

The Impossible Infinite: Les Murray, Poetry, and the Sacred

LYN MCCREDDEN
Deakin University

IN 1983, THE PROVOCATIVE AND IDIOSYNCRATIC Australian poet Les Murray published a volume entitled *The People's Otherworld*. At the heart of that middle volume of Murray's work is a poem about grace. Its title is "Equanimity," which the poem sees as a place "where the farmer has done enough struggling-to-survive / for one day, and the artist rests from theory— / where all are, in short, off the high comparative horse / of their identity" (Murray 159). It is a place, or time, we are told, "beneath effort," where "lifelong plenishment" is found or given. This is a landscape of deepest humanness, we are told, a place from which "all holiness speaks." This equanimity is represented in multiple ways: it is the "on-off grace" that attends the movement of birds; it's light which "makes some smile, some grimace"; it's the place from which Christ "spoke to people most often"; it's a painting of equality, and a landscape of "infinite detailed extent / like God's attention." But strangely, in order to represent such fullness the poem centers around two absences: the first is a "sometimes glimpsed" light or grace, and the second is Murray's old, familiar, rancorous railing against human *failure* to glimpse such grace:

there is only love; there are no Arcadias.
Whatever its variants of meat-cuisine, worship, divorce,
human order has at heart
An equanimity. Quite different from inertia, it's a place
where the churchman's not defensive, the indignant
aen't on the qui vive,
the loser has lost interest, the accountant is truant to
remorse,
where the farmer has done enough struggling-to-survive
for one day, and the artist rests from theory—
where all are, in short, off the high comparative horse
of their identity.
Almost beneath notice, as attainable as gravity, it is
a continuous recovering moment. Pity the high madness
that misses it continually, ranging without rest between
assertion and unconsciousness,
the sort that makes hell seem a height of evolution.
Through the peace beneath effort

(even within effort: quiet air between the bars of our
attention)
comes unpurchased lifelong plenishment;
Christ spoke to people most often on this level
especially when they chattered about kingship and the
Romans;
all holiness speaks from it. (Murray 158)

This, strangely, is the middle stanza of a poem about peace, grace and equanimity. The poem needs, it seems, to establish the possibility of such fullness on the back of old enemies, to invoke ancient wounds and faults in order to clear the ground for holiness. There is an inherent tension, if not outright contradiction here—one that this essay will probe, not from any "high comparative horse," but in order to ask the following questions: How does the poetry of Les Murray seek to represent the sacred? And is language capable of representing the sacred?

If we look again at this poem extolling "the peace beneath effort / (even within effort)" we can see the tensions writ large: how to speak of God, the absolute other, without taking on the God-mantle; how to receive "unpurchased life-long plenishment" while "purchasing" it in the very act and effort of representation. In his essay "Les Murray and Poetry's Otherworld," American critic Paul Kane generously describes such tensions as part of "a dialectic, if not a dialogue" with Murray's readers. Kane's essay is on the edge of critique of Murray's poetics, but most often lapses back, I would argue, into a warm praise of his themes and modes of poetry that grapple with the sacred. Following Kane for a moment, we might describe Murray's three central poetic modes or impulses as: firstly, use of a "middle style and a sacramental (or ritual) temperament," with a democratic sense of ordinary life as the locus of the sacred; secondly, a sense of human, cultural convergence, or as Murray himself puts it, "an enactment of a longed-for fusion of all three cultures [Aboriginal, country and city], a fusion which, as yet perhaps, can only exist in art, or in blessed moments when power and ideology are absent" (*Persistence* 24); and thirdly, a propheticism, in the forms of both social critic or satirist, and as a messenger of the divine. This latter often involves

“silence” and a proclaimed attendance of “something beyond imagining,” an understanding of the artist as “one who makes things the value of which is located beyond death” (Murray in Kane, 200).

So, for Kane, Murray’s poetic representations of the sacred employ a ritual and democratic vernacular, a sense of cultural fusion of ideologically disparate tribes, and propheticism. There is certainly “effort” and dare I say “theory” behind all of these supposedly post-ideological impulses, but perhaps it is the kind of effort that allows for that “quiet air between the bars of our attention,” that possibility of grace. As a critic I am in awe of Murray’s artistic desire to represent the something beyond representation, but it is both an admiring and a skeptical awe. And in reading Murray, I find the skepticism must have equal play with the admiration. Simply to be directed against effort or theory is tantamount to being told by the artist: “trust me.” My democratic response to this directive would be: “trust and test.”

So this essay will give equal time to skepticism and admiration, and offer a number of readings that seek the limits of both trust and analysis. First, it’s helpful to consider the contexts into which Murray’s poetry arrives, for this individual reader, and more broadly in relation to contemporary theological debates. In doing this, it’s necessary firstly to acknowledge that the context of “Australian secularism,” to use a gross shorthand for the moment, and its readings of Murray, can hardly be touched in this essay. One of the most humorous, colloquially irreverent and resistant among these responses is Ken Bolton’s poem *Untimely Meditations*:

In the mid 70s
I became aware
of an irritating irregular din,
becoming quite insistent
—things beginning with “I”
appropriately.
It was Les Murray
Les told us
“Where’s
the beef?”
as if poems were a sandwich
and his
had dinkum verities
and content, while ours were that relativistic non-
sense
you learn at unis,
not very sustaining.
This was “the City and the Country” theme.
(Bolton 37)

Bolton’s is an altogether other, secular response to “Les” that can find no redeeming features in the preacherly, insistent presentation of “dinkum verities / and content.” Its humour is informed and seems to come from a deep, alienated place that has no room for Murray’s poetics. However, the context I want to create in this essay is one

that seeks both to question and illuminate Murray’s poetics of the sacred. This context can be introduced through two brief descriptions of what might be called “postmodern” and “post-colonial” theologies: the first is from an essay entitled “Infinity, Insomnia and the (im)possibility of Theology,” in which Australian theologian Stephen Curkpatrick explicates the work of Emmanuel Levinas. He does so within a poststructural, Derridean framework that sees that for any writing that approaches the divine, “Witness to the infinite is betrayed when it is translated into a theme (‘the said’). This ‘said’ as the predicting grammar of the word ‘God,’ must constantly be unsaid in order to bear witness to the infinite” (Curkpatrick 28).

To gloss this idea, Curkpatrick quotes Levinas arguing that “language is already skepticism, haunting rational thought, contesting the solidification of thought in the ‘said’ (Levinas 44). And the second description of a current theological context is from Jamie S. Scott, a Canadian post-colonial and religious studies critic, from his 1998 essay “Geographies of the Sacred and Post-colonial Literatures.” He emphasizes

the precariousness of our own sacred contexts, the historical accident of our own sacred locations . . . in a heightened awareness of the relativity of all locatedness, human or divine. Post-colonial writings thus offer concrete opportunities for us to discover in ourselves and in our neighbours that simultaneous presence of the seen and the unseen, of the material and the mysterious . . . which animates [a] sense of the sacred. (Griffith and Tulip 70)

The negative and the positive-leaning directions of postmodern theology are registered here. Curkpatrick’s Levinasian theology constantly questions itself “so that every “said” is to be constantly “unsaid” in order to bear witness to the infinite, without certifying that the word “God” can serve as an adequate alibi for infinity” (Curkpatrick 32). Scott, in contrast, seems more positive as he describes the “simultaneous presence of the seen and the unseen” (70). It is true that like Murray Scott has a strong sense of literature—and specifically post-colonial literature—and its ability to represent the sacred. But Scott also has a strong emphasis on the precariousness of such representation. He wants, at an “ethical level” to “expose the pretensions to place involved in our narratives, [to . . .] question our proprietary postures, and counter claims to possession [. . .]” (Scott 61). Here he is speaking simultaneously of theological and post-colonial imperatives, of “critical practices of dislodgement, without which [. . .] narratives become fortified places, abiding cities” (Wesley A. Kort in Scott, 61).

This essay proposes that Murray’s poetics is deeply and dramatically at work within such “precarious” and “unsaying” dramas of sacredness. Further, the axiomatic, and at worst, the judgmental and dogmatic certainties

and will to authority, of Murray's work undermines a richer impulse, a more self-questioning, less knowing response to the sacred. This second impulse lets fall the pretension to absolutes, those often infuriating Murrayesque axioms, pronouncements, desiderata, binaries, high-horses, and allows the language to reveal its own imperfect, vulnerable, flawed and unabiding capacities. I use "the language" as the subject of this sentence, not precluding the constructive participation of the author, but allowing in, hopefully, all the healthy skepticism of language to undo itself, and of the reader too, who in the end must discern for herself how to measure Murray's languaged sacred.

A central Murray poem in this context is "Poetry and Religion," from the 1987 volume *The Daylight Moon*:

Religions are poems. They concert
our daylight and dreaming minds, our
emotions, instinct, breath and native gesture

into the only whole thinking: poetry.
Nothing's said till it's dreamed out in words
and nothing's true that figures in words only.

A poem, compared with an arrayed religion,
may be like a soldier's one short marriage night
to die and live by. But that is a small religion.

Full religion is the large poem in loving repetition;
like any poem, it must be inexhaustible and complete
with turns where we ask Now why did the poet do that?

You can't pray a lie, said Huckleberry Finn;
you can't poe one either. It is the same mirror:
mobile, glancing, we call it poetry,

fixed centrally, we call it a religion,
and God is the poetry caught in any religion,
caught, not imprisoned. Caught as in a mirror

that he attracted, being in the world as poetry
is in the poem, a law against closure.
There'll always be religion around while there is poetry,

or a lack of it. Both are given, and intermittent
as the action of those birds—crested pigeon, rosella parrot—
who fly with wings shut, then beating, and again shut.

(Murray 235–36)

We are made, technically, to hover over that line break—"inexhaustible and complete / with turns"—to experience the poet's joke about poems as potentially complete, but also "complete with turns." My response though is not only to ask the obedient reader's question, "Now why did the poet do that?" (a question supplied, after all, by the poet) but to wonder at how language can do things, beyond the poet's control, in this poem. Without second guessing what the poet meant to do, or

did accidentally (felicitously or otherwise) it seems that the major drama of the poem is two-fold: a measuring of Murray's playful, serious, languaged claims, and a measuring of how language spins beyond any control of author or reader—wilful, provocative, full of images and the limits of imagery, full of breathtaking assertions and the silliness of such assertions.

Undemeath the fruitful central analogy of poetry as religion, religion as poetry—an analogy which flirts with but generally manages to stave off polarization of thought, a simplistic contrast or difference between poetry and religion—runs a vein of oppositions which the poem both establishes but also seeks to deny or obliterate: daylight and dreaming mind, made singular; emotions concerted playfully, smoothly across the stanza break into "the only whole thinking"; words as necessary dream tools but also as needing to be put in their place, only a part of the truth; the poem as truth, a place of adoration (loving repetition, analogous to the operations of religion), but also never the same, not reiterable, having a "law against its closure," being free ("caught, not imprisoned"). The poem's fixed triplet structure gives a regularity; and the sprawling, irregular lines burst open any regularity, allowing in the desired vernacular. The triplet form works through axioms and pronouncements—it can't help itself—even as the poem seeks to break down such certainty: note the playful (or irritating, depending on where you're standing) insistence of "religions are poems," "they concert," "the only whole thinking: poetry," "Nothing's said till . . .," "It is the same mirror . . .," "There'll always be religion." etc. It is play, and perhaps all the more provocative for that: alluring and replenishing if you happen to read *with* the poem's axioms; irritatingly pompous and self-preening—"now why did the poet do that?"—and self-sealed if you don't.

But it's the unreadability of two central images that moves beyond this vein of polarities and sets up that second, less conscious, drama of the poem: a measuring of how language spins beyond the control of even these specious polarities. In the image of God caught in a mirror, "that he attracted," we are offered a representation of God as poetry, God as the poetry in any religion, God being in the world "as poetry is in the poem," "a law against its closure." How is the everyday reader, seeking the poetry of any poem, expected to look over God's shoulder—to follow the metaphor—into such a mirror? God has attracted the poem and is somehow caught in there, and we humble humans, poets and readers, are promised a vision of God looking out from within. We mustn't force our vision, as poetry is "given and intermittent." This brings us back to the tension between effort and the beyond of effort. Is this a tension, or a contradiction here? How are we to read the seductively beautiful final image of "those birds"—"crested pigeon, rosella parrot— / who fly with wings shut, then beating, and again shut"? As one of alternating effort and glid-

ing? Or are we being offered the ultimate snake oil here? Trust me, let go, glide, wait for and accept the gift? Does this all equate finally with a choice to trust in the authority of the poet who has been “given” the poem, and is merely a servant of the divine Giver, but with his own reasons for his turns of language; the poet as authenticate before the truth-bearing of language (“you can’t pray a lie”)?

The use of the objective correlative of the birds, seen also in “Equanimity,” sets up a further question about human agency and its role in representing the sacred. What is being claimed is that both waiting, givenness, and effort are necessary—wings shut, wings beating—a double claim that seems humble and attentive enough, and not necessarily contradictory. But what room is left for that “skepticism of language” that Levinas posits? As a reader it is linguistically possible to hear the “concert” of the poem’s first line as “disconcert.” There is an oddness in the confusion of noun and verb. And further, the less indicated verb here, to *concert*, or to push or strain or force, undermines the simple lyrical felicity of the former concert. What we have in this poem, it might be argued, is the activity of language—playful, seemingly effortless, not forcing the point, but suggestive, reflective; and simultaneously we have language as axiom, sermon, as binaristic, scheming to establish or claim truth, saying even as it pretends simply to suggest. Abraham’s mirror and lamp metaphor is relevant here: do we have in Murray’s poem a structure claiming merely to be a mirror—“mobile, glancing”—but necessarily repressing its own stage-lighting, its effort-ful design upon us?

What is the effect of the poem in terms of contemporary theological contexts? Does language here ask us to trust it, and then betray us, in equal parts? If so, how then are we as critical and discerning readers to approach this doubleness? One instinctive response is to catch Murray in his own spotlight, put him up against the wall, make him admit his culpability in the whole thing. After all, if he’s claiming that the poet is the one who seeds all those “turns” in the poem, isn’t he to be held accountable for letting us down—allowing us to see the stitching and the flaws? But another, perhaps more generous response is to acknowledge here the overwhelming workings of language—always unsaying (doubting, failing to accomplish, constantly aware of the other possibilities it excludes). This unsaying may be philosophical and overt, as it is for Levinas or Derrida, or it may be enacted both consciously and unconsciously, in the language of the poets. In this context I want to co-opt Murray’s vision of effort, and the beyond of effort, of gift and waiting, with the *work* of representation, in a slightly aslant way. The dramas of representing the sacred *are* constructed by the poet, knowingly, playfully, punningly, but they are also given, in the humbling, traitorous, unsaying that language performs. Even the poet—or perhaps especially the poet who grabs at authority and certitude, is unsaid in this context. And of course, so is the critic.

The most famous of Murray’s early poems, “An Absolutely Ordinary Rainbow,” from the 1969 volume *The Weatherboard Cathedral*, can be read as an attempt to thematize this impossibility of representation. It’s an attempt that entails both a solid, represented, vernacular image—“a fellow crying in Martin Place”—and the impossibility of interpreting such an image. The poem begins:

The word goes round Repins,
the murmur goes round Lorenzini,
at Tattersalls, men look up from sheets of numbers,
the Stock Exchange scribblers forget the chalk in
their hands,
and men with bread in their pockets leave the Greek
Club:
There’s a fellow crying in Martin Place. They can’t
stop him.

The traffic in George Street is banked up for half a mile
and drained of motion. . . .

and ends

and many weep for sheer acceptance, and more
refuse to weep for fear of all acceptance,
but the weeping man, like the earth, requires nothing,
the man who weeps ignores us, and cries out
of his writhen face and ordinary body

not words, but grief, not messages, but sorrow,
hard as the earth, sheer, present as the sea—
and when he stops, he simply walks between us
mopping his face with the dignity of one
man who has wept, and now has finished weeping.

Evading believers, he hurries off down Pitt Street.

(Murray 24–5)

The image of the weeping man has multiple effects, but no-one can say what they are seeing, whether there is a halo, a peace, a retrieval of childhood innocence, an instinctual need expressed, a gift of weeping, an ordinariness, a self-sufficient dignity. So the impossibility of interpretation is *thematized*. But the central fact of the poem is that it wants to leave us in no doubt, that we have witnessed the numinous bursting in upon the ordinary: the rainbow. The thematizing or saying of the impossibility of representation is simply folded back (another of language’s tricks) into the poem’s urgent need to open a space for authentic representation. The poet, as much as the reader, is seduced into believing, even as all believers are imaged in the final line as needing to be evaded.

We are drawn in here by the seductive communal “we”—“the man we surround”; by the realism of ordinary Sydney—Tattersalls, the stock exchange, the Greek Club, the traffic in George St, dogs and dusty pigeons—and by the authorial voice as witness, pro-

nouncing: "there is no such thing" or "I see a woman, shining." But it's the incongruity of this authorial voice that is the give away. While the speaker is one with "us," held back *with us* by the dignity of the man's weeping, trembling with silence along with all the other slick wits, it is also, like Blake's wanderer in London, so certain, so prophetic. Its certainty is there in both its denunciation of the misinterpreters—"some will say, in the years to come, a halo / or force stood around him. There is no such thing." (25)—and also in its sureness about the meaning beyond words to which it is witness: ". . . the weeping man, like the earth, requires nothing. . . / and cries out of his writhen face and ordinary body // not words, but grief, not messages, but sorrow, hard as the earth, sheer, present as the sea—" What can the reader make of such analogies—the weeping man "like the earth" requires nothing? "Hard as earth, sheer, present as the sea"? These are assured similes that flirt with failure of meaning as they seek to represent "not words, not messages." But equally, and contradictorily, these similes emerge both from a prophetic desire, and from a very human agency, speaking in words.

Curkpatrick describes the Levinasian difference between a theology that diminishes infinity and one that comprehends, at different levels, prophetic witness, which "cannot speak of God, even if "God" is invoked as the authority in whose name one speaks" (27).

Therefore, a contradiction occurs in prophetic testimony—having been apprehended by the infinite, the witness speaks by the authority of the infinite, but cannot appeal to any further disclosure or endorsement of this witness beyond the prophet's own words. (27)

And this is perhaps doubly so for prophets in secular Australia, the land of skeptics par excellence. What we have in "An Absolutely Ordinary Rainbow" is the *thematization* of a weeping man who in the end could only say nothing and "evading believers, hurries off down Pitt Street" (Murray 25). In Levinas's intricate and nuanced language, we have a portrait of the complexity of "Les Murray" grappling with "the impossibility of the 'infinite within' . . . a subjectivity that is 'cored out' even as it is 'nourished' by this lack through excess . . . [a] subject . . . apprehended, exceeded, and hollowed out in its finitude, by the in-finite within" (Levinas in Curkpatrick, 23).

In a wonderful Murray poem, "The Mouthless Image of God in the Hunter-Colo Mountains," the reader is once again presented with the mighty struggle between representation, naming, imaging, and a registering of the absence of God to the human. In a scramble through mad past-midnight suburbs and grunting barnyard cacophonies—dogs and dingoes, fowls and waterbirds all barking and hissing and flexing in their own languages—you (an unidentifiable but strangely Murraysque "you")

. . . speak to each species in the seven or eight planetary words of its language, which ignore and include the detail

God set you to elaborate by the dictionary-full when, because they would reveal their every secret, He took definition from the beasts and gave it to you.

(Murray 184–85)

In its bizarrely humorous Dr Doolittle progress, this three-part opera for animal and human opens out into its full theme: "spirit." Up through the wisdom of animals, and through the singularly human activity of "Laughter-and-weeping," "we are shattered by joy" (185). In the environment of such joy, humans move beyond the language of rationality alone, and beyond mere human emotions we may enter the place of "the spasm which . . . turns our face awry, / contorts speech, shakes the body, and makes our eyelids liquefy." In this place "learned words bubble off us," and we are sung "as a summer dawn sings a magpie." If we enter this place, the detritus of mere human language drops away and we find ourselves "exposed to those momentary heavens."

It is a truly strange, exhilarating linguistic performance, "The Mouthless Image of God in the Hunter-Colo Mountains": possibly a modern, rural version of Pentecost; possibly a charismatic seizure by the spirit; or an orgasmic experience of laughter and tears and liquefaction; a representation of the organic: animal, human and God reunited; but certainly an attempt in long, complex, often gorgeously rough hewn syntax, to claim a place beyond language. Or to speak in an other language—visionary, embodied, joyous, and way, way beyond the simple world of cause and effect, work and striving. It is something given.

This then is Murray's glory, his letting go, his self-contradictoriness, so much repudiation of human language, in human language. In reading poems like "The Mouthless Image of God," this reader wants to cry "Yes!" For all Murray's provocations, his sermons and dogmatizing, his setting up of straw enemies, and his fighting words elsewhere, it is when this poet is able and willing to let go, to bathe in his own contradictoriness, and not to flaunt his pomposities and prophetic knowingness, that the reader too has a chance to join in, to receive the gift. "The Mouthless Image of God" seems alive to all its own contradictions: a fully embodied and embodying poetry which is simultaneously envisaging a release from mere body; a language set to speak in the tongues of humans *and* angels *and* animals, while still needing to repudiate the failures of human language—dictionary-full, defining, logical, needing release into a place where there might be "expressing repletion and bestowing it," "far from class hatred." The poem seems aware of "the impossibility of the 'infinite within.'" In fact it rings with amazement at how humans so often miss the point—"playing the fool. / behind your arch will"—*working* for joy, *denying* it, deaf to the raucous, ridiculous, passionate chorus of creation.

Is language capable of representing (embodying, incarnating) the sacred? This essay has been arguing that Murray in a number of ways seeks to answer this question. For this reader, at least, the most inspiring, the most contagious Murray poetry, is that which does not insist on its own knowledge of the place, the time, the enemies and the friends of the sacred. For Levinas, the "said" as the predicting grammar of the word "God" must constantly be unsaid in order to bear witness to the infinite. For Scott, such unsaying is akin to an awareness of "the precariousness of our own sacred contexts, the historical accident of our own sacred locations [. . .] in a heightened awareness of the relativity of all locatedness, human or divine." In Murray's finest poetry there is this awareness, a coming to realize that it is impossible to speak of God, even as God is represented, imaged, mimicked, and called on. Such a realizing, undone and done over again, is not a failure, but the very closest the poetry comes to the sacred. □

Works cited

- Bolton, Ken. *Untimely Meditations and other poems*. Adelaide: Wakefield Press, 1997.
- Curkpatrick, Stephen. "Infinity, Insomnia and the (im)possibility of Theology." *Pacifica* 17.1 (2004): 15–35.
- Griffith, Michael and James Tulip, eds. *Spirit of Place: Source of the Sacred?* Sydney: Berget, 1998.
- Kane, Paul. "Les Murray and Poetry's Otherworld." *Australian Poetry: Romanticism and Negativity*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996.
- Levinas, Emmanuel. *Otherness than Being; or, Beyond Essence*. Trans. Alphonso Lingis. Boston: Hague, 1991.
- Murray, Les. *Collected Poems*. North Ryde: Angus & Robertson, 1991.
- . *Persistence in Folly: Selected Prose Writings*. Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1984.
- Scott, Jamie S. "Geographies of the Sacred and Post-colonial Literatures." *Spirit of Place: Source of the Sacred?* Eds. Michael Griffith and James Tulip. Sydney: Berget, 1998.

LYN MCCREDDEN is a Senior Lecturer in Literary Studies at Deakin University. Her research interests include Australian literature and culture, indigenous writing, and postcolonialism.

Les Murray

Church

i.m. Joseph Brodsky

The wish to be right
has decamped in large numbers
but some come to God
in hopes of being wrong.

High on the end wall hangs
the Gospel, from before he was books.
All judging ends in his fix,
all, including his own.

He rose out of Jewish,
not English evolution
and he said the lamp he held
aloft to call all nations was Jewish.

Freedom still eats freedom,
justice eats justice, love
even love. One retarded man said
church makes me want to be naughty,

but naked in a muddy trench
with many thousands, someone's saying
the true god gives his flesh and blood.
Idols demand yours off you.

LES MURRAY is preparing a new collection of poems, *The Biplane Houses*. In 2004, the Italian translation of his verse novel, *Fredy Neptune*, won the Premio Mondello Award, and in 2005, he published *Hell and After*, an anthology including poems by Francis McNamara, John Shaw Neilson, Mary Gilmore, and Lesbia Harford.