

Pastoral and Urban Conflict: A Study of Les Murray's Poetry

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Abstract

Poetry played an important part in the founding of Australian literature. During its early history, Australia was a collection of British colonies, therefore, its literary tradition begins with and is linked to the broader tradition of English literature. But by mid nineteenth century, poets started describing the country and its inhabitants. In the twentieth century, there was a social awareness which reflected both in the ideology and literature. Australian literature was marked with unique attributes that gave it an individuality. It was with the global acknowledgement of Les Murray's poetic genius that the worth and identity of Australian verse was established. The present paper attempts to study the pastoral and urban conflict in the selected poems of Les Murray.

Key words: poetry, Australian literature, global, country, Les Murray.

Poetry played an important part in the founding of Australian literature. During its early history, Australia was a collection of British colonies, therefore, its literary tradition begins with and is linked to the broader tradition of English literature. It was somewhat post-colonial in its characteristic with themes of alienation and assimilation. But by mid nineteenth century, poets started describing the country and its inhabitants. In the twentieth century, there was a social awareness which reflected both in the ideology and literature.

The plethora of Les Murray's writings comprises of nine books of poetry, a verse novel *The Boys who Stole the Funeral*, collected poems in the *Vernacular Republic* and three collections of essays. "The worth and identity of Australian verse was established with the global acknowledgment of Les Murray's poetic genius. The main body of his work can be seen as an admiration and reverence for the values and ideals associated with and symbolized by rural folk and the community at Bunyah" (Pruthi, p.19). Murray reconstructs the backdrop and psyche of Australia with minute details. For him, poetic utterance is associated with spiritual religiosity. His poetry is a poetry reflecting entire faith and devotion to God. He maintains that

*Religions are poems. They concert
our daylight and dreaming mind, our
emotions, instinct, breath and native gesture.* (Murray, p.229)

Murray never favoured the institutionalization of religion. The poem '*Poetry and Religion*' seems to convey that religion needs to be expressed and that it can be expressed only through music and poetry. Several of his books bear the dedication "To the glory of God" whom he unabashedly and deliriously pits against his own powers of poetic creation.

The poem '*The Future*' depicts the plight of people who have turned away from religion and spirituality. He shudders to think of humanity devoid of the sanctity and essence of the harmony provided by religion (Pruthi, p.92). He writes:

*"...a small living distance into it
but even that's a projection. And all our projections
fail to curve where it curves."* (Murray, p.242)

Thus, he sees the future of mankind moving in complete darkness and blindness. And the onslaught of industrialization heralded by humans for material goods is causing mental and spiritual depravation.

Slessor, once wrote about Murray, "*the touch, smell, dazzle and sounds of the Australian countryside are created here for our age more sharply...*". A poem like '*Exile*

Prolonged by Real Reasons is a “chapter” about the speaker’s despair at being prevented from returning to the countryside while a poem *The Man with the Hoe* is a “chapter” about a man living with “my people whom I do understand” (Bourke, p.23).

“When I discovered poetry” he has said, “I discovered the kind of writing I really wanted to do, which was as much about mountains and trees and animals...” (Oles, p.30).

Two poems in *The Ilex Tree – ‘Recourse to the Wilderness’* and *‘Bagman O’Reilly’s Curse’* are based on his experiences with the nature. In his communion with nature he is aptly referred to as Australia’s Wordsworth. Murray talks about Nature, Australian landscape, the scenario and people of rural Australia.

In the poem *‘The Buladelah – Taree Holiday Song Cycle’* Murray explores the themes of recovering the rural traditions. The poem is characterized by its confident belief in convergence between past and present, the metropolitan and the rural culture (which include those of Aboriginal tribes). It also presents a detailed account of the Manning Valley. Les idealizes rural values that emerge in natural environs and are closest to his heart. In 1983, in a review of Murray’s poem *‘The People’s Otherworld’*, Lehmann looked back:

As an undergraduate in his late teens Murray wrote poems about inquisitors, refugees, lovers in city parks and thunderstorms. The earliest poems did not reflect a childhood and youth spent on a North Coast dairy farm. In private conversation he often talked about the farm and mentioned incidents and details....

I was a city boy with a desire to write poems about the country. I once said to Murray “You’re terribly lucky coming from the country. If I were you I’d be writing poems about it.” I had the distinct feeling that Murray wanted to terminate the conversation there and then, to rush off to his boarding house room and start writing those poems. (Bourke, p.13)

He associates the three integral streams of Australian culture – the Aboriginal, the Pastoral and the Urban in his poetry. Thus, he became a part of the Jindyworobak movement. A large part of his verse focuses on the rural-urban opposition in Australian culture.

In his poem *‘The Action’*, he takes what he sees at the metropolitan frenzy over getting “a piece of the action” and contrasts this with a rural case that lies back and enjoys the countryside – the poem’s speaker is literally “laid back”, letting everything “wash over” him.

In the poem “*1980 in a Street ...*” Murray tells of a contemporary urbanite who leads an existence which is devoid of purpose.

As Bourke in 'A Vivid Steady State' observes that Murray deplores the cultural dislocation of the industrialized urban economies and declares the need for social coherence and for the sterility of identity and tenure which he finds in rural cultures. The fissure between community and individuality, between tradition and modernity, runs throughout his poetry.

In his relief at being 'home again from the cities of the world', the persona in the poem 'Evening Alone at Bunyah' goes to study the moonlit view from the room where he slept as a child. What he sees is more than an intimately known landscape (Leer, p.15):

*This country is my mind. I lift my face
and count my hills and linger over one:
Deer's, steep, bare-topped, where eagles nest below
the summit in scrub pines, and where I take
my city friends to tempt them with my past. (Murray, p.12)*

His poem 'Sydney and Bush' states that Sydney is becoming urban and sophisticated and in the process despises the simple rural life.

*When Sydney and the Bush first met
There was no open ground ...
When Sydney and Bush meet now
There is antipathy
And fashionable suburbs float
At night, far out to sea. (Murray, p.124)*

In his poems, Bocotia and Athens are used as symbols. Bocotia symbolizing creativity and place inhabited by Aborigines while Athens represents the constant antithesis and a place for the settlers.

In the poem 'The Daylight Moon' Murray keeps looking back to the city. He denounces industrialization and advocates social coherence.

At first glance one feature of Les Murray's poetry seems to stamp it as different from his contemporaries: the number of animal references. He has indeed earned a reputation as "a great poet of cows".

The subject of animal representation is central to Murray's vision of Vernacular Republic and he directly addresses them in the poem 'Anthropomorphics'. In this poem he

acknowledges the predatory animals' ruthlessness and contrasts this with what he sees as human behavior in the city.

His extremely intimate relationship with the land, the flora and fauna is explicitly stated in his poetry, as his childhood memories were stocked with natural beauty. He asserts his relationship with the physical environment and animal kingdom. We find in his poetry an obsessive concern for farms, cows and dogs. Cows are elevated to the status of motherhood being providers of milk and nutrition. They are the backbone of an agricultural based society. They are a link between people and nature. In the poem '*Walking to the Cattle Place*' Murray traces human history back to the break between the Animal and Machine powers. The earliest technology – that which led to the separation of human beings from environmental constraints – was the technology of the hunt, the tools that were developed and used to kill animals and to cut them up. In traditional societies the kill so deeply unsettled the hunters that they needed a redemptive ritual in order to appease the Animal Powers.

In the poem '*Noonday Axeman*', the harmonious companionship of place and people is depicted by the presence of the cattle:

*Here, I remember all of a hundred years:
candleflame, still night, frost and cattle bells,
the dragwheels' silence final in our ears,
and the first red cattle spreading through the hills.* (Murray, p.4)

For Murray the rural centred Australia (his 'Vernacular Republic') although superficially modified by modern times and technologies, exists today essentially the same as it was in earlier times. The poem '*Noonday Axeman*' reveres the toil and endurance of the pioneer Murrays:

*A hundred years of clearing, splitting, sawing
a hundred years of timbermen, ringbarkers, fencers
and women in kitchens, stoking loud iron stoves
year in, year out, and singing old songs to their children.* (Murray, p.4)

Murray's strength is the dramatization of general ideas and the description of animals, machines or landscape. He invariably explores social questions through the celebration of common objects from the natural world.

Murray's diverse interests include not only the world of animals, but also incorporate the world of science and technology. Machines perform an important role in his poetic thought. Most Australian poets like Judith Wright and A.D. Hope have rejected themes

concerning science and technology as they considered them an offshoot of the inherited European tradition. In an effort to produce poetry more indigenous than verse influenced by imperial techniques, the deliberately ignored western technology. But Murray revealed interest in contemporary developments of science and technology and celebrated cars, aeroplanes and gadgets in his discourse. He found the machines to be enchanting and an important aspect of modern Australian poetry.

A remarkable fusing of ancient Aboriginal and modern White Australian urban and rural cultures (for example, the Pacific Highway in holiday time is described in terms of the all-giving Rainbow Snake), the poem *'Holiday Song Cycle'* is an imaginative poetic statement of the Jindyworobak dream that White Australians should have the same affinity with the environment as the Aborigines had, and is also another emphatic illustration of the loss suffered when children grow up and desert their rural origins for urban life. Several poems both admire and question the impact of modern technology, especially where it is dramatically changing the once familiar face of the urban landscape.

In the poem *'The Flight from Manhattan'* he attributes the modern Sydney city skyline to the New York skyscraper influence. The remaining pieces, *'The C19-20'* and *'The Recession of the Jones'*, link the technology that produces such vast urban structures to the cargo cult of consumerism that consumes the lives of so many in contemporary times. The poem *'Variations'* certainly reflects Murray's awestruck wonder at the miracles of modern technology, but the ultimate message of the poems is regret that, in the onward march of technological genius, the old, familiar, accessible and fondly remembered Sydney that he knew has been all but obliterated. The poem *'Machine Portraits with Pendant Spaceman'*, which shared the 1981 Mattara Poetry Festival Prize, is a spectacular set of ten Spenserian stanzas divided by a single sonnet (the *'Pendant Spaceman'*). This is a free-wheeling, exuberant set of verses, crammed with poetic devices and sparkling with witty verbal flourishes. The machines portrayed – e.g. a bulldozer, combine seeder, satellite dish, space shuttle, crane, geophone and river ferry – demonstrate the mechanical ingenuity that Murray clearly admires but carry with them a somewhat intimidating mystique that raises the question whether they indeed are the slaves or the masters.

Murray realizes the need to synchronize and monitor the machine. When he exclaims that *'Every machine has been love and a true answer'* he probably means that positivity and the accomplishments achieved are due to an understanding and balance between people and their world. The machine should be put to constructive use as it will respond to the

commands given by the human hand. The puppet-like existence of man in the hands of destiny is similar to the machine's manipulation by man:

*All machines in the end join God's creation
growing bygone, given, changeless – but a river
ferry has its timeless mode
from the grinding ruddy outset; it enforces contemplation.* (Murray, p.192)

To sum up, Murray is a poet deeply rooted in his tribal loyalties. His poetry is charged by the positive and negative legacies of Bunyah, New South Wales, his childhood home: love for its landscape, its people and vernacular and working-class ethos; and hostility bordering on hatred for citified pretension, ideology, and snobbery. He is indeed a poet of great linguistic power and moral energy.

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