Boeotian and Loyolan Art

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Abstract
In sorting through the mass of English-language poetry poured out by the printing-presses of the world, one's problem is not so much to tell good from bad as to distinguish, out of the great press of the merely talented, that tiny handful of poets (probably not more than half a dozen in a generation) who have something major and distinctive to say. Among observers of Australian poetry suspicion has been hardening over the last five years that Les A. Murray may be such a one.
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Thirty-nine-year-old Murray is a man of paradoxes: an innovator in style, but a social conservative; supporter of the deposed Whitlam government, and critic of its ideology; a republican polemicist who refers to the British Crown as ‘that scab of our dependence’, yet advocates a republic less for what it might
change in Australian society than for what it might conserve; a convert to an eclectic, yet essentially preecumenical Catholicism; populist democrat, who tresures (SR1 spelling is used throughout) an aristocratic Scots Gaelic ancestry; poet who celebrates the countryside, yet like one in five Australians lives in Sydney; and finally, a linguist who speaks most of the languages of Europe, yet prefers the complexities of Australian vernacular culture.

One clue to the paradoxes of Murray lies in his loyalty to the New South Wales countryfolk among whom he grew up. Describing his adolescent rebellion against the university system, he states that the one thing he understood was that fully to accept the fashionable ideas of the late fifties would have been to betray his friends and family. ('Thus education doth make class-traitors of us all'.) There is a great deal in this, especially in an overwhelmingly urbanized country, where a first-class honors degree has become the new passport to political power, and where the more progressive and intellectual of the two political parties proved when in power to have no rural policy whatever. Where an earlier generation of Australian intellectuals during the 20-year-long mild McCarthyist period that followed the defeat of the Japanese invasion joined the shrill concensus of the tertiary-educated, cursed their philistine countrymen and tended to go into voluntary exile abroad, Murray has in turn cursed that concensus, and become the most extreme example of a new generation of Australian intellectuals who are unashamedly proud of their homeland.

In Ethnic Radio Murray excels at sympathetic depiction of his countrymen in precisely those attitudes that would tempt a Barry Humphries to satire. No one captures so well that world of meaning in the pause before an Australian farmer replies 'Yes, that'd be right'; or even the metaphysics of a card-player's anecdote about a bookmaker who failed to adjust his odds during a plunge on an outsider:

So drunk he kept it at tens – and the bloody thing lost!
He bought a farm out of it. Round the battered formica
table the talk is luck more than justice, justice
being the politics of a small child’s outcry.

The subtlest eyes in the Southern Hemisphere look at
the cards in front of them. Well I'll go alone.
Outside the window, passionfruit flowers are blooming
singly together. Many are not in the sun.

Murray’s short sentences capture well the flat ironic cadences of
Australian speech. The mild metaphysics of the succeeding stan­
zas build well to the superbly vernacular conclusion: ‘The game’s
loosely sacred; luck is being worked at’.

With landscape, too, he rejects European preconceptions, see­
ing things familiarly and whole. Here, for instance, he describes
an excursion on the bark-steeped peaty waters of the Myall Lakes
in central New South Wales:

As we were rowing to the lakes
our oars were blunt and steady wings

the tanbark-coloured water was
a gruel of pollen: more coming down
hinted strange futures to our cells

the far hills ancient under it
the corn flats black-green under heat
were cut in an antique grainy gold

it was the light of Boeotian art

**Boeotian** is a key term in Murray’s aesthetics. It refers to that
richly diversified regional tradition of Greek lyric poetry which
the centralist Athenians affected to despise as rustic and dialectal.
Boeotian poetry, as in Hesiod, has its centre wherever the mind
and eye of the observer are:

still hearing, we saw a snake ahead
winding, being his own schnorkel
aslant in the swimming highlights, only
his head betrayed him, leading two
ripples and a scaled-down swirl. We edged
closer, were defied and breathed at. . .

Touching the oars and riding, we
kept up with the blunt, heat-tasting head
debating its life, and sparing it

which is the good of Athens.

In 'The Gallery', by contrast, the scene is the meandering
double line of trees that follows the water-table of a dried-up
creek-bed:

This skeleton river, soil-shadow feeding the farms:
to be under these terraces
understanding your life
that is more than half gone, and your friends dismarrying
to be here with your country, that will waken when it wakens,
that won't be awakened by contempt
or love:
to know you may live and die in colonial times.

As he claims in another place: 'I am not European, nor is my
English'. Yet there is nothing here that need baffle the non-
Australian reader. Murray's Boeotian insistence on his own ver-
nacular goes with a desire to communicate, and with a linguist's
understanding of other languages and cultures.

Only occasionally does he let his skill with words tempt him
into a display of surrealist virtuosity, as in 'The Powerline Incar-
nation':

Vehicles that run on death come howling into
our street with lights a thousandth of my blue
arms keep my wife from my beauty from my species
the jewels in my tips
In fact, by his development of a flexible poetry of statement that deals with real and important things Murray has done more than anyone else of his generation to strengthen the core tradition of Australian poetry and make a second Ern Malley hoax unnecessary. Here, for example, he describes his wife's experience as a refugee child shipped out to Australia after the 2nd World War:

Ahead of them lay  
the Deep End of the schoolyard,  
tribal testing, tribal soft-drinks,  
and learning English fast,  
the Wang-Wang language.

Ahead of them, refinements:  
thumbs hooked down hard under belts  
to repress gesticulation;

ahead of them, epithets:  
wog, reffo, Commo Nazi,  
things which can be forgotten  
but must first be told. . .

Murray's merit is so evident that it is worth spending some time on the two defects that may yet pull him back into the ranks of the merely talented. The first, which he himself would probably admit, is his failure to date to develop a truly populist style of verse. The polysyllabification of the English language over the last 100 years has made its old metres, notably the iambic rhythm, clumsy and artificial. In the absence of a new metre, Murray, like most of us, is forced back upon free verse. But (as a glance at the funerals column in the daily paper would suggest) the one thing for which the ordinary person has never forgiven twentieth-century poets is their abandonment of metre. Poetry at its most minimal definition is memorable speech; but the absence of metre means that what one commonly remembers from Murray's work is the general
tenor plus a few salient phrases. It must gall him that A. D. Hope (whom he decries as an ‘Athenian’ poet) has probably more chance of being remembered and quoted by the average reader, precisely because Hope has found a solution to the twentieth-century problem of metre.

Murray, however, counters with a remarkable ability to introduce into his verse the sort of choice vernacular phrase that one is more used to associating with David Williamson’s characters. Sometimes a poem is little more than an anecdote written down: for instance in the piece where he describes how bravado led him to attempt a vindaloo curry – ‘Fair play! It was frightful. I spooned the chicken of hell / in a sauce of rich yellow brimstone’; or in his reference to his surplus fat – ‘flat food round the midriff, long food up your sleeves’.

But it’s a narrow tight-rope. One of the immediate consequences of loss of metre, perhaps first seen in Pound’s doctoring of The Wasteland, is elitism. Deprived of the traditional metrical craft that connected his skills with the demands of the less literary reader, the poet resorts to clevernesses, to allusiveness, and to elliptical compression. Murray, in his poem on the carnage at Gallipoli, rightly rebukes Eliot for having led this fashion, but even in his reference falls into the same vice:

The misemployed, undone by courage
have become the Unsaluting Army
and buttoned boys, for all their trades
are country again, and that funny Missus
Porter’s not yet changed poetry.

As Murray admits, it’s a losing business at present: no matter how hard you try to reach the public you wind up as the property of an elite.

His most interesting solution to date has been to adopt the metres of aboriginal ceremonial poetry. In ‘The Buladelah-Taree Holiday Song Cycle’ the ritual Christmas–holiday summertime return to the countryside is represented as a sort of ‘white-fellow
walkabout'; and the winding seasonal procession of cars up the Pacific highway north of Sydney is associated with the powerful *Rainbow Serpent* of aboriginal mythology:

> It is the season of the Long Narrow City; it has crossed the Myall, it has entered the North Coast, that big stunning snake; it is looped through the hills, burning all night there. Hitching and flying on the downgrades, processionally balancing on the climbs, it echoes in O'Sullivan's Gap, in the tight coats of the flooded-gum trees; the tops of the palms exclaim at it unmoved, there near Wootton. Glowing all night behind the hills, with a north-shifting glare, burning behind the hills; through Coolongolook, through Wang Wauk, across the Wallamba, the booming charred pipe of the holiday slows and spurts again.

The long lines permit a certain necessary prolixity that suits well with Murray's eye for cumulative detail: 'toddlers, running away purposefully at random, among cars, into big-drownie water (come back, Cheryl-Ann!)'. At times, too, they enable him, without losing precision, to achieve a kind of Homeric high style, as when the flying-fox fruit bat, launching down from his perch, 'becomes the unfolded, far-speeding, upward-sidestepping, night-owl- outflying one'. It remains to be seen whether these aboriginal rhythms can be permanently adapted to Australian speech-patterns, or whether they will degenerate into modishness.

* * *

But Murray's is so much a poetry of statement that his real Achilles heel may lie in the pattern of ideas which he so relentlessly asserts.

As poet of ideas Murray reveals himself as essentially an eclectic conservative intellectual with populist leanings. He is capable of importing into his verse even the most standard tricks of conservative rhetoric – for instance the assumption of an implausibly
cyclical view of social history, so that changes in the climate of ideas are dismissed as matters of fashion:

We are mad for fresh starts, for leaps forward,
for this vertigo;
for new Angles and recycled Breakthroughs,
the 1912 show

or

Uptown, the Bomb Culture's just opened
its European run,
discounting many things on its counter:
calm tradition is one.

But this position is not so staid as might seem. White Australian society, since the pioneering days, has been committed to a process of incessant change. Even its out-and-out reactionaries of the Bjelke-Petersen mould are characterized precisely by their unquestioning belief in 'development'. The national psyche is like that of Murray's 'New World Driver': its notion of conservatism is to continue cruising at 60 mph and hope the terrain won't change too much in the process. In such a society (as even so moderate a group as the conservationists have discovered) nothing requires so radical a restructuring of inherited prejudices as the desire to keep things unchanged. Hence fearless conservatism can land a man like Murray in what seems to be the extreme radical camp. His well-known republicanism and vernacularism are good examples of this effect.

But of course the weakness of most conservative intellectuals is that at some point they are conservative not only in their goals, but in their thinking. 'Give me a child's mind till he is 7', sed St Ignatius Loyola, 'and I will determine his ideas for the rest of his life'. Much of what passes for conservative philosophizing is simply the fabrication of logical links between one Loyolan position (that is, one emotionally indoctrinated belief) and another; much
like a child completing one of those puzzles where if you join all points in the right order you create a picture. Murray is doubtless right, or at least within the permissible degree of error, in his pro-vernacular, pro-rural, anti-‘Athenian’ and neo-anti-colonial emphases; but there are too many places where grosser prejudice shows through. What is one to make of a poem (‘Impulse resisted on the Manly Ferry’) which carries in its slight length such refrains as: ‘Lovemaking may still, at times, make love’, “Man” is a prouder name than “male”, and ‘A fuck is never just a fuck’?

In an earlier book Murray asserted that an unwanted pregnancy should be accepted as a divine summons to experience. In *Ethnic Radio* the interesting piece ‘Lachlan Macquarie’s First Language’ ends with the governor’s Gaelic seer prophesying an Australia where ‘All folk there,/ except the child-hating ones were ladies and gentlemen’. Only the reader thoroughly familiar with Murray’s ideas might guess that this translates roughly as ‘All Australians will achieve middle-class culture, except the fashionable intellectuals who promote abortion and birth-control’. The obscurity may be meant to give a kind of aesthetic softening to Murray’s views; in fact it makes them more strident.

Such passages raise the fear that Murray is engaged in a precarious balancing act, one that involves him in trying to import into the humanist mainstream of Australian debate assumptions which really derive from his religious doctrines. (Abortion is a good example: you cannot convincingly argue *in human terms* that destroying a foetus is the same thing as murdering an adult. That sort of argument is always theology in disguise.)

And even on purely secular issues Murray’s thinking is often constricted by Loyolan effects. It is not that one objects to his rural bias, his sympathy for those so often unfairly dismissed as rustics, yokels, illiterates simply because their votes keep a conservative government in power. And as an Australian Murray is certainly right to reject stone-age Marxism as a solution, and insist that people be respected in terms of their own culture. But there remains too much suspicion that he, a super-intelligent in-
tellectual, sometimes uses the inadequacies of ordinary minds as a cover for his own timidities. The four futuristic pieces in this collection reveal a certain fear, even on those issues he knows best, of venturing across psychic open space.

For instance, as a linguistic scholar Murray should be well aware that any alphabetically-written language which reduces itself to a standardized written form must be prepared to update that standardized form every couple of centuries, as most European languages have in fact done in the last 100 years, or else suffer massive and increasing illiteracy such as now afflicts all the English-speaking nations. (Britain alone has some 2 million adult illiterates, whose humiliations it is difficult for a literate person to imagine; the plight of Australian schoolchildren is notorious.) Yet in his unpronounceable poem 'The Cwdeitar' both humane and philologic considerations are swept aside; and we find Murray proposing, with all the tart elitism of a village schoolmistress, that the updating of spelling be seen as a totalitarian plot to sabotage international culture!

Murray's satire on universities ('Fantasy of the World as a Softened University'), a theme to which he returns in this volume, shows a similar flaw:

I am a cleaner in the Faculty of Production, South Sydney Campus. We are Subtechnics staff; next year we'll be allowed to wear blue denim and take our orders only from postgraduates. At night, our seminar scrubs the Assembly Building where the undergraduates assemble cars. Untidy, scruffy young people, but you have to pity them, not being allowed to pair-bond till they graduate.

The futuristic presuppositions of the satire are ingeniously deployed. Nevertheless, it fails inasmuch as the reader is left with some suspicion that Murray resents universities not merely for their real vices (bureaucracy, elitism, masonic intent) but also because they do, with all their faults, serve as centres where the
intelligent young can find both the equipment and the confidence to question society’s norms. (The suggestion that their present tenuous right not to ‘pair-bond’ must turn into a compulsion seems to be a typical conservative misapprehension.)

Projecting the future is not of course an activity at which the conservative temperament excels. Its strength is rather in a certain doggedly contented realism about the way things are. But even here there are some sad opportunities missed, both aesthetically and philosophically. For instance ‘Laconics’, Murray’s account of how his family bought and cleared forty acres of ‘prime brush land’ (rainforest), is in places not so much laconic as tongue-tied. Here is the conclusion:

That interior machinegun,
my chainsaw, drops dead timber

where we burn the heaps
we’ll plant kikuyu grass.

Ecology? Sure.
But also husbandry.

And the orchard will go there
and we’ll re-roof the bare pole barn.

Our croft, our Downs,
our sober, shining land.

The blend of creative and machismo-ish satisfactions in clearing forest-land is nicely etched; and the dismissive reference to the claims of ‘ecology’ neatly captures the countryman’s irritation with the preachings of the city-bred weekend-tripping conservationist. Nevertheless, there are too many deep issues being skimped. Why should more land be cleared on the world’s least poorly forested continent? And what can be said in defence of a system of ownership that gives a million-year-old ecological community into the hands of a human individual and invites him to
destroy it for his own satisfaction, or to rationalize an investment? Follow these kinds of uneasiness through, and you eventually undermine the basic propositions on which Australian society has been built. (To do this you have to avoid the twin heresies of Marxism and conservative Christianity, each of which sees the planet Earth as the property of a single species with unlimited breeding rights.) However the sad thing in the present instance is not so much that Murray's ideas are shared by many of his countrymen, as that his commitment to pro-rural polemic has prevented his admitting the ideas and emotions that might have given him a richer and deeper poem.

* * *

It may seem I have spent too much space on Murray's philosophy. But his is so much a poetry of statement that its merit depends greatly on the adequacy of the ideas expressed. And there is a very real risk that Murray's attachment to certain Loyolan convictions which society is already abandoning, will sabotage his poetry. It is this that may eventually cause posterity to glance at much of his work and sigh for the waste of talent.

If so, Murray will be remembered not for his doctrines but for his more disinterested observations: for his picture of the world of refugee translators in 'Employment for the castes in Abeyance' –

I was Western Europe. Beiträge, reviste, dissertaties, rapports, turned English under my one-fingered touch. Teacup-and-Remington days.

Prince Obolensky succeeded me for a time but he soon returned to Fiji to teach Hebrew.

In the midst of life we are in employment

– rather than for his prematurely confident assertion that
machine translation never happened: language defeated it. We are a language species.

But his most undeniable achievement has been the development of a matter-of-fact free-verse poetry of statement: a poetry which gives us things like his Boeotian assertion of the unreality of the future

There is nothing about it. Much science fiction is set there but is not about it. Prophecy is not about it. . . We see, by convention, a small living distance into it but even that's a projection. And all our projections fail to curve where it curves.

It is the black hole out of which no radiation escapes to us.

* * *

That gets not only the applause for ingenuity but the nod of agreement. What it sees is certainly true.

* * *

If you haven’t eny of Murray’s books, don’t buy this one. Get his Selected Works (Angus & Robertson paperback, 1976). If you do have the Selected Works this is a worthy sequel.