

Les Murray's Poetic Trajectory over Australia's Changing Landscapes

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Abstract

In this paper I focus on Les Murray's attempt at naming the Australian landscape as it persists to date. It has been pointed out that Murray has quite often tried to evade modernities and has preferred the Budelain-Bunyan-Boeotis pattern of life to the Camberra-Sydney-Athens syndrome. But his definition of Australia as a Vernacular Republic is not bereft of the city and city dwellers. "We are country and Western", he says in his poem "Returnees". An analysis of poems such as "Sydney Nighrise Variations", "Nocturne", "The Canberra Suburbs", "Infinite Extensions", "Hypoegeum" and "An Absolutely Ordinary Rainbow" demonstrates that Murray has been successful in naming and defining what he himself means and what others have meant by 'Australia' and 'Australianness'.

It has been widely acknowledged that Murray is one of the handful of poets writing in English today who are devoutly busy in exploring the far recesses of their land and language. It is through the exploration of the landscape and the expression of a sense of belonging to it that one may not only realise but even construct an identity for oneself. The solution to the problem of identity, especially in the context of poetry, involves a creativity of a high imaginative order and also a perceptive ability to discover a meaning in the phenomena of life. To quote David Headon:

Murray is intent on exploring what he has termed 'high matters'. He does this but by way of a native Australian high style—for Murray such a method would be unthinkable—but by way of a kind democratic heraldic language attuned to the ways and peculiarities of his people. (1983, 71)

Quite early on in his career as a poet, Murray seemed to be aware of the issues facing present-day Australian society and defined his preoccupations and ideology based on the concept of convergence. He has always been for the convergence of cultures—urban, rural and Aboriginal—in Australia. It is here that he associates himself with the Jindyworobat Movement, the poets of which were for the assimilation of two cultures—urban and Aboriginal. For Murray, however, "Convergence is a better word here ... assimilation carried too deep a stain of conquest, of expecting the Aborigines to make all the accommodations while white people make none" (1984, 29).

Murray has his own poetic vision of a future Australia—it would be a *Vernacular Republic*: a world with the Beotian values of life, with ceremony and custom, cattle-place and green pastures, religion and poetry. To quote Ken Godwin:

In Murray's view, the nation of Australia, its landscape and rural industries, its communities, its beliefs and its literature should all share certain qualities, the qualities that he metonymically describes as Beotian. These values are rural, even provincial: directly related to the land; concerned with religion and its ritual rather than with the abstractions of philosophy; based on the family rather than the political unit, and egalitarian rather than rigidly democratic. (1986, 125)

No wonder Murray wishes "to see Australians escaping ... not towards the past, but towards futures which have no existence until WE discover and settle them, for our own good and the whole life of mankind" (Shaproft 1970, 74).

Murray has very often been criticized for failing to deal with the subject of city life in his poems. But John Bernis tells us that he is "one of a handful of English-language poets who have written effectively about the city, though his attitude is questioning and critical and not perhaps what the modern city dweller wants to hear" (1985, 27).

"The Sydney Highrise Variations", included in *The People's Otherworld*, is one of the finest poems on the city. The poem is divided into five sections each having its own subtitle. The first poem of the sequence "Fuel Stoppage on Sladesville Road Bridge in the Year 1980", celebrates the bridge itself, which for Murray is a symbol of modern civilization. The poet begins the poem in his usual, casual way:

So we're sitting over our sick beloved engine
atop a great building of the double century
on the summit that exhilarates cars ... (POW, 12)¹

This is followed by the poet's musings about how the bridge was built, but even during such moments his perceptiveness is not at all lost and he tries successfully to present the view of the bridge from all angles:

It was inked in by scaffolding and workers. Seen from itself the arch
is an abstract hill, a roadway up-and over without country,
from below a ponderous grotto, all entrance and vast shade
framing blues and levels.

It's a space probe, a trajectory of strange fixed dusts. (POW, 12)

And what follows is a sheer celebration of the very sight of the bridge:

It feels good. It feels right.
The joy of sitting high is in our judgement.
The marvellous brute-force effects of our century work.
They answer something in us. Anything in us. (POW, 12)

Veronica Brady remarks, "This readiness to let go, to recognize that identity is not something closed from inside itself but open and resonant makes the force that flows through these lines" (1985, 113). While commenting upon the last two lines, Barnie points out that "There is in the end something monstrous about the bridge's transformation in the poem. Something ominous and barely controlled, answering to a ruthlessness in our nature" (1985, 28). But it is really creditable on the part of Murray that he lends his poetic ears to the yet-to-be-heard voices of the bridge which, in its own turn, are the trajectory of an inner cry of twentieth-century man.

In the second poem, "View of Sydney, Australia, from Gladesville Road Bridge", the poet's perspective is far wider than in the first poem and this is well suggested in the title. The poem, written in the form of eight comparatively very long lines recalling Whitman followed by a paragraph of small lines, simply lists the images and the five longer lines give one the impression of a very comprehensive perspective of Sydney, of Australia, which as Murray himself says in his poem "The Returnees", is not 'country', but 'western':

There's that other great arch eastward, with its handing highways;
the headlands and horizons of packed suburb, white among bisque-fired: odd
smokes rising;

Ingots of shear
affluence poles
bomb-drawing grid
of columnar profit
pietrust and scintillant
tunnels in the sky
Fine print insurrection
Tall drinks on a tray
All around them is the old order, (POW, 13)

According to John Barnie, this is:

... the unreal world of TV-advertisement elegant living—buildings like tall drinks on a tray; the image invoking a finely controlled change of scale, the distant sky-crappers shrunk to cocktails, the limit of our dreams. Yet perhaps this civilization founded of dreams and greed has had its day. (1985, 28)

This poem, in particular, highlights Murray's pictorial quality. It may be recalled that Murray had in mind the profession of a painter for himself when he was a young boy and was on the verge of choosing such a career.

The third poem "The Flight from Manhattan", also follows a pattern of flight in its form. Here, the city is seen as a museum and the whole picture is almost surrealistic:

It is possible the heights of this view are a museum
though the highrise continues desultory along ridges, canned Housing, Strata
Title. (POW, 14)

The opening part of the poem, "It is possible ...", leaves a margin for all imaginative musings and what follows is not what 'is' but what 'seems', i.e. a museum. Psychological as well as physical distance in perspective is well expressed in the lines:

Hot-air, money-driers,
towering double entry,
Freud's cobwebbed poem
with revolving restaurant (POW, 14)

The image of "Freud's cobwebbed poem" for the city is a master-stroke and typically Murrayesque in texture. It aptly presents a view of the city often not seen but perceived in the mind. The multi-storied buildings of the city rise:

... like nouveaux accents
And stilled, for a time, the city's conversation. (POW, 14)

Even the momentary silence of the city sounds strange and mysterious because of its unusual occurrence:

Little we could love expanded to fill the spaces
of High glazed prosperity. An extensive city ...

Their reign coincided
with an updraft of ideology.
That mood in which the starving
Spirit is fed upon the heart. (POW, 14)

Murray seems to lament the lot of the human soul being starved by the loss of warmth of emotions in the metropolitan town. But then the poet refuses to be disillusioned and finally he realises that it is the "great city of the Australians".

The fourth poem, "The C 19-20", analyses the factors responsible for technological advancement. The poem is backward looking in time. At the very outset the poem tells us how the twentieth century is the natural corollary of the industrial growth and progress of the nineteenth century:

The Nineteenth Century, The Twentieth Century.
There were never any others. No centuries before these ...
The two are one aircraft in the end, the C 19-20,

capacious with cargo. Some of it can save your life,
some can prevent it. (POW, 15)

The comparison of the centuries to massive aircraft sounds like a conceit but contextually it is imaginatively thrilling.

Today's metropolis is the dream of the man of the Age of Piety come true. The poet, however, does not see an end to man's urge to "go on and on" since Darwinians and Lawretians

are wrestling for the controls,
we must rake her into Space!
We must fly in potent circles! (POW, 15)

But this is not the end, the finale. Still ahead lies the catastrophe. In the last poem, "The Recession of the Joneses", the poet reaches the nadir of his pessimism. It is here that the "trajectory" (referred to in the first poem) of the poetic projectile travels into the future:

The soaring double century
might end, and mutate, and persist:
as we've been talking, the shadows of
bridges, cranes, towers have shifted east. (POW, 16)

The poet is sceptical about the future of humanity. Where is technological advancement leading us? The poet sees the sun setting in the west and the shadows turning eastwards. The lengthening shadows announce the end of the hectic day:

The sun, that is always catching up
with night and day and month and year
blazes from its scrolled bare face. To be
Solar, I must be nuclear—

Six hundred glittering and genteel towns
... vibrant with modernity's strange anger. (POW, 16)

This craze for more and more advanced technology has spread like a contagion with global effects, but the end of this race and its repercussions are visualized by the poet in the form of an impending fear of a nuclear holocaust. This poem, in particular, reminds one of Yeats's "The Second Coming" in which Yeats, too, with a poet's concern and detachment, waits for the final catastrophe:

Things fall apart, the centre cannot hold;

mere anarchy is loosed upon the world. (1962, 99)

The whole sequence entitled *The Sydney Highrise Variations* moves from the particular to the general and in its movement the perspective is gradually widened. "The last poem", remarks Barnie, is "a fine example of Murray's art, of the ability of a good poet to treat the possible destruction of our civilization, seen as being adrift, gone seriously wrong, yet to handle it with a vibrance in the language which counteracts the gloom of the vision" (1985, 29).

"Modernity's Strange Anger", referred to in "The C 19-20" becomes all the more disgusting in another poem, "The Hypogeum", which deals with the sordid atmosphere of an underground car park. The inside of the Hypogeum is dingy and suffocating, almost hellish:

Rare shafts to daylight
waver at their base. As the water is shaken, the few
cars marked down here seem to rock. In everything
there strains that silent crash that reverberation
which persists in concrete. (POW, 16)

The place rarely enjoys the shafts of daylight. To take a phrase from Milton, it is "dungeon horrible", not the creation of God, but of man. Man has thrown a thick veil of petrol and diesel smoke over the face of everything and the whizz of the autos and the horns of the Hondas make (they do not perform) a savage dance. Man has become metal, his emotions metallic:

What will help the informally religious
to endure peace? Surface water dripping into
this underworld makes now a musical blip,
now rings from nowhere. (POW, 46)

The souls of persons like Murray who are "informally religious" are starved in this world. "The hypogeum is an underground chamber, an 'emblem of our buried lives'" (Barnie 1985, 29).

Here there is a deep-rooted contradiction in Murray's view of Australia. On the one hand, he is hopefully prophetic about the birth of an egalitarian humanitarian society in some near future, and on the other, he is disillusioned by the trends that present Australian society shares with the cultures of other western nations. But then it may be recalled that a poem, as Yeats believed, is always a mood and moods often change. No wonder that Murray's "Hypogeum" and "Machine Portraits with Pendant Spaceman" are written in altogether different moods. However, Murray is rightly justified in believing that the urban civilizations of today have failed to cater for the demands of the human soul.

In his poem, “Nocturne”, included in *The Daylight Moon*, he describes another Australian city, Brisbane. The poem, along with other pieces in the collection, presents Murray as the poet laureate of the Northern Rivera. The poet describes the physical appearance of the city:

Brisbane, light-gathered, far away
estuarine, imaginary city ...
Brisbane, of fotogravure memory ...

Weatherboard incantatory city ... (DLM, 40)

The picture of the city seems to exist in the “fotogravure memory” of the poet himself. As the title “Nocturne” suggests, the poet has clicked a snapshot of the city at some still moment at night. The atmosphere and phrases like “night gathered”, “imaginary city”, “incantatory city” recall the similar experience reading Yeats’s “Byzantium”, although thematically the two poems are poles apart. While Yeats endeavoured in his “Byzantium” to realize an ideal, Murray’s “Nocturne” tries to idealize the real:

Brisbane, on the steep green slope to war
brothel-humid headquarters city

and the crab moon, rising, reddens above
Brisbane, rotating far away. (DLM, 40)

There is also a moon in Yeats’s “Byzantium”—“The moon that embitters”. Here in Murray’s poem, the image of the “crabmoon”, reddening the city, is also an irritant, since it is an unusual phenomenon and also seems to be an ill-omen. But it rotates far away, thank God!

“The Canberra Suburbs’ Infinite Extension” is also remarkable as a poem of celebration. Says the poet:

Citizens live in peace and honour
in Pearce and Higgins and O’Connor,
Campbellites drive Mercedes Benzes,
lobbyists shall multiply in Menzies—
but why not name suburbs for ideas
which equally have shaped our years? (POW, 78)

The coined names in the foregoing lines are pronounced in the form of a wish of the poet to name the landscape. The paragraph confronts the microcosm and the macrocosm and what follows is the poet’s determination:

I shall play a set of tennis
in the gardens of Red Menace ... (VR, 78)

And he asks:

Shall I scorn to plant a dahlia
in the soil of white Australia? (VR, 78)

This question posed to himself is self-answered and is affirmative in tone. Murray describes the planting of a dahlia. Fertility is never banished from Murray's world which is also the dream-world of Lewis Mumford, the American critic and social philosopher:

Who will call down Lewis Mumford
on the streets of Frugal comfort? (VR, 78)

Mumford prophesied the emergence of a new world which may witness the union of art and machine technology. This new phase he has called the biotechnic one. "But before we can enter into this higher stage, art must be enriched by the machine, and the machine in turn humanized by art" (Rader 1962, 349).

In this world of "Frugal comfort", an inhabitant ought not to call down the visionary, to be a Lewis Mumford or a Les Murray. And, finally, there comes the poet's masterstroke of celebration:

Oh, live in Fadden and be content:
everywhere's Enviroment. (VR, 78)

"An Absolutely Ordinary Rainbow" is a typically religious poem in the Murrayesque sense of the word. In this poem, Murray points out that even the city-dweller—the people of Sydney—have the potential of a shared longing for transcendence and spirituality. The poem was written about Martin Place in Sydney, before the road was closed to form a traffic-free place.

In this poem, "the exposition of the opening lines deftly draws in Repins, a now defunct hop, Lorenzinsis, a bohemian wine and spaghetti bar of the fifties and sixties ... There is plenty of movement in the city" (Nelson, 1978, 21):

... The crowds are edgy with talk
and more crowds come hurrying. (VR, 23)

According to Polinitz, "The city is being celebrated for its abundance, its profusion of individuals and cultures" (1980, 381). The sight of the weeping man is so unusual and fascinating that people from all corners and streets rush to stop him but in vain. There is a religious profundity and dignity about his weeping, so that he is almost

inaccessible to the hurrying crowds:

The man we surround, the man no one approaches
simply weeps, and does not cover it,

... the dignity of his weeping holds us back from his space ...

The crowds who tried to seize him
stare out at him, and feel, with amazement, their minds

longing for tears as children for a rainbow. (VR, 23)

Only in the last line quoted above, is rainbow mentioned in the poem. The “man weeping down there” is almost a Christ-figure lamenting the lot of people, perhaps, “what man has made of man” as Wordsworth said. A few lines later, we have the screaming of “those who thought themselves happy”. The weeping man brings people face to face with their lack of spirituality. The poem is full of Biblical connotations, especially in lines like the following:

Only the smallest children
and such as look out of Paradise come near him
and sit at his feet, with dogs and dusty pigeons. (VR, 24)

“Sit at his feet” suggests that the children are disciples listening to a prophet. Moreover, the image of children along with dogs and dusty pigeons symbolizes extreme faith and innocence. According to Penelope Nelson:

... the reference to dogs and dusty pigeons may suggest a parallel with Saint Francis whose attachment to all animals and birds led him to create an image of a unified creation where all life is sacred. Dusty pigeons can be found any day in Martin Pace: though less romantic than white doves, they too can symbolize peace. (1978, 22)

Even “rainbow” is a symbol with religious implications: it stands for spiritual illumination. Cirlot points out, “For the Israelites, rainbow was the sign of the covenant between the Creator and his people, and in China, the sign denoted the union of heaven and earth. For the Greeks, it was Iris, a messenger of the gods” (1961, 31-32). But Murray himself disclaims any religious interpretation of the poem:

Some will say, in the years to come, a halo
of force stood around him. There is no such thing.
Evading believers, he hurries off down Pitt Street. (VR, 23-24)

However, it may quite easily be said that Murray shares a few beliefs of Spengler and Arnold Toynbee. Spengler believed in some sort of second religiosity. The masses, who at the fag-end of culture have become weary and disillusioned, insecure and uncertain, begin to look for salvation and peace of mind in some form of religiosity. This religiosity is anti-intellectual, anti-urban and anti-technological and serves as the 'Finis' of the culture and at times as a bridge between the old and the new culture-civilization. Murray, along with Toynbee, still leaves a hope for a miracle. "We may and must pray that a reprieve which God has granted to our society once will not be refused if we ask for it again in a contrite spirit and with a broken heart" (quoted in Borokin 1952, 118).

Gary Catalano remarks that Murray "tries to evade modernities ... though sniggering about the city ..." (1977, 70), and John Tranter is of the view that Murray is "a little too inexperienced in the necessarily tortured metaphysics of our modern urban world" (quoted in Catalano 1977, 72). Yet as the foregoing analysis of his poems suggests, "Les Murray is always compassionate towards the people of a deprived urban sub-culture whose lives and beings are diametrically opposed to those of rural grandeur" (quoted in Catalano 1977, 72). To take a line from his poem, "Fuel Stoppage on Gladesville Road Bridge", Les Murray's poetry is a space probe, a "Trajectory of Strange fixed dusts ...". And a time probe, too, of course.

NOTES

¹ POW is *The People's Otherworld*. Similarly, Murray's other collections from which lines are cited in the present text will appear in abbreviations in the text itself. Thus, DLM is *The Daylight Moon*; VR is *The Vernacular Republic: Poems 1961-1983*.

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