characterisation. In casting the whole poem in Fredy’s language Murray has created an extended multiple narrative which addresses the reader from a Boeotian position.

Obviously, Fredy Neptune is not the first Australian vernacular narrative. The long tradition behind it is thematically indicated in Fredy’s ‘odd yarns’ with Banjo Paterson, who alludes to his poems as perhaps ‘nothing but a long wry farewell to the horse’ and wonders ‘how Lawson’s faring’ (21–22). An oblique reference in another strand in the tradition surfaces in Book II when Fredy and Laura go to the ‘moving pictures’ for the first time and see The Sentimental Bloke (57). There are, in fact, occasional traces of the Bloke’s idiom in Fredy’s address to Laura but in this verse novel Murray uses the vernacular differently from other writers. Fredy’s is not a dramatically represented voice through which he is characterised, but a pervasive and flexible narrative tone. This might suggest similarities to the antecedent of all such narratives, Huckleberry Finn, but the narrative voice of Fredy Neptune is not managed in the same way. In Huckleberry Finn and many similar narratives the representation of such things as orthography, lexis, grammar and syntax suggests a non-standard or deviant voice manipulated by a controlling author behind the scenes and at a distance from the protagonist. There is nothing of this kind in Fredy Neptune; such devices would form the bridges which Murray said it had been a strain to build ‘between [his] inherited culture and the suave snob-talk of Culture’ (Craven 365).

Although Fredy sometimes dramatises himself, notably in passages introduced by phrases such as ‘Here’s me’ and ‘There I was’, Fredy Neptune bears no relation to the dramatic monologue, unlike extended narratives such as The Ring and the Book, or, closer to home, The Sentimental Bloke. Dramatic monologue makes the reader an eavesdropper who infers situations and scenes from
listening to a voice, but Fredy narrates descriptively and addresses a reader, sometimes quite explicitly. Fredy Neptune is not an attempt to represent oral narrative, though its tone derives from talk. It centres the narrative in Fredy.

Of all forms of narration employed in the novel this might seem the one most dependent on prose as the medium for the creation and modulation of a discursive tone, yet novels in this mode may develop lyric qualities, and the rhythms and intonations of the narrative may assume poetic qualities. It is arguable that the poetic tendencies of many major novels in prose, combined with the influence of prose on the craft of verse in the twentieth century, have brought about a situation where verse is now an appropriate medium for the novel just as the novel remains the one large form available to the poet.

The interdependence of verse and narrative in Fredy Neptune demonstrates this beautifully. The story of the man from Dungog who lost the faculty of tactile sensation and witnessed many atrocities of the twentieth century is related in the protagonist’s voice but as it unfolds this is inflected with quotations, allusions and other voices, directly or indirectly represented. These are orchestrated through the irregular octets which drive the narrative.

The freely varied octets of Fredy Neptune avoid the distractions of an acoustically regular template as well as the diffuse tendencies of blank and free verse. They are irregular but at the same time finely controlled and have a tenuous link with ottava rima, a stanza used for extended narrative by Boccacio, Ariosto and Tasso but not brought to its full potential in English until the time of Byron. Don Juan amplifies its capacity for tonal fluctuation and assimilation which was already present in the work of Ariosto and it might be considered a forerunner to Fredy Neptune in the evolution of novelistic verse. However, Fredy Neptune is a counter-example or inversion of Don Juan and its octets bear a similar tangential relation to ottava rima as the fourteen-liners of The Boys Who Stole the Funeral bear to the sonnet. In both books, forms which evolved in association with what Bakhtin regarded as fixed and closed poetic genres are reformulated into attributes of what he would have called a ‘genre-in-the-making’: the verse novel. Poetry as speech or song is novelized for silent reading, which is not to say it is muted; we read it for the ‘pleasure of listening to the music in (the) head’ as A.
Alvarez put in a review of Walcott's *Tiepolo's Hound* in the *New York Review of Books*. Of course, the tendency towards the novelization of verse has been operating since poets gave up singing or chanting and began to write instead; what is at issue here is Murray's distinctive way of creating a polyphonic verse narrative in Fredy's voice.

The octets of *Fredy Neptune* are generally syntactically complete and rhythmically resolved; a few are enjambed or linked in short sequences. Their rhythms are propulsive and extended through the length of the octet rather than segmented. This is managed by the co-ordination of syntax, line-length, caesuras, alliteration, assonance and subtler acoustic effects running across the line divisions, giving the octets a deceptive tension which propels the fast pace of the narrative. There is a principle of artistic economy operating here similar to that which shapes the sonnet forms in *The Boys Who Stole the Funeral*. Instead of employing the full suite of defining attributes, just sufficient are selected to create the fine balance of formality, intricacy and sprawl which is the hallmark of Murray's poetry.

The two octets of the prelude in which the protagonist begins to document his life by reference to snapshots from a family album are as good a place as any to illustrate this.

That was sausage day
on our farm outside Dungog.
There's my father Reinhard Boettcher,
my mother Agnes. There is brother Frank
who died of the brain-burn, meningitis.
There I am having my turn
at the mincer. Cooked meat with parsley and salt
winding out, smooth as gruel, for the weisswurst.

Here's me riding bareback in the sweater
I wore to sea first.
I never learned the old top ropes,
I was always in steam. Less capstan, less climbing
more re-stowing cargo. Which could be hard and slow
as farming — but to say Why this is Valparaiso!
Or: I'm in Singapore and know my way about
takes a long time to get stale.
These represent a colloquial voice speaking informally and using familiar expressions, yet the third line is a perfect trochaic tetrameter and this is followed by two decasyllabic lines centrally balanced in contrasting ways. The fourth line is exactly divided syllabically (but not accentually) by a very prominent caesura which reverses the rhythms of a line that might be scanned iambically. This gives the strong accent on ‘There’ in the middle of the line a different quality from the accents the word receives as the initial syllable of the third and sixth lines. The movement of the verse follows the eyes scanning the photograph and midway through the fourth line they locate a figure they have been searching for intently. In contrast to the prominent pause in the middle of the fourth line, the fifth line is exactly centred on the heavy alliterating ‘brain-burn’ which is rhythmically ambiguous; it could receive one stress or two, or perhaps what Hopkins regarded as a ‘distributed accent’. The silent reader, listening to the music of the poem in the head, can appreciate this and perhaps replay it as a rhythmic crux at the core of the stanza which trips its rhythms, deliberately upsetting its balancing tendency.

In addition to this, both ‘There is brother Frank/ who died of the brain-burn’ and ‘There I am having my turn/ at the mincer’ are pentameters (with an extra unstressed syllable, a common variant) but they are deliberately broken around the line endings; the first to frame it between phrases which echo each other rhythmically and alliteratively; the second so that the turn of the line models the movement of the arm on the mincer and underlines the pun. Finally, the pervasive but unforced alliteration which lightly integrates the octet becomes graphemically obtrusive across English and German in the closing line. This may not be realised phonetically as Fredy is bilingual in these languages but the reader only becomes fully aware of this as the book progresses.

This analysis of prosodic details, which could be repeated at any point in the book, has already become over-elaborate. It is enough to observe that the second octet has a different structural economy organised around informal repetitions and antitheses which suddenly tighten into a surprising combination of internal and end rhyme (‘restowing cargo’, ‘slow’, ‘Valparaiso’) and then relax into the irregular rhythms of the lines which complete the syntax and close the octet.
There are sufficient indications here of how the octets of Fredy Neptune compose the music of colloquial speech without becoming metrically or prosodically obtrusive. The poetry of the novel is an extended counter-example to Roman Jakobson’s celebrated definition of poetry as ‘organised violence committed on ordinary speech’ (which he propounded in On Czech Verse, Berlin 1923). Cases of disrupted speech in Fredy Neptune are generally exceptions which prove the point; for example, the horse-breaking stanza (13) is made of ordinary speech tinged with technical jargon and shaken into alliterative metres by the effort of staying on a bucking horse. It is not poetry, but the imaginary horse, which commits the musical violence on ordinary speech in this passage. Altogether, the verse of Fredy Neptune suggests that ordinary speech is not prosaic but poetic. This is consistent with the idea that human beings are not rational but poetic which Murray suggested in the essay ‘Poèmes and the Mystery of Embodiment’ (180) and several related poems. Fredy Neptune is, amongst other things, an extended development (or ‘poetic embodiment’), both formally and thematically, of the complex ideas in this essay.

The poetry of Fredy Neptune scores the protagonist’s vernacular, narrating voice to enhance its novelistic potential. The book makes verse work as an appropriate medium for the novel and thus it occupies the centre of a tradition which until now has been more prominently defined around its margins. The fundamental tone of the narrative is an unforced Australian vernacular introduced in the prelude and at its purest in the opening octet of Book V (215); it is generally finely turned for historical and regional specificity. There is, for example, occasionally an allusion to the Sentimental Bloke in Fredy’s address to Laura and sometimes, poignantly, a hint of Joe Wilson (180):

Having to write to Laura and say what went wrong
with my plans to get home was as hard a job as ever.
Talk about earn as you yearn. And the butcher’s truck
part of it beat me. I couldn’t write that. I tried.
That’d stay in me till it croaked out some desperate day.

The poetic narrating voice serves a complex array of representational functions which counterpoint the fundamental tone. It reports dialogue in a range of other voices and communes with
itself; it is jostled by events, as in the bucking horse octet or when it
breaks into end-rhyme, like a vernacular hymn, at the prospect of
Jerusalem; it becomes implicated in stories and aware of itself and
occasionally sends messages to the reader across time and space
(‘... As we swelled up above/ the Dormier works, a seaplane was
splitting the blue/ cobble of the Soil Sea, Lake Constance to you
English’ 178); it reads or misreads signs, makes noises, sings,
recites poetry, translates, impersonates other voices and in a
typically novelistic manner it is doubled in free indirect discourse:

So I went to Ira and Bethelle and he was up,
Ira and Ira, with his maroon and gold
emperor’s robe round him, and the children in scrubbing-brush helmets
bashing shields with each other, and he thanks me right kindly
for all I done but he couldn’t tolerate to stay
among Godless lying movie abominations. None of his
had ever been in a movie house, no more that the burleyque.
He was drinking buttermilk from a gilt bowl knotty with gods
as he told me this, (157)

The most remarkable enrichments to the narrative tone derive
from its linguistic variety, especially from Fredy’s bilingualism and
the manifold ways this is represented in verse. Fredy Neptune, is, of
course, mostly in English, but it is full of other languages and dialects.
Some of these are drawn from sources which are taken for granted
(such as the Latin Mass) and their effect generally depends upon their
not being translated. Others are introduced in contexts which supply
clues to translation; one is actually footnoted and another is
uncomprehendingly transcribed by Fredy, presumably backwards,
from Turkish written in Arabic script, into something resembling
English words (5). Towards the end of Book I (38 and 39) Fredy
encounters a German machine-gunner with an encyclopaedic mind
who annotates a Chinese character and gives him a slightly inaccurate
lecture on the history of comparative philology. This is perhaps a
mocking allusion to Pound’s practice in The Cantos.

Throughout the novel there are extensive passages of narrative as
well as dialogue where German is represented through English in all
possible ways. The narrative tone is enhanced through loan-words
such as ‘wurst’, transliterations such as ‘Soil Sea’, ‘race-comrade’
and ‘wander-years’, snatches of German slang literally translated,
and traces of German syntax and word order, discreetly introduced to avoid the suggestion of stage German. Several dialects are present, including Swiss, which is represented in various ways, including verse in Scots (174). This passage occurs at the beginning of Book IV, ‘The Police Revolution’ where Fredy is occasionally reminded (or commanded) that in Germany one speaks German. Earlier, in Book III (160–161) the long conversation with Marlene Dietrich in German is rendered in English, complete with translations of Rilke and Mörike, until the end, where narrative and dialogue are tightly juxtaposed in verse which produces a complex effect by representing German in different ways; as the language itself, through a word by word rendering, and through translation:

...Your skin is deaf, then? she asked.
I gulped Yes. Deaf all over? I agreed there too.
Sie sind aber einmalig. You are but once. You're unique.
Now I do see. A boss cocky steamed along in his cravat,
wriggled with excuses to Miss Dietrich ... (161)

These passages illustrate how Fredy Neptune develops dialogically through the medium of performance, but the narrative is both a performance and the story of a performance. From the twelfth stanza of Book I to the final page of Book V, Fredy is ‘cracking normal’ (with a few brief, partial remissions); compelled by the loss of sensation to pretend that he is not different. This involves him in further levels of performance; as horsebreaker, fake journalist, circus strongman, undercover agent, Hollywood extra, airship crewman and truckie, amongst other things. His performances are cover because he is constantly at risk of being revealed as a ‘no-body’, he has suffered a psychosomatic loss of sensation, or lost his body yet paradoxically his performances have to be corporeal. At the centre of the book he is actually collected as a body by Basil Thoroblood who talks to him ‘about/ bodies and corporals, embodiment and incarnation; about never being the body that an evil poem/ uses for its vehicle; about how a true poem could arise/ from the body ...’ (121–122). ‘All beyond me’, Fredy responds ‘but I thought how the Turk Colonel said the world/ was made of poems; Basil was telling us how that worked.’ (122). While he is numb he cannot experience embodied poetry but only the grand disembodied poems — or poèmes, as Murray calls them in
'Poèmes and the Mystery of Embodiment'. It was one of these, 'The new poem .../ all of the Turkish peoples/one great secular Turkey to the Chinese Wall' (44) explained by the Turkish colonel which motivated the atrocity which led to his loss of bodily sensation.

Fredy Neptune is (amongst other things) a picaresque narrative in which the protagonist has to find his way through a world of pocts, poems and poèmes, from the encounter with Banjo Paterson to the encounter with Rilke and Eduard Mörike recited by Marlene Dietrich which is a turning point in the fable. Fredy seems to miss the point when the Turkish Colonel takes him to a festival of oral poetry and translates a Dervish poem for him, but when Marlene Dietrich recites Rilke's poem on the panther in the zoo he responds with his body:

It sat me up. This wasn't the Turk's or Thoroblood's 'poems',

big, dangerous, baggy. This was the grain distilled. (160)

I will pass over the enticing allusion to a famous definition of the novel to keep attention on the fact that here, at the centre of the book, Fredy responds to a poem with his body. The scene continues intriguingly; Marlene can see that he is 'cracking normal' and brings him to the verge of answering 'yes' to the question of whether he is a murderer. She gives him (with 'a Dazzling look') two stanzas of the Eduard Mörike poem on worldly detachment, which he interrupts with 'I asked her Stop' and draws him into confessing his story. She then offers him a psychological insight which leaves him with the sense of being inside out, with an unconscious body rather than an unconscious mind.

As the story of an inside-out man 'cracking normal' Fredy Neptune is the inverse of narratives which single out the fate of exceptional or individualistic protagonists (Ulysses — even in the guises he assumes in Walcott's Omeros — Troilus, Criseyde, Don Juan, for example). Fredy is introduced in the prelude as part of an ordinary family represented in a few photographs and the thrust of the narrative is towards a resolution where he can stop 'cracking normal' and simply become normal again. By representing Fredy — '[d]ecent but not clever' — as 'cracking normal' through a series of extraordinary adventures back to ordinary life which contains too much for description, the narrative develops the Boccian impulse which has been present in Murray's poetry from
the beginning. This locates the art of poetry in the ‘vernacular republic’; the realm of common speech and ordinary life, which cannot be represented through heroic — or Athenian — narrative. In *Fredy Neptune* the verse novel is re-created as a Boeotian art which by-passes the epic *versus* novel debate on which theories of the novel are predominantly founded.

*Fredy Neptune* is a fully developed verse novel which balances and fuses the fable and novelistic form with the poetry in which it is embodied, in accordance with the theory of poetry developed in the book, to which Murray returns in ‘The Instrument’ in his latest collection (*Conscious and Verbal*, 1999). In terms of that poem, *Fredy Neptune* is ‘completed art/ free of obedience to its time/ which can pirouette you/ through and athwart the larger poems you are in.’ Through the medium of varied and precisely cadenced vernacular verse it becomes both a fully dialogical novel and a true poem (a ‘poem-novel’ rather than a verse novel, as Murray suggested to me in conversation) for surviving in a world of poems.

**WORKS CITED**


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NOTES

1. Once the tradition becornes apparent other titles such as *The Weatherboard Cathedral*, *Ethnic Radio* and *The People’s Otherworld* are seen to allude to it.

2. Seamus Heaney, an adept of literary studies, diverges in later books from the Bocotian impulses of his earlier work.

3. For a full discussion of this see Ian Bickerton, ‘Why Australians, and Americans, why indeed all historians should read Les Murray’s *Fredy Neptune*’ forthcoming in the *Journal of Australian Studies*, 69.

BRUCE CLUNIES ROSS, inspired by Tony Wedgewood Benn's announcement that he was leaving parliament so that he can continue in politics, recently retired from his position in the Department of English at the University of Copenhagen in order to continue with scholarship though there are signs that he is entering his anecdotage.

NILS ESKESTAD did his PhD on contemporary poetry at the University of St. Andrews, and now lives in Copenhagen where he teaches and works as a radio journalist.

LINE HENRIKSEN is a graduate of the University of Copenhagen who also studied at the University of Florence and completed an M.A. on modernism at the University of York. Her recently completed Copenhagen Ph.D. thesis, *Ambition and Anxiety*, deals with the epic genre and its modern extension in The Cantos of Ezra Pound and Derek Walcott's *Omeros*. She has essays published and forthcoming on Homer and genre and on various aspects of the poetry of Pound, Dante and Walcott.

CAROL HETHERINGTON is a librarian and editorial assistant for *ALS* and co-compiler, with Irmtraud Petersson, of ‘The Annual Bibliography of Studies in Australian Literature’. She is also currently employed as a bibliographer by AustLit: The Australian Literature Gateway.

MARTIN LEER is Associate Professor of Postcolonial Literatures in the University of Copenhagen. He has published widely on Australian and other literary geographies. His translation of a selection of Les Murray's poetry into Danish, *En helt almindelig Regnbue*, was published to great acclaim in 1998 and has spawned a ‘choral symphony’ of Les Murray poems, *Sound/Sight*, by the