

## Martin Leer: 'This Country Is My Mind': Les Murray's Poetics of Place

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In his relief at being 'home again from the cities of the world', the persona in '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:

*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.*

*Across the creek and paddock of the moon  
four perfect firs stand dark beside a field  
lost long ago, which holds a map of rooms.  
This was the plot from which we transplants sprang.  
The trees grew straight. We burgeoned and spread far.  
(Collected Poems 1998, 12–16)*

The external landscape is more central to the experiencing consciousness than anything he carries internalised in his head; the persona's self is dependent upon setting; the existing landscape is mindscape, memroyscape and dreamscape.

Attempts to explain the depth of meaning attaching to place, and the centrality of Bunyah, have been a commonplace of Murray criticism at least since James McAuley, in *A Map of Australian Verse*, noted Murray's 'Virgilian pietas' towards ancestors and the earth itself: 'The realism passes over into a mythic vision and acquires a suggestion of sacred meaning and ritual' (300). But nobody has gone into the depth of it. Though Lawrence Bourke in his book on Murray devotes a chapter to analysing place, he ultimately sees this 'place' as 'the Bardic voice' (see *A Vivid Steady State* chapter 7, especially 128), which I take to be the perceived claim on Murray's part to be a kind of ideological spokesman for the rural poor, 'the relegated', the 'old, Bush version of Australia', a claim which may be seen as having grown even more overt in collections, such as *Dog Fox Field* and especially *Subhuman Redneck Poems*, published after Bourke wrote his book. I am less interested here, however, than most Murray criticism with distilling the ideological aporias of his perceived or overstated public political positions. Rather, I want to describe phenomenologically the notion of place in Murray's work, the complex nature of Bunyah as a 'centre of the world', and how a poetics of place is established and develops from the earliest collections.

*Place*, claims Lawrence Buell in *The Environmental Imagination*, is 'space humanized' (253), acquiring 'character' from the projection of human feeling and human stories and a disembodied psychology. Something similar is argued by Paul Carter, especially in *The Lie of the Land*: 'place' is an invention of ideology and rhetoric. Both are 'reading against' a rather overwhelming literature by poets, novelists, travellers and environmentalist writers attesting to the 'primary reality' of place and its influence on the literary imagination (Carter 17). Nevertheless, *topophilia*, Buell notes, even according to Yi-Fu Tuan, who coined the (rather sickly) term, 'is not the strongest of human emotions'. (Quoted in Buell, 254)

Writing about Les Murray and with an awareness of the allembicing *topophilia* of Australian Aboriginal culture, which had shaped and was shaped by the landscape Europeans encountered two centuries

ago, I find it hard to maintain such Cartesian detachment from place, which I see as the point or plane or dimension, where inner and outer meet, where memory inhabits the present. For this essay 'place' is a given; abstract 'space' an invention of the European mathematical imagination around the time of Descartes and Newton, incorporating perspectival painting and cartography. Even Euclid had no concept of 'space', and to contemporary geometry (post Einstein and Heisenberg) space is 'a set of points' (or 'strings', if you accept that theory), 'space' and 'place' endlessly defined in terms of each other. Like a map, *place* may be both metaphor and metonymy; unlike a map, *place* is both sign and ground.

Experientially, *place* appears to Murray and to a vast range of writers as what Mircea Eliade termed a 'hierophany', the apperception of a cosmic centre: 'not a matter of theoretical speculation, but a primary religious experience that precedes all reflection on the world ... it is the break effected in space that allows the world to be constituted, because it reveals the fixed point, the central axis for all future orientation' (21ff.). Bunyah, like Seamus Heaney's Mossbawm is an *omphalos* (Heaney 18), the place from which a life-world draws its primary rhythm. Pressed further for a definition I would base *place* not in psychology or ideology or rhetoric, but in ecology, as does Gary Snyder in a number of essays: it is the human habitat, *biotope* or *biome* reaching into the *bioregion* (see Snyder 183–200; 241–87). Place, however, also has political dimensions: humanity faces a crisis at the very deepest ecological level as we reach the limits of the biosphere without being able to take off into space; and under the present world-system of neocolonial globalisation, peripheral places become the sites of resistance, as Subcommandante Marcos has been reminding us from the village of La Realidad in 'the mountains of South East Mexico' (Marcos 18).

For all these reasons, and more, an examination of place in Murray's poetry is of interest, since perhaps not even Heaney's Mossbawm or Derek Walcott's St. Lucia are peripheral locations as complexly reconceptualised as centres as is Murray's Bunyah. As 'Evening Alone at Bunyah' makes clear, it is a *centre by transplantation* and *centred in a spreading network*. Later, in the verse 'Preface' to *The Idyll Wheel* (1989) the sequence written to place himself back into the landscape, out of the myth of 'return to the centre' which had generated most of his work up until then, Murray scapes Bunyah in the following lines:

An east-running valley where two hooded creeks make junction  
and two snoring roads make a rainguttered cross of function:

there, each hamlet of house-and-sheds stands connected and alone  
and the chimneys of old houses are square bottles cut from iron.

Gum forest is a solid blue cloud on the hills to the south  
And bladygrass and chain rust round its every wheeltracked mouth.

*Place*, in Murray's world-view and poetics, is where landscape and mindscape coalesce, or at least converge, into a person's *imago mundi*, the image of the world engraved as an *intaglio* on the mind: *The Idyll Wheel* was first published with woodcuts by Rosalind Atkins, 'whose burin,' the 'Preface' says, 'opens up further leads/ into the heart of it.' In place, landscape and mindscape connect by *chiasmus*, the figure incarnated at Bunyah as centre-of-the-world by the junction of creeks and the 'cross of function' of the roads (indeed this is all that Bunyah *is* as a geographical site, all its human meaning diffused into the surrounding district).

In his essay 'L'entrelacs: le chiasme' Maurice Merleau-Ponty posits chiasmus as the figure incorporating the crossover between the observer, vision and the view, and between the senses like vision and touch. It is, he argues, the figure for a lateral and transversal process—as is the case in both Murray's views of Bunyah and the figure 'inherent' in (and as) Bunyah in each of them: the cross-roads and cross-creeks and the fir trees and transplanted Murray clan. Embodiment to both Merleau-Ponty and Murray chiasmically reconfigures the traditional philosophical mind/world distinction. The body, our incorporation in the world, becomes the carrier of the mind in the world; and the world enters the mind largely through what physiologists call the 'optical chiasmus', where the right eye sends its image to the left hemisphere of the brain and vice versa. Or in the poetic terms of Merleau-Ponty's marginal note to the unfinished essay:

*For vision is in itself an incorporation of the viewer in the visible, a search for itself which belongs to the visible—for the visibility of the world is not an envelope of quale, but what lies between the qualia, connective tissue between inner and outer horizons—it is as*

*flesh appearing to flesh that vision has its apartness and is mine ... My body as model for the objects and the objects as model for my body: the body connected to the world in all its parts, towards it - all this means: the world, the flesh, not as fact or as sum of facts, but as site for an inscription of truth: the false erased, not annulled ... (19)*

The 'inner and outer horizons of things' yoked together chiasmatically constitutes what Merleau-Ponty calls 'my landscape', an *intuitus mentis* of 'incarnated ideas'. In a very concretely embodied way, this is also the meaning of Bunyah, *the place and idyll*, the farming year as the figure of European-derived settlement in *The Idyll Wheel*: 'for idyll derives from *eidōs*, form/ It too shapes cityscape and farm', as it said in the first version of the final poem. But to Murray, of course, the chiasmus of 'my landscape', 'this country is my mind', is not an attempt, as Merleau-Ponty's was, to present phenomenology as a more materialist solution than Feuerbach's or Marx's to the materialist/idealist impasse in philosophy. To Murray it is a Catholic Incarnationist poetics, which makes of his personal 'First Real World' of Bunyah and the surrounding landscape of dairy-farms rising into the forested foothills of the Great Dividing Range an almost impossibly complex and wide-ranging chiasmus of *topoi*. Bunyah is what Malcolm Cowley in *Exiles' Return* referred to as 'the landscape by which all others are measured and condemned' (13) and it is the chiasmic 'meadow' of Robert Duncan's *The Opening of the Field*:

*Often I Am Permitted to Return to a Meadow*

*as if it were a scene made up by the mind,  
that is not mine, but is a made place,*

*that is mine, it is so near to the heart,  
an eternal pasture folded in all thought ...*

*that is a place of first permission,  
everlasting omen of what is.*

But in Bunyah this common poetic-religious intuition of 'a first place' is crossed with yet other strands of signification. In his essay 'On Sitting Back and Thinking About Porter's Boeotia' (*The Paperbark Tree* 56–65) Murray refers to Hippokrene at Mt Helikon where Hesiod got his first poetic inspiration, setting in motion the whole Boeotian strain of poetry with which Murray allies himself, as a 'Wunger-place', and often enough he has referred to Bunyah as his 'spirit country' in Aboriginal terms (it is an Aboriginal placename, after all) endowed with the connection between mind, family history and place which T.G.H. Strehlow in *Aranda Traditions* described as 'the everlasting birth-place' (Aranda *pmara kutata*):

*Mountains and creeks and springs and water-holes are, to [the Aranda], not merely interesting or beautiful scenic features in which his eyes may take a passing delight: they are the handiwork of ancestors from whom he himself is descended. He sees recorded in the surrounding landscape the ancient story of the lives and the deeds of the immortal beings whom he reveres; beings who for a brief moment may take on human shape once more: beings, many of whom he has known in his own experience as his fathers and grandfathers and brothers, and as his mothers and sisters. The whole countryside is his living age-old family tree. (30–31)*

Even from a secularised and historical European view, the Bunyah landscape in which Murray grew up could barely be separated from his family history. The first white people to settle at Bunyah in 1870 were his great-grandparents John and Isabella Murray (portrayed in 'Their Cities, Their Universities' *CP* 94–97), the first white child born at Bunyah was their son Alexander Bunyah Murray. In fact the four first settlers (the fir trees in 'Evening Alone') at Bunyah were Murrays according to Evelyn Boyce's *A History of Sawyer's Creek, Willina and Bunyah* — all sons of Hugh Murray at Kimbriki on the Manning River, who had come to Australia from Roxboroughshire in the Scottish Borders in 1848. 'The rich flats of the Upper Manning have been the heartland of the family ever since, though it has put out offshoots in all the districts around,' says Murray in the essay 'The Bonnie Disproportion' (*The Paperbark Tree* 103–28), which is partly concerned with family history. The sense of ramifications is crucial for understanding his mythologising of the region:

the ramifications of transplanted trees, of Aboriginal networks of sacred sites, deeply ramified in space, the ancient Celtic *fine* or clan system, deeply ramified in time, and the stellar galaxies deeply ramified in spacetime.

Murray's poetry combines the two ways of 'sensing place' which Seamus Heaney has outlined in his essay on 'The Sense of Place': 'One is lived, illiterate and unconscious, the other learned, literate and conscious' (131–49). There are some of Murray's poems where places and place-names are used as 'posts to fence out a personal landscape', as Heaney says of the lived knowledge of place in the poetry of Patrick Kavanagh. Like Kavanagh and Heaney himself Murray possesses an imaginative identification with place that perhaps only poverty in a lonely childhood bestows. Kavanagh's persona in the poem Heaney cites, 'Inniskeen Road, July Evening' stands aside from the community dancing, identifying instead with the road: 'A road, a mile of kingdom I am king/ Of banks and stones and every blooming thing', while of the persona of 'Evening Alone at Bunyah', 'It used to be said that I must know each [stone]/ by its first name. I was such a dawdler,/ such a head-down starrer.' In other, perhaps a majority, of Murray's poems, however, places and place-names become 'sounding lines, rods to plumb the depths of a ... culture', as Heaney finds it in John Montague, though the Northern Irish culture Montague probes is 'shared and diminished', while Murray's culture has different root systems interweaving in a convergent pattern, as at the ending of 'Aspects of Language and War on the Gloucester Road':

*I am driving waga, up and west.  
Parting cattle, I climb over the crest  
out of Bunyah, and skirt Bucca Wauka,  
A Man Sitting With Knees Against His Chest:  
baga waga, knees up, the burial shape of a warrior.  
Eagles flying below me, I will ascend Wallanbah,  
that whipcrack country of white cedar  
and ruined tennis courts, and speed up on the tar.  
In sight of the high ranges I'll pass the turnoff to Bundook,  
Hindi for musket — which it also took  
to add to the daylight species here, in the prim-  
al 1830's of our numbered Dreamtime  
and under the purple coast of the Mograni  
and its trachyte west wall scaling in the sky  
I will swoop to the valley and Gloucester Rail  
where boys hand-shunted trains to load their cattle  
and walk on the platform, glancing west at that country  
of running creeks, the stormcloud-coloured Barrington,  
the land, in lost Gaelic and Kattangal, of Barandan. (CP 279–84)*

An Australian place-name, like an Irish one, 'can net a world with its associations' (John Montague's phrase, quoted by Heaney, 140). The net not only establishes connections with other sites, it draws different cultures together: Bucca Wauka coexists with Bundook on the present-day map, yet they commemorate opposed sides in the 'numbered Dreamtime past'. Place-names are Dreamtime inscriptions on the landscape, eroded but not obliterated by the action of history, which leaves topographical palimpsests like the anglicised corruption of 'Barrington', whose distant forest-clad hills may be derived from either of the 'lost' Dreamtime languages of Murray's world: imported Gaelic or indigenous Kattangal. This incidental convergence is obviously suggestive since Murray's models of placename lore are Irish *Dinnseanchas* (an etymological mythology of place) as well as Aboriginal song-cycles.

The sense of ramifications applies also to personal history, where the poetics (or even mental disposition) of allocating identity into the landscape rather than a body-contained mind, leads to the placing (or 'projection') of sensations, feelings, memory and ideas into the landscape as *memory theatre* and even a strand of poems about his childhood home as *dream house* from 'Evening Alone at Bunyah' through 'Cowyard Gates' (1977) to 'The Sleepout' (1987). This is seen at its most acute when the childhood home is dismantled in 'Cowyard Gates':

*My cousin had prised the last sheet iron off  
the rafters of our sleep*

.....

*I had said goodbye to the house many times  
and so helped it fall.  
I had even ransacked it,  
carried off slants of sunlight and of wind  
that used to strike through the bedroom planking, blades  
against the upstart.*

*Many feelings are suspended:  
the front verandah feeling, looking away at the west,  
the back verandah feeling, wet boards, towel on its nail,  
all widowed in the air*

*but half-demolished it was almost an eddy,  
standing there on the ridge,  
memory and loss in a grove of upright boards.*

*Now Time's free to dissipate all the days trapped there:  
books in the sleepout, green walling of branches around  
our Christmas table, my mother placing and placing  
a tin ring on scone dough, telling me about French.  
The first weeks of her death (CP 155–56)*

Time here appears as a dissembler and destroyer — ever ready to flatten everything in its course. Human life acquires meaning only from eddies in the flux, from the spacing of time: trapping days in rooms or ‘placing and placing/ a tin ring on scone-dough’. Only by creating such *loci*, which redeem time, can we prevent creation from slipping into a black hole of annihilation. Spatial points of reference convert passing time into memory. Such sites become *loci* in the memory theatre of the landscape, places where meaning adheres and can be recovered.

The myth attaching to place in Murray's work has loss and recovery at its core: ‘a field/ lost long ago, which holds a map of rooms’ of the first Murray homestead; the childhood home pulled down to make cowyard gates; the death of the mother inscribed on the landscape in poems like ‘The Steel’, where at the crucial moment time and death come to be measured in distance from Bunyah: ‘thirty-seven miles to town/ and the terrible delay’ (CP 186–91). In the country that is a mind, this memory-scaping becomes accessible to poetic recovery in a totally different way from the Puritan Hell of Milton's Satan, where ‘the mind is its own place’. No wonder then that the word Murray finds to celebrate in ‘In Murray's Dictionary’ (the *Oxford English Dictionary* compiled by Sir James Murray, cousin of Les Murray's great-great-grandfather, but also of course the poet's own) should be:

*The word aplace [which]  
lasted from Gower to the Puritans,  
but never got much use,  
yet far from being obscure, it once  
was more of a true antonym  
to away than say back or home  
here, present or fixed in space (Dog Fox Field 74)*

Place, in Murray's world-view, is a dynamic, not a static concept. Recovery of meaning and selfhood work through a relocation of ‘inner and outer horizons’, an *aplacement* which in all of Murray's work, as for the prison escapee persona of ‘Escaping Out There’, from *Lunch and Counter Lunch* (1974), is a matter of going to ground physically in the embodied *mentalité* of the country that is a mind. Body and mind are chiasmically reconfigured in a way which is entirely appropriate in terms of the conceptual geography of a continent where the Centre and the Outback are synonymous:

*The people around me  
restore me like colours. Their heads  
are full of quiet electrified porridge and blood.  
I almost can't bear how delicate the webblings  
of their lives are in there, the cattle and front yards and psalms (CP 99–100)*

Fitting back into the networks of the cultural mind-map (exposed here as in an expressionist painting) entails a crossover between vision and touch: police searching for him 'feel under paddocks'; the busdriver 'is practicing grips/ for his wrestle with mountains'. The movement of thought, as in all Murray's meditative landscapes, becomes reciprocal, not reflective: 'The hills are coming around us like calves/ to a rattled milk bucket'. And in the end, the crossover is complete, geographically as well as in the identification of landscape and persona:

*I will go on from there to where the west wind rises  
further east, the gorge is so far back*

.....

*My name will rub off there on the lips of the watershed  
and when I am fine as cloud-webbing, I will drift  
vaguely down valleys,  
me, or my water, if it comes to that,  
into further lives*

*I will make good ancestors. (CP 99–100)*

Even generative time is projected into the landscape, *aplaced* in 'increase-places', as it were, storages of latent meaning held in an after-life which may be a source of regeneration, as in the poem which stands as contrast to the four Scots firs of the initial Murray transplantation. 'The China Pear Trees' is a poem steeped in the traditional iconography of Paradise and of the Cosmic Tree, which grows at the world axis, with its roots, its trunk and its branches in different cosmic spheres. The poem begins by contrasting 'the power of three China pear trees/ standing in their splintery timber bark/ on an open paddock' with 'the selector's house that staked and watered them/ in Bible times, beside a spaded patch.' The house of this Free Presbyterian, Australian Adam and Eve 'proved deciduous; it went away in loads', whereas the arboreal trinity proves to be the axis round which worlds centre and new gardens are plotted:

*... after sixty years of standing out  
vanishing in autumn, blizzarding in spring  
among the farmlands' sparse and giant furniture*

*after sixty crops gorged on from all directions*

.....

*the trees drew another house, electrified and steaming  
but tin-roofed as before for blazing clouds to creak over  
and with tiny nude frogs upright again on lamplit glass*

.....

*they drew a wire fence around acres of enclosure  
shaped like a fuel tin, its spout a tunnel of trees  
tangled in passionflower and beige-bellied wonga vine (CP 244–45)*

Biographically, this describes the farm that Murray bought from his poetic earnings for his father, and to which he himself returned to live in 1986, celebrated earlier in 'Laconics: The Forty Acres' (CP 128–29). But the poem more importantly embodies the *aplaced* sense of time and the chiasmic poetics of place on which his work builds. The trees have grown through — and preserve memories of — three different dispensations. They are the temporal axis which has drawn three very different spatial planes, thus subtly inverting our usual conception of the relationship between space and time. In Murray's world space is metamorphic, time merely the axis of spatial metamorphosis. The temporal coordinate is typologically vertical, and this verticality is topologically identical with place. Such is the lateral and transversal

movement of chiasmus, as Charles Lock explains in his afterword, 'Some Words after Chiasmus', to John Breck's *The Shape of Biblical Language: Chiasmus in the Scriptures and Beyond*:

*Typology and Chiasmus are both structured around a centre: as Fr. Breck notes, the shape of chiasmus is properly a helix. The sentence spirals, from A to B and inwards and upwards to the centre of the conical helix ..., and then outwards and upwards to B' and at last to A' ... [W]hat follows the centre, what is, on the visual model, above the centre, is not a mere repetition of what has gone before, but represents increase, augmentation, intensification. We may compare this with typology, which describes that which comes before as figures or shadows of types, and that which comes after as fulfilment, presence, realization. The mid-point, the neck of the hour-glass, is the Incarnation, the moment when Prophecy becomes Revelation. The Bible in its entirety clearly has the structure of a conical helix, with the New Testament serving not only as a reflection of but also as an increment over the Old Testament. The Incarnation is the mid-point of the conical helix, whose outer- and upper-most point will be the last and pleromatic 'what's more' of the Eschaton. (Lock 362)*

By the Incarnation the Empedoclean spiral of creation, destruction and recreation (from original Eden through postlapsarian paddock to the new *hortus conclusus*) is turned into a typological gnomonic spiral of cumulative increase. Three remembered spatial stages of place are mirrored by three generations of human occupants. But the trans-substantiating place incarnated under the China pear trees, which form a centre of revelation, not of projection, also strikes an ecological chiasmus, a crossover of an ancient inborn ecological war and the convergence of imported and indigenous flora:

*...they called lush water-leaved trees  
like themselves to the stumpholes of gone rainforests*

*to shade with four seasons the tattered evergreen  
oil-haloed face of a subtle fire landscape  
(water forest versus fire forest, ancient war of the southern world).*

*It was this shade in the end, not their coarse bottling fruit  
that mirrored the moist creek trees outward, as a culture  
containing the old gardener now untying and heaping up*

*one more summer's stems and chutneys (CP 244–245)*

Place is embodied ecological chiasmus, incarnated culture. This is crucial not just for the 'composition of place' in Murray's meditative landscapes, but for 'Boeotian' politics and the 'Bush' as against the 'City' perception of 'the country', meaning both Australia and land. A significant concept in Murray's work on many levels, as Lawrence Bourke has noted in his interview, is that of 'the holding' (168). This seems to be a trans-substantiatingly real concept in Murray's depiction of 'Boeotian' culture, just as the vote is a symbolically real concept in 'Athenian' democracy. To the 'Athenian' received view of the history of civilization, which places itself in a linear, temporal progress from primitive beginnings through the rise of cities, the state, science, industry towards an apotheosis in a future, millenarian paradise, Murray opposes a world-view which times itself according to the cycles of a particular place. Thus 'The China Pear Trees' does not conceive of the world as a temporal movement through different places, but as the spatial movement through different planes of a place. Thought in this world-view is as helical as the chiasmus: not an evanescent succession of momentary ideas, but a sedimentation in space, both intrinsically in the mind and extrinsically in the landscape. Mind and landscape become mirror images, just slightly out of phase.

The colonisation of Australia provided the space, Boeotian traditional wisdom makes it habitable as a culture by centering and containing it in a place, which can be directly extended to human mental life and politics — as poor city-bred Cameron Reeby is told by the Boeotian politician known as the 'Burning Man' in the following altercation in *The Boys Who Stole the Funeral*:

actually I like it up here      theres space

enough to feel free            I think it takes space

How can you be free? *snaps the Burning Man,*  
you haven't got a place... (42)

A place, a holding, gives the individual a reality to express, a voice and a right to speak, not necessarily total ownership: 'No one can own all Bunyah,' says the verse preface to *The Idyll Wheel*, 'Names shouted over coal-oil lamps/ cling to their paddocks'. When Murray in 'The Dream of Wearing Shorts Forever' (CP 234–236) speaks of 'going home into space,/ into time to farm the mind's Sabine acres/for product or subsistence', the holding is more than a place from which to criticise the metropolis as was Horace's Sabine farm (though it is also that!). It is rather that farming and writing are chiasmically connected: 'The farm must be made a form,' as the Kentucky farmer poet Wendell Berry puts it, a form endlessly renewed, an *eidōs* in which the objectification of the subject corresponds to an organic moulding of mental form. Poetic realisation means embodiment in Murray's meditative 'composition of place'. Thus in 'Towards the Imminent Days' (CP 37–43) the mystery of the sacrament of marriage (in this first of Murray's epithalamia) is correlated with the reality of farming: it is first concretely placed in diurnal and seasonal time in 'the country that is a mind' of both Bunyah and Boeotia (the setting clearly refers to David Campbell's poem 'Ploughing' from the sequence 'Works and Days', *Collected Poems* 102). The place reveals its meanings by simile and analogy rather than allegory — and at first by thoughts (and memories of the wedding of Geoffrey and Sally Lehmann) alighting like birds in the fields:

*Midmorning. September, and red tractors climb  
on a landscape wide as all forgiveness. Clouds  
in the west horizon, parrots twinkling down  
on Leary's oats, on Stewart's upturned field —*

*good friends are blood relations that you choose.  
The phrase discovers me in the heart of farmland,  
Harpstringing fences, coming back into my life*

But the meanings inscribed on or ascribed to the landscape are reciprocated from another set of meanings coming out of the intimate perception of place: the 'imminent day' of both Advent and summer, 'a radiant season swelling through the horizons' perceived by a second visionary sight through which farm boys attuned to organic processes intuit the hidden potential in place, the universal ramifications of the local and the religious implications of the natural. The landscape and even the firmament swell in a kind of mystic exuberance, which makes the immanent appear as an imminent transcendence, as in the young men: 'lounging in grasses that threaten// the smaller brick towns, they long for a splendid alert./ Only marriage will save them.' These symbolic or metaphoric implications must be contained by juxtaposition in continuity with its opposite: ambiguity by chiasmus, imminence by immanence, young men by marriage and husbandry (at this season 'wise farmers talk drought, Hanrahan's comfort'), and the intuited universal *aplaced* in poetic substantiation, where the poet literally ploughs himself into chthonic actuality:

*I walk into furrows end on and they rise through my flesh  
burying worlds of me. It is the clumsiest dancing,  
this walking skewways over worn-ocean that heaps*

*between skid and crumble with lumped stones in ambush for feet  
but it marches with seed and steadiness, knowing the land*

.....

*I am striding on over the fact that it is the earth*

*that holds our mark longest, that soil dug never returns  
to primal coherence...*

The plough-furrows here are less a synecdoche for the activity of verse-making, as when Seamus Heaney in an essay derives *verse* from the Latin *versus*, 'the turn that a ploughman made at the head of the field as he

finished one furrow and faced back into the next' (67). Ploughing to Murray is rather a figure for his poetry's meditative immersion in an extended, yet local experience and knowledge. The ploughed field substantiates the poet's knowledge, his ken, his culture, where time and even history have been written indelibly into the landscape as an ineradicable culture-layer where the first plough-furrows occur, but with a surface like a palimpsest constantly erased and redrawn, and still being established in the newly agricultural Australia:

*My quiet uncle  
has spent the whole forenoon sailing a stump-ridden field  
of blady-grass and Pleistocene clay never ploughed  
since the world's beginning. The Georgic furrow lengthens  
  
in ever more intimate country...*

Inner and outer horizons cross over here (the furrow lengthening into intimate country, place trans-substantiating into mind). And the palimpsest marks on the landscape are embodied as writing, first in the form of cattle brands:

*a charred-in black letter script of iron characters,  
  
hooks, bars, conjoined letters, a weird bush syllabary.  
It is the language of property seared into skin,  
but descends beyond speech into the muscles of cattle,  
the world of feed as it shimmers in cattle minds  
  
.....  
It has its roots in meadows deeper than Gaelic,  
my uncle's knowledge...*

This 'Boeotian' knowledge and the reciprocity of cattle and human culture is explored further in the sequence *Walking to the Cattle-Place: A Meditation*—which Murray has explained in an interview is 'really an etymological sequence...It was sparked off by realizing from linguistic studies that the oldest root we can trace in Indo-European languages is 'cow'' (interview with Robert Crawford 27). 'Cattle-place' is the probable etymology of both 'Boeotia' and 'Goloka', the Sanskrit setting for the night-time vision of paradise which ends the sequence. From the very beginning (in 'The Names of the Humble') the sequence yokes together meditation, place, landscape and language in the chiasitic trans-substantiation I have delineated:

*Fence beyond fence from breakfast  
I climb through into my thought  
and watch the slowing of herds into natural measures  
  
.....  
...a cow's mouth circling on feed, the steady radius  
shifting...as she shifts  
subsumes, say, two-thirds of mankind. Our cities, our circles.  
  
They concede me a wide berth at first. I go on being harmless  
and some graze closer, gradually. It is like watching  
an emergence. Persons.  
  
Where cattletracks mount  
boustrophedon to the hills  
I want to discern the names of all the humble. (CP 57–58)*

The topographical contour-lines of the poet's home district seem to absorb the shock-waves of the imported culture, setting off a gradual assimilation of fence-lines to cow-circles of grazing and the spread of the Indo-European and Bantu 'cattle civilisations', seen here as sound and culture waves around the oldest—and temptingly onomatopoeic — Indo-European root of \**gwau-gaus- bous-bos-kuh-cow*, which has subsumed 'two thirds of mankind' in the sense that the only numerically significant culture relatively unaffected

is the Sino-Japanese. The word ‘boustrophedon’ is in itself a world-subsuming chiasmus, meaning ‘as the ox follows the plough’ and referring both to the vernacular European tradition of numbering fields in ‘boustrophedonic order’ of alternating rows from left to right and right to left, but also to the similar order in certain ancient inscriptions — the significance of which becomes clear in the next section of the poem: ‘Surely the most precious Phoenician cargo/ was that trussed rough-breathing ox turned downward to lead/ all Europe's journey’. The image of the ox (our ‘a’) appears at that crucial point in history when hieroglyphic script becomes alphabetic writing: the bull sacred to Baal is transformed into the leading letter of both European and Semitic civilizations, setting off in their opposite directions.

Chiastic embodiment is not just a condition for reading meaning out of the visible world—which indeed is displaced and withdrawn into centred sound in ‘Goloka’, where the cattlemen and women gather round the campfire after dark:

*Their speech is a sense of place  
 night makes remote  
 lucerne fields in the dark hills are renamed  
 Moorea, Euboea.*

*That bull invoking Munduberra, Karuah  
 and Speewah, now Speewah  
 is trying his sultanate out on infinite space.*

.....

*Sleepy, lingually liquescent.  
 It is a delectation, that matter of rock-salt,  
 a drawn sparkling mouth (CP 73–77)*

Chiastic embodiment is also a substantiation of the physical nature of the meditation: the walking, driving or other forms of physical movement in Murray's poems. With the reciprocal movement *in* thought *through* the landscape, the expansion from within which might transcend into metaphor and symbol is *aplaced*. In Boeotia, the persona of ‘Toward the Imminent Days’ asserts, ‘freedom is memory’ — and this is part of the trans-substantiating effects of Murray's meditations: the idea first localised and then here literally ploughed into the ground, may, having thus proved its validity, be turned into a universal ideal. The contemplated connection between marriage, fertility and farming has found its true place, and according to *The Australian Year* and ‘Aspects of Language and War on the Gloucester Road’, the main characteristic of the Australian outer and inner landscape is that it ‘spaces out’ ideas:

*crossing the creek on my mind's feet, though,  
 I walk on home where the stars are thinnest, glancing  
 back at the village with the one human house*

*that is my uncle's farm...  
 ...Into the brimming hills  
 cattle graze beyond the human marriages,  
 and the one-globe kitchen windows, miles apart,*

*approach the quiet of boats far out on the year  
 whose wake is all that will persist of them  
 What lasts is the voyage of families down their name.  
 Houses pass into Paradise continually.*

*voices, loved fields, all wearing away into heaven.  
 As the cornplanter sings out to the rising month  
 bush-hidden creeks in the rabbit country wash  
 like a clear stone in my mind, the heavenly faculty.*

*Hiles' paddock leans on its three-strand fence in the dark*

*bending the road a little with its history.  
Our lives are refined by remotest generations.  
(‘Toward the Imminent Days’, CP 37–43)*

Inner and outer dimensions fuse in this landscape, *intaglio* becomes *memory trace*, as the farm, the idea of marriage and even the human presence dwindle to a radiant point in a wider cosmos. The exterior distancing corresponds to the interior distance which arises when the mind has worked through an idea, formulated its own version of it and is free to turn its attention elsewhere in the meditative continuum, having placed the idea, or the poem, in its appropriate star cluster of engrams, which become ideographs in Murray's Bunyah iconography: the holding, the wheel, the road, the cattle, the hills, which new meditations will return to.

The concept of the engram or memory trace (that is that the individual memory has a physical-spatial place in the brain, now generally agreed on by brain mappers, see Carter) is as crucial as the notion of *lieux de mémoire* for understanding the way Murray's meditations place the connection between time and space. Time at the end of ‘Towards the Imminent Days’ appears as a retraction through space, by which momentary presences — whether the seemingly durable ones like houses or fields or the evanescent ones like voices — ‘pass into paradise continually’, but by which on the other hand the past presences leave behind a ‘wake’: the pattern of their ‘wearing away into Heaven’. ‘Paradise’ here turns out to be an afterlife of memory rather than a forshadowed time, a state comparable to the way that in hilly country views which have been left below the horizon will rise above it again, and then look as if they are ‘worn away’ into Heaven — or Space, that visible past which thus merges with the Imminent Day. This continual recession into an atemporal future past is the obverse of the process that creates the wake (history genealogically conceived), where tendencies towards the linear or sequential are deflected by memory eddies like ‘Hiles’ paddock ... / bending the road a little with its history’, but also the ‘heavenly faculty’, the touchstone which registers timelessness.

If ‘Toward the Imminent Days’ enfolds a landscape so commodious that it can contain an entire poetic world-view, ‘The Buladelah—Taree Holiday Song Cycle’ (CP 137–47), through the magic of place-names, enacts an entire philosophy and poetics of place. Most often the poem is read in the light of Murray's idea of ‘convergence’, or what in his self-commentary in ‘The Human-Hair Thread’ he referred to as a ‘longed-for fusion’ of the three constituent cultures of Australia: ‘a fusion which, as yet perhaps, can only exist in art, or in blessed moments where power and ideology are absent’ (*The Paperbark Tree* 71–99). But this ‘fusion’ is enacted rather than imagined or realised in the unadmitted rite of ‘return to Home places’ of the urban Australians streaming into the countryside for their Christmas holidays. The conyergence is not a utopian vision, but a formal composition of apacement, attunement and atonement in the three cultures, ‘with the senior culture setting the tone and controlling the movement of the poem’. The modelling on R.M. Berndt's translation of the ‘Wonguri-Mandjigai Cycle of the Moon-Bone’ (Hall 13–19) is in a very precise sense not an act of cultural appropriation, but an embodiment in toponymic art of the temporo-spatial differences between cultures in that creative cognitive mapping, whereby the world — and especially the home world — is known, perceived and committed to memory, so that it can be released in the poem's process of rediscovery and repossession. The cultural vantage-point of the poem is from within the ‘White Walkabout’; the cross-cultural echoes bring out the psychological necessity and religious depth of the recovery of the ‘spirit country’. For the spiritual transformation of ‘relearning that country’ does not take place on any explicit level of meaning, but rather through a rhythmic realignment of perceptual and conceptual form.

From the outset ‘The Buladelah—Taree Holiday Song Cycle’ works by tension, antithesis and reconnection, whereas the ‘Moon-Bone’ cycle is cumulative, enacting a complex pattern of accretion. Even the almost ritual combat with another tribe prepared in the first section seems part of a natural, recurrent rhythm, compared to the tensions revealed in the geographical and social space of Murray's poem: between the returnees and the country they are returning to; or between town and country, which have completely different manners and codes of speech, even down to whether they call the midday meal ‘dinner’ or ‘lunch’. The sense of belonging is not ever-present, but must be restored by the imminent return to place:

*Fresh sheets have been spread and tucked tight, childhood rooms have been seen to,  
for this is the season when children return with their children  
to the place of Bingham's Ghost, of the Old Timber Wharf, of the Big Flood That Time,  
the country of the rationalized farms, of the day-and-night farms, and of the Pitt Street*

*farms,  
of the Shire Engineer and many other rumours, of the tractor crankcase furred with  
chaff,  
the places of sitting down near ferns, the snake-fear places, the cattle-crossing-long-ago  
places.*

Tension begins to be relieved by this list which sets out the different levels of place below the official ones on maps: from the specific, communally capitalised sites of local lore commemorating people and past functions and events; through the more generalised communal maps of the different kinds of agricultural involvement with the land existing in present space; and secret stories whose meaning can only be guessed at by outsiders; to the most intimate and almost wholly personal loci which everyone in the community has, but which are not shared. The list describes a gradual 'spacing out' of the minds of the returnees, where sites in the landscape bring out memories and complexes of feeling that are otherwise concentrated to the point of oblivion in the mind. The very notion of place comes to act as an eddy, a point of renewal through diffusion of mental patterns into the landscape.

But the 'secret-sacred', 'unadmitted' levels of place (and in the mind) are in fact reached by the official places marked on road maps of the Pacific Highway: 'It is the season of the Long Narrow City; it has crossed the Myall,/ it has entered the North Coast'. Despite seeing the holiday traffic as a regenerative Rainbow Serpent, the second section is actually furthest from the comparable part of the 'Moon-Bone' cycle. There the people are compared to clouds and mist in their dense mass and restfulness, whereas Murray's poem dwells on the blinking lights, the great consumption of energy and the spurting rhythm of the return as linear time and urban speed gradually slow down into loops and side-roads and are absorbed by the countryside. A pulse-beat or digestive contraction and expansion is evinced by the punctuation and repetitions, which however indicate movement and time, just as the place-names are passed by merely as markers of the northward motion.

It is only in the third section that the returnees, stepping out of their cars, begin the process of 'relearning that country'. A suggestion of celebratory dancing is developed — 'going into the shade of myrtles to try their cupped climate, swinging by one hand around them,/ in that country of the Holiday'. 'Time' and 'season' have become 'country', and a growing reabsorption also leads the capitalisation of a place and its associated bird and dance: 'stepping behind trees to the dam, as if you had a gun,/ to that place of the Wood Duck,/ to that place of the Wood Duck's Nest,/ ... the mother duck who'd run Catch Me (broken wing)'. As place enters the returnees' consciousness for its own sake and not just as a marker of time, Murray in his self-commentary notes how the residual violence between humans and animals ebbs and 'powers of observation' increase to a 'quasi-totemic empathy' (*Persistence in Folly* 25):

*The birds saw us wandering along.  
Rosellas swept up crying out we think we think; they settled farther along:  
knapping seeds off the grass, under the dead trees where their eggs were, walking  
around on their fingers,  
flying on into the grass.  
The heron lifted up his head and elbows; the magpie stepped aside a bit,  
angling his chopsticks into pasture, turning things over in his head.  
At the place of the Plough Handles, of the Apple Trees Bending Over, and of the  
Cattlecamp,  
there the vealers are feeding; they are loosely at work, facing everywhere.  
They are always out there, and the forest is always on the hills;  
around the sun are turning the wedgetail eagle and her mate, that dour brushhook-faced  
family:  
they settled on Deer's Hill away back when the sky was opened,  
in the bull-oak trees way up there, the place of fur tufted in the  
grass, the place of the bone-turds.*

Mind and landscape become reciprocal observers of each other as mental processes are transferred into the eyes of the landscape, the birds, and gradually lose direction and focus. This is no movement of humanity

through a motionless landscape, since human mental motion is absorbed by the 'thinking' birds and finally the vealers who possess a collective version of what the poem 'Second Essay on Interest: the Emu' calls 'the everywhere focus of one devoid of boredom' (CP 204). Having perceived this state the returnees are afforded their first glimpse of the 'Always There', which connects the time of Creation with the present, the eagle's-eye-view of the district with 'the place of' earth's redigestion of death. This 'Always There' is the 'Dreamtime' of the agricultural landscape, part of, yet beyond it. For what is a natural and ordinary part of Aboriginal conceptions of space and time (as in the Aranda *Alcheringa*, of which 'Dreamtime' is a mistranslation and misconception) has become marginal and almost subconscious to the holiday-makers and only released when the mind lets go of its restraining self-identification. This 'Dreamtime' is not of the mind, but inheres in the cultural landscape, especially the outer reaches of it, where the Aboriginal and the European-Australian cultural landscapes meet.

After reaching back to the *illud tempus* of the valley's creation, the returnees go on to notice the presence of their pioneer ancestors, which the poem claims as *timeless* presences, thus in Murray's words giving them some of 'the aura of the great ancestral sires of the Central Australian sacred sites', without losing sight completely of the 'purely white matter' of 'reverence for particular successive ancestors':

*The Fathers and the Great-Grandfathers, they are out in the paddocks all the time, they  
live out there,  
at the place of the Rail Fence, of the Furrows Under Grass, at the place of the Slab  
Chimney.  
We tell them that clearing is complete, an outdated attitude all over;  
we preach without a sacrifice, and are ignored; flowering bushes grow dull to our eyes*

The 'convergence' between the two cultures simultaneously brings out their divergence, adding a further level to the poem's exploration of the chiasmic intersection of time and space in place. The past inheres in place, but the past is placed elsewhere. Passing the places of past events, the past is seen to recede — as the returnees see their own left-behind urban selves in the figures of ants or meet the corporeal manifestation of the past in the figure of 'the cousin with his loose-slung stock-whip', whose horse (the emblematic animal of the pioneer past) 'recedes/ gradually bearing him' (CP 140).

The following Picnic section marks a still climax of the poem, where movement is redeemed not only of direction, but of purpose and desire beyond itself. The verbs reach an almost pure continuous presence, towards which the accretive syntax of the poem is always striving, but through a succession of seemingly inescapable active and transitive verbs: 'thinking', 'crossing', 'winding', 'looking', 'seeing' and 'talking'. Here the word is 'rising', the encampment centred in preparation for the trans-substantiating barbecue, but the overt statement of time redeemed is reserved for the paean to the water-skiers: 'they are skidding over the flat glitter, stiff with grace, for once not/ travelling to arrive'. They are in and of the landscape, in the noisy and domineering way characteristic of urban culture, which even at this point is shown to be pervaded by ambivalence: 'families who love equipment, and the freedom/ from equipment'. Placed and stationary even in motion, the point of view of the poem shifts away from the seasonal invasion to what Murray calls 'an unobtrusive mingling of memory and perception which makes it possible in the end to discern a pattern... going beyond the ambit of one person's sight' (*Persistence in Folly* 25): the pattern of human work and settlement in 'the child labour districts' and the blood ecology which links all species of mammals in the entire region through the mosquitoes.

The 'shapes of children' in 'the standing corn' and even the mice gnawing at it recall the landscape of T.S.Eliot's *Four Quartets*, if only by contrast. The faint invisible tinge that the remembered past imparts to the scene in Eliot's *placed meditation on time* (from 'Burnt Norton' to 'Little Gidding') tends to render the visible half-shadowy, whereas Murray's *timed meditation on place* turns the invisible past and future visible in his (de)-familiarising of the eternal presence of all time. Eliot shows the encroachment of other times on present consciousness, Murray follows the expansion and accretion of places beyond the position of the observer. The places from which the *Quartets* take their names mark momentary points of intersection of temporal patterns. Time and season in the 'Song Cycle' are the rhythms marked by the unfolding of places in the continuous-durational aspect of geography—objectified in the fertile alluvial deposits 'ascending' towards the Dreamtime, the 'steep country' both geographically and mentally. Down from the 'Forests and

State Forests' comes a counter-wave of mosquitoes: 'their tune comes to the name-bearing humans, who dance to it and irritably grin at it'.

This unacknowledged tune out of the Dreamtime 'ecologises' humans (they are only one species among many) just as the next section 'primitivises' White Australian culture by seeing its 'Warriors' in terms of their 'words of power'. We participate in an ironical initiation into 'the life peerage of endurance' where, as when rising through the degrees of Aboriginal initiation, esoteric 'inside words' replace exoteric 'outside words': 'Making Timber a word of power, con-rod a word of power, the Regs. a word of power/they know belt-fed from spring-fed; they speak of being stiff and being history'. Having rediscovered the vernacular as well as the 'spirit country', having recovered the linguistic as well as geographical dimensions of their cognitive 'dream maps', the returnees can turn to watch—from within the landscape, yet with a bird's-eye-view of it—a new non-human invasion. For the first time there is a 'Now', a timing, as well as a 'There', a placing; the poem now times itself in accordance with its place:

*Now the ibis are flying in, hovering down on the wetlands,  
on those swampy paddocks around Darawank, curving down in ragged dozens,  
on the riverside flats along the Wang wauk, on the Boolambayte pasture flats,  
there at Bunyah, along Firefly Creek and up through Germany,  
the ibis are all at work again, thin-necked ageing men towards evening; they are  
solemnly all back  
at Minimbah, and on the Manning, in the rye-and-clover irrigation fields;*

Seeing this other 'specio-centric' invasion from within the place makes the returnees in the end, tentatively, 'remember things about themselves, and about the ibis'. The fruit trees section turns this memory successive and generational as a new generation begins to add its place-names to the parental generation's rediscovery of the all-important presence of the past in the White Australian 'dream map': 'the poignancy added by the passing of time' summed up in the phrase 'abandoned things are thronged with spirit' in the following long section, which traces the rhythms of the day through a system of places, a region. Both the regular movements of the sun and the less predictable movements of the weather are followed through a succession of distinctly placed images that are spotlighted until in the end the sun or the thunderstorm suffuse and envelop the whole landscape:

*Now the sun is an applegreen blindness through the swells, a white blast on the sea-face,  
flaking and shoaling;  
now it is burning off the mist; it is emptying the density of trees, it is spreading upriver,  
hovering above the casuarina needles, there at Old Bar and Manning Point;  
flooding the island farms, it abolishes the milkers' munching breath  
as they walk to the cowyards; it stings a bucket here, a teat-cup there.  
Morning steps into the world by ever more southerly gates; shadows weaken their north  
skew  
on Middle Brother, on Cape Hawke, on the dune scrub toward Seal Rocks;  
steadily the heat is coming on, the butter-water time, the clothes- sticking time;*

It is only when the tidal wave of light has inundated the entire landscape that it begins to be timed instead of placed in its progress from east to west. Similarly, the afternoon thunderstorm is placed in the landscape rather than timed in its build-up and dissolution. Only in memory, in story-telling, is the thunderstorm timed: in the cumulative and ascending rhythms of 'Dreamtime'. The present is repeatedly folded into the cumulatively ascending memoryscape of the Dividing Range, reconceived in the poem 'Cumulus' (CP 225–26) as the national past, a space where stories are stored and brought back from, a 'horizon above the nation', still enigmatically meaningful, something Other against which imported ideas are tested. Above all the ideas of time, history and seasons, which Murray sees as the most important European import to Australia: Europe is a 'time culture' which thinks historically and perceives movement through space as having at least a loose sense of progression, whereas 'Aboriginal 'history' is poetic, a matter of significant moments rather than development' (*Persistence in Folly* 27). There, moment is site, time is space in a cumulative, multidirectional continuum hardly imaginable to European-derived cultures.

However, just as the European temporal conquest has largely retreated to the foothills of the Dividing Range and begun to appreciate the sacredness of that Dreamtime space ('We've put the wild above us', 'Cumulus' concludes), so the tense-patterning of the 'Song Cycle' aspires to a kind of consciousness which might be described as 'present perfect', converging on the 'Always There'. In striving towards this spatialisation of time, it is as if the verbs (often participles) are aspiring not to the status—and stasis—of nouns, but towards an obliteration of the distinction between process-words and name-words, thus making our living in the world a continuous *topo-poiesis*. The cumulative stasis or at least lack of sequential progression of the great Aboriginal song cycles, where the order of lines may be repeated and alternated in any number of ways, is suggested and aspired to in Murray's poem, but never reached. History is undermined by Dreamtime geography; linear time warped and curved in its meeting with remembered and significant sites, but not permanently or fully, just as the poem is certainly not redeemed of all signs of conflict and edginess: the desire for spatialisation of time may be the most basic, imaged in the cumulative horizontals of the poem's 'overlength' lines, which somehow overreach as they overspill. As time spirals down into place, it is also carried on to another place, not just as a sign of connectedness and continuity, but of progression.

Place is not to Murray 'finished time', as Samuel Alexander defined it, nor is it some modern geographers' 'pause in motion' (Carlstein, Parkes and Thrift 117). It is rather the site from where time flows and by return to which time is regenerated. Nor does it appear in this poem, as people sometimes feel, that a place is defined anew when returning to it. In Murray's omphalic sense of place, it is place which has the power to redeem the returning consciousness by chiasmus or 'cross-linkage', imaged in the finale of the 'Buladelah—Taree Holiday Song Cycle', which according to Murray 'links the evoked region with the heavens, with what I call the Great Imagery of the stars. The region is *placed* in the universe and the whole experience of the Holiday, the walkabout quest, is mapped and sealed for the people who now have to go back to their other life' (*Persistence in Folly* 26):

*The stars of the holiday step out all over the sky.  
People look up at them, out of their caravan doors and their campsites;  
people look up from the farms, before going back; they gaze at their year's worth of  
stars.  
The Cross hangs head-downward, over there over Markwell;  
it turns upon the Still Place, the pivot of the Seasons, with one shoulder rising:  
'Now I'm beginning to rise, with my Pointers and my Load...'*

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