Taller when prone: The contradictions of Les Murray

Paul Mitchell

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Before his death five years ago in April, Les Murray was widely considered Australia's leading poet and among the world's most significant. He published 38 collections of poetry along with books of essays on art, poetry and culture. The garlands laid upon him by critics and fellow poets included 'the custodian of Australia's soul', 'the one by whom the language lives', and a panoptic visionary who enhanced Australia's international literary standing and sought to shape the nation's destiny.

Murray was an only child, born and raised in Bunyah in rural New South Wales. Poverty, Free Presbyterianism, family feuding, and the early death of his mother made for a complicated childhood.

'As a kid, I grew repelled by the Calvinist atmosphere, the competitive personal holiness, the mean advantage often taken of the poorest in our community,' he told *Image* journal in 2010. 'We were the poorest family in our district; the wind came in through the gaps between the boards of our house, and my parents seethed in humiliation about this, because it was contrived for us by Dad's father.'

Our bare plank house/ with its rain stains down each crack/ like tall tan flames/ … it reaped Dad's shamed invectives/ Paying him rent for this shack!/ The landlord was his father. (from 'The Steel')

Les's father Cecil had had a brother who died in a farming accident. Because he perished cutting down a tree that Cecil had refused to fell, Cecil's father blamed him for the death.

'An unforgiving kind of blame stayed between dad and his father for the rest of their lives,' *The Guardian* quoted Murray in 2010. 'Dad was given a farm, but my grandfather made sure he kept hold of the purse strings so he kept my parents poor. After I was born my mother had no more live children and had several miscarriages. The two things together were pretty crushing for my parents and they were depressed a lot of the time.' As if that weren't enough, Murray's mother died when she was 35 after haemorrhaging during labour at home. Murray eulogised his mother in his poem 'The Steel', which outlined the complexities surrounding her death: the family car had broken down and Cecil couldn't afford to fix it; Cecil rang a doctor who failed to urgently call an ambulance:

Perhaps we wrong you,/ make a scapegoat of you;/ perhaps there was no stain/ of class in your decision,/ no view that two framed degrees/ outweighed a dairy./ It's nothing, dear:/ just some excited hillbilly – /

During Cecil's call to the doctor on one of the era's shared phone lines, his sense of propriety stopped him from revealing the truth of his wife's condition:

The ambulance was available/ but it took a doctor's say-so/ to come. This was refused./ My father pleaded. Was refused./ The doctor wanted details/ but my father would only say/ A bad turn. She's having a bad turn!/ the words his culture/ could allow on party-line phone.

The circumstances surrounding his mother's death appear to have given Murray a mistrust of the upper classes and authorities, while his father became what Les described as a 'grief-a-holic'.

Les free-ranged on the family farm and described parts of his childhood as happy, especially spending time with animals, an affinity that reached its

apex with the release in 1992 of his groundbreaking collection *Translations from the Natural World*.

But much of Les's childhood and early adulthood was shaped by the intergenerational grief and suffering that dogged his heels. His father beat him and the young poet, still ensconced in Free Presbyterianism, blamed this on his own sinfulness. Les was bullied relentlessly at school for his weight and bookishness, and was an outcast at Sydney University, so poor he ate scraps from cafeteria tables.

Murray achieved a BA, but his famed aversion to academia and academics, despite his own prodigious intelligence, led him to work in translating ancient German texts and employment with the Macquarie Dictionary. It was the 'perfect job', *The Age* literary editor Jason Steger wrote, 'for a man who suffers from what he calls "verberation", the state of having words running through your head all the time.'

With his wife Valerie, Les had five children, including a son with autism. He described himself in 2010 as a 'high-performing Asperger', adding, 'I'm not very good at human relations, and it took me a terribly long time to deal easily with people. Even now I use expressions like "the humans".' Author and critic Michael McGirr described Les as having 'no social antenna at all'.

It's not surprising that in his 20s, Les fled populous Sydney and returned to live permanently on his family's dairy farm at Bunyah, where he would become the 'bard of the bush' — and also a Catholic. Murray's critics said he embraced Catholicism to thumb his nose, as his biographer Peter Alexander wrote, at 'enforced orthodoxies of intellectual and public life'. No one noted that he may also have been rebelling against his father, who hated Catholics. Murray, however, was straightforward about why he converted: 'I thought it was true,' he said in a 1976 interview with the ABC. 'It … could handle with skill and eloquence … a whole realm about which everybody else in society seems to be in terrible doubt.'

Murray was noted for describing humans, belief systems and cultures as 'poems'; and he said individuals often lived within the larger poems of others — Marx's poem; Hitler's poem; Jesus' poem. 'We're not rational humans, we're poetic and we take on our ideas like poems,' he said in an interview with *The Age*, adding that we should question which poems

we're living in. 'I found in the Catholic one there was a chap who sacrificed himself rather than demanding human sacrifice.'

If he is risen, all are children of a most high real God/ or something even stranger called by that name/ who knew to come and be punished for the world. (from 'The Say-But-The-Word Centurion Attempts a Summary')

David Mason, Colorado's former poet laureate now based in Tasmania, wrote in *First Things* journal that Murray deserved to be 'ranked among the best devotional poets — from Donne and Herbert to Eliot and Auden', while also noting Murray's 'earthiness and irreverence'. *The People's Otherworld* (1983) was the first collection Murray dedicated to 'the glory of God', what became his famous introduction to all his books. *Presence: Translations from the Natural World* (1992), a book that gave voice to plants and animals, had as a central concern the idea that poetry can help us perceive pure being, the '*whatness* of a thing, as Aquinas would put it', according to critic Bert Almon. Murray's verse novel *Fredy Neptune* (1998), described by many critics as a masterpiece, saw Fredy only able to overcome the horrors he had witnessed by achieving pure-hearted prayer.

'Art is surely the sort of surface through which the Other can address us,' Murray wrote in his 1984 prose collection *Persistence in Folly*. 'We lift up our voice and the Spirit joins it and begins to speak through it, while letting it remain our voice.'

Unsurprisingly, Murray viewed religion and poetry as interlinked, and he explored this nexus in his poem 'Poetry and Religion'. In it, he reverses the expected order of the connection: religions are praised for their similarity with poetry. Through his concept of God being the 'poem caught in any religion' — and religion and poetry sharing the same 'mirror' — Murray meditates on how poetry and religion can inform and deepen each other. Murray said in 2010 that religion was 'under everything I write; it's in the mix. I can put my finger on exactly where in most individual cases, but not always.' His early poem 'An Absolutely Ordinary Rainbow' (*The Weatherboard Cathedral*, 1969) has a man weeping for no apparent reason in a busy Sydney street. Parallels are drawn between him and Christ as crowds struggle to understand his message and his eventual departure, 'evading believers'.

‘The Burning Truck’ (from *The Ilex Tree*, 1965) has an unstoppable truck in flames travelling along a suburban street, finally leaving this world ‘with its disciples’ — a collection of wild boys on board. It has been interpreted as showing the unpredictable actions of the Holy Spirit and as a metaphor for Christ’s apocalyptic return.

‘The Quality of Sprawl’ (from *The People’s Otherworld*, 1983) gives Murray’s definition of ‘sprawl’, a peculiarly Australian way of being that he views as ‘roughly Christian’. Sprawl is spiritual, so much so that it ‘may have to leave the earth’. ‘Easter 1984’ (from *The Daylight Moon*, 1987) focuses on Christ as ‘fully human’, noting it was not just our sinfulness that saw him crucified but also our sense of not being able to tolerate, as critic Nicholas Birns wrote, the ‘fulfilment of human aspirations that Christ offered’. Murray also considered in his poetry the meaning of Christ’s sacrifice on the cross. ‘Those who lose belief in God will not only believe in anything; they will bring blood offerings to it,’ Murray wrote in his verse novel *The Boys Who Stole the Funeral* (1980). Noel Rowe observed in *Southerly* magazine that ‘Murray’s poetry has been, partially, a ritual with which to appease the demons wanting blood, whether they appear in the shape of pig-killing, bushfire, war, disinheritance or miscarriage. His preferred ritual, the eucharist, has been continually performed through his imagery, representing his belief that Christ’s sacrifice finalises all others.’

Some of us primary producers, us farmers and authors/ are going round to watch them evict a banker. (from ‘The Rollover’)

Much of Murray’s poetry was, of course, viewed through a political lens. It explored themes of equality and justice, especially for the rural poor, including Aboriginal people. Despite allegations against him of anti-Aboriginal sentiment and cultural appropriation, Murray was deeply influenced by Aboriginal culture, which he viewed as ‘carried by a vast map of song-poetry’.

‘Australia will be a great nation and a power for good when her head of state is part-Aboriginal and her prime minister a poor man. Or vice-versa,’ Murray once said.

His poetry, especially 1996's *Subhuman Redneck Poems*, was often politically combative, as Les viewed himself as under attack from city elites. He sometimes struck out in his poetry at what he saw as the academics, politicians and systems that oppressed the rural white poor, conservatives, and the religious. He also landed poetic blows on the bullies of his youth, along with those on the modernist side of Australia's notorious 'Poetry Wars' of the late 1960s and early 1970s.
Murray told *The Guardian* in 2010 those public rows were 'an awful strain and probably contributed to my depression,' adding that, 'the criticism was always couched in political terms'. However, Murray told *The Age* in 2002 that he saw the terms 'left' and 'right' as 'probably oppressive categories no matter who they touch — even those who claim them'. Australian literary icon David Malouf told the ABC after Murray's death that the poet was 'utterly unorthodox' but had written 'undoubtedly the best poems anybody has produced in Australia … He knew that he could be difficult — nobody pretends that he wasn't — but he was always difficult in an interesting way.'

That difficulty can perhaps be attributed to the many years Murray suffered from clinical depression, which he wrote about in *Killing the Black Dog: A Memoir of Depression* (1997). Asperger's was another likely contributing factor, as was his experience of childhood bullying. Once Les was king of Australian poetry, his wrath against academics and other poets could be scathing, demonstrating the classic pattern of the bullied becoming the bully.

When grace and intent/ recruit a fresh shoulder, then we're in the other testament/ and the innocent wood lifts line-long, with its leaves and libraries. (from 'The New Moreton Bay')
In the 1983 poem above, Murray celebrated the conversion to Catholicism of Kevin Hart, renowned Australian poet, theologian and philosopher, described by Poetry International as 'a prodigious figure on the intellectual landscape'. Murray and Hart were friends for many years until Hart ended the connection.

Hart said Murray would reel off strong invective against fellow poets and then, within the space of minutes, speak kindly to their faces for fear of them 'destroying him'. Murray ranked himself as overtaking Homer and Keats, and Hart became concerned there was more to Murray's

psychological condition than depression, especially after one irony-free outburst walking past Victoria's Parliament House.

'Les stopped and said, "Last night they were debating whether I or [John] Tranter was the better poet; they went on all night, and only the Country Party spoke in favour of me!"… A line had been crossed: to my mind he now needed medical attention.'

Hart said Murray developed an 'overweening ambition that steadily grew into flaring arrogance', whereas the younger Murray was generous to other writers. 'When older, he could be downright rude or nasty about other writers, without the slightest provocation'.

An enthusiast for Murray's work, late poet and critic Peter Porter suggested this antagonism could also often be seen in his poetry: 'A skewer of polemic runs through his work,' he wrote in *The Guardian* in 2003. 'His brilliant manipulation of language … is often forced to hang on an embarrassing moral sharpness. The parts we love — the Donne-like baroque — live side by side with sentiments we don't: his increasingly automatic opposition to liberalism and intellectuality.'

For Murray, however, that opposition was a necessary part of his poetic *raison d'etre*. 'It's my mission to irritate the hell out of the eloquent who would oppress my people,' *BBC News* reported, 'by being a paradox that their categories can't assimilate: the Subhuman Redneck who writes poems'.

Poet and critic David McCooey wrote in *The Conversation* that, although Murray is often associated with the political right, his poems were 'everything that a One-Nation version of Australia would mistrust: complex, witty, genuinely anti-authoritarian, transnational, and encyclopaedically knowledgeable.'

Regardless of how any polemic in Murray's poetry is viewed, Kevin Hart said he could never unravel the connections between Les's depression and what he saw as Murray's 'inflated self-image' from which his nastiness stemmed.

'I was never able to square some of his nasty remarks about people with his avowed Catholicism,' Hart said, adding he would prefer to remember Murray as the generous younger poet he first met.

Home is the first/ and final poem/ and every poem between/ has this mum home seam. (from 'Home Suite')

Michael McGirr had just interviewed Les on ABC radio in Canberra in the early noughties. There were high-end cafés nearby and McGirr wanted to take Les to one for lunch. But the poet decided on Greasy Spoon, a café with roast beef rolls and chips.

'He had a new poem he wanted to read me and he put the poem on the table and he ate the roast beef roll with gravy and the poem he read was so delicate and gentle it was like gossamer,' McGirr remembered. 'As he was reading it the gravy was spilling down his chin and onto the poem! Everything delicate about him was in his poetry, the rest of him was so *earthly*,' McGirr laughed.

The 'poem' of Les Murray: complex, full of contradictions, sublime, and sometimes ready to whip with a scorpion's tail those he saw as his enemies.

'I don't agree with a lot of his politics and one-off lines about academia or feminists or city-dwellers,' leading Australian literary critic Lyn McCredden told the *Sydney Morning Herald* after Murray's death, 'but his poetry doesn't do that. It lifts us into a different space where we can hear an otherness beyond ourselves.'

John Kinsella, one of Australia's most widely respected poets, wrote on a shared blog that he and Les had 'a complex interaction due to different ways of seeing the world' but that Les had 'dynamic thinking around language' that would remain 'vital and interesting'.

'His finest poems are those full of "strangeness" and yokings between the familiar and unfamiliar,' he wrote, adding that Les's work was often read reductively. 'To get to his essence you have to almost lift him out of reality into that space where language is forming, is almost unutterable.'

Valerie Krips, academic and poetry editor of Australia's *Arena* magazine, said 'the essential and lasting kernel of Les Murray's poetry lies in the way it brings the sacred into relation with the Australian quotidian: who else would think of a *Weatherboard Cathedral*?' Poet David Mason added that he would remember Murray for, among other things, his elegy for the poet Joseph Brodsky.

'"*The wish to be right/ has decamped in large numbers/ but some come to God /in hopes of being wrong.*" I can read and enjoy a poet without having

to believe he was always perfect in his person or his opinions,' Mason said. 'If we condemned all literary works because of the flaws of their authors, there would be very little left to read.'

Paul Mitchell is a Melbourne-based poet, fiction writer and essayist. His latest book is *Matters of Life and Faith* (Coventry Press, 2021). Follow his writing at www.paul-mitchell.com.au
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EXISTING COMMENTS

This is a fine tribute to a complex and much-loved poet, thanks Paul Mitchell. Les Murray is an important person in my life. I turn to him when I need to hear a sublime quietness ("Driving Through Sawmill Towns"); when I want to try to approach the ineffable ("An Absolutely Ordinary Rainbow") and when I want to somehow grasp his essence ("Kiss of the Whip"). He articulated his connection to Catholicism in "Distinguo": Prose is Protestant-agnostic,/story, discussion, significance/but poetry is Catholic:/poetry is presence.

Murray's journey through life was often painful and it is clear his depression had a significant impact. But through his great mastery of language and feel he expressed his particular genius. Always our Bard.

Pam | 10 May 2024

Les was a superlative poet. In the Australian poetry firmament, his only equal IMHO is Judith Wright, some of whose poetry has deep spiritual insight. The comparison with George Herbert is particularly apt. He was an intellectual gadfly, who poured scorn on the literary opinionati. He's still laughing up there in Heaven. A lovely bloke. A genuine Australian literary icon.

Edward Fido | 13 May 2024