Typically forthright, Les Murray declared in 1976 that language in Australia was "up for grabs at the moment". He went on, "I'm turning the Australian language into a literary language". (1) This is just what he has done. No one in Australian poetry (with the possible exception of Bruce Dawe), and only a handful of poets writing in English today, is thoroughly and lovingly exploring the far recesses of his land and language. He is so very, but not offensively, Australian.

Australia's first poets - Michael Massey Robinson, Charles Tompson, Wentworth and Baron Field, to name a few - experienced the usual colonial dilemma: what terminology should they utilize in a new land? Inevitably, they resorted to the language of "Home" - namely, England. And yet, as in seventeenth century America, it wouldn't work. William Carlos Williams points out that the early American settlers saw birds with rusty breasts and called them robins. Thus, from the start, an America of which they could have had no inkling drove them upon their past. They retreated for warmth and reassurance to something previously familiar. But at a cost. For what they saw were not robins. (2)

Confronted by a similar situation, the first Australian bards found themselves forced to respond, not to the perennial English drizzle, but to a bloody hot, rusty sun, which just kept relentlessly pouring in on their page. (3) They also encountered a different sky.

For the best part of two centuries, Australian poets have continued to struggle with the enormous problem of developing a localized language. With scant success. Les Murray has clearly determined to change all that - exploring the language in a way that accentuates the minutiae of the Australian environment such as the idiosyncrasies of speech, as well as the light patterns, sounds and curious silences of the landscape. More importantly, Murray is intent on exploring what he has termed "high matters". (4) He does this not by way of a native Australian high style - for Murray such a method would be unthinkable - but by way of a kind of democratic/heraldic language, attuned to the ways and peculiarities of his people. Exploring the natural convergence of cultures in Australia (Aboriginal and Western), Murray elevates the land, the vernacular and the republic, in an attempt to truly establish Australia in the minds of all his countrymen. In his hands, the Australian language has become a tool for naming and discovery, not exploitation.

* * * *

About a decade ago, Les Murray expressed a wish

_to see Australians escaping... not towards the past, but towards futures which have no existence until WE discover and settle them, for our own good and the whole life of mankind._

(5)

There is a singular determination here reminiscent of Walt Whitman in his Preface to the 1855 edition of _Leaves of Grass_. Like Whitman - an important figure, incidentally, in the Australia poet's artistic province, whether he admits it or not - Murray is unashamedly democratic, anti-colonial and assertively, often aggressively local. With confessed sponsors as thoroughly indigenous as the Coolongolook River and the
red-headed fruit bat, he could hardly be otherwise. But the poet's highly-wrought language and stance have
developed to such an extent in his six published books of poems so far that his quest, like Whitman's has
assumed universal relevance.

Murray has come a long way since his first volume of poems, The Ilex Tree (1965), and yet a close
inspection of this book reveals virtually all the elements of the poet's maturer technique, only writ small.
Like most young Australian poets trying to establish some fertile relationship with their craft in the late
Fifties and early Sixties, Murray had to endure the oppressive atmosphere created at that time by critics from
the Academy, who wanted to curb individual exploration. A. D. Hope, for example, ridiculed Whitman, Poe,
Eliot and Pound, and sought a return to eighteenth-century refinement: James McAuley, too, labelled poetry
over the last one hundred and fifty years "an immense detour" - presumably away from the true road of high
literature, and in accordance with his own interpretation of the great English tradition.(6)

Despite the prevailing climate, several poems in The Ilex Tree established a new and exciting voice in
Australian poetry. They provide useful signposts to the poet's later, unmistakably individual style. Response
to sounds will be so important. In "Privacy" the poet remembers

\[
\begin{align*}
in \text{ dim July}, \\
\text{In the indifferent, ah, but dancing rain,} \\
\text{The spiced fantastic winter on the roof.}
\end{align*}
\]

If you've slept in a house with a corrugated iron covering, through drizzle, thunderstorm or hail, you'll
better understand the roof music that made the winter "fantastic". Silences, too, absorb the young poet,
especially in the "Noonday Axeman". In his preface to Adam Lindsay Gordon's Sea Spray and Smoke Drift
(1876), Marcus Clarke expressed the feeling of most early settlers in outback Australia when he used Poe's
phrase, "Weird Melancholy", to depict the dominant note of Australian scenery. For Murray, though, the
passing of time has witnessed a change. The large spaces have become inhabited. For some Australians,
finding themselves at home on the land, the perennial and eerie silence that Clarke identified now provides
comfort and assurance. Murray dwells on this theme in "Noonday Axeman", proposing its central relevance
to Australian social history. In his first volume of poetry, Murray had already begun to identify what he
regarded as the enduring rhythms of Australian life, and history. We sweep effortlessly from the past, to the
individual axeman in the present, to the future:

\[
\begin{align*}
Axe-fall, \text{ echo and silence. It will be centuries} \\
\text{Before many men are truly at home in this country,} \\
\text{And yet, there have always been some, in each generation,} \\
\text{There have always been some who could live in the presence of silence.}
\end{align*}
\]

The poem "Driving through sawmill towns", also in The Ilex Tree, explores another of Murray's recurring
motifs: the peculiar character and significance of light in Australia (something that recent North American
film reviewers have correctly identified as the great boon of Australian cinematography). The poet specifies
the "jammed midday brilliance" and the "dim dazzling blades" of a mill's winch. Further, cognizant of the
profundity of distance in the southern continent, he observes that

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{As night comes down, the houses watch each other:} \\
\text{A light going out in a window here has meaning.}
\end{align*}
\]

In "Beside the Highway", one of the finest poems in The Ilex Tree, Murray for the first time makes creative
use of rural dialect, with the six white children piddling on the asphalt, and Mad Tess, the poem's central
character and symbol, expressing her indignation at the "flash cars".

Vernacular speech, then, along with the varying shades of southern light, sound and silence - all become
luminous features of Murray's later work. In a poem from his fourth book, Lunch and Counter Lunch (1974),
he vows to "improve" his "silence" and

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{listen to lives.} \\
\text{Those who would listen} \\
\text{have always been the Republic.}
\end{align*}
\]
"Cycling in the Lake Country"

Murray’s progression as a poet testifies to an observer grown keener and more alert. He displays a more steadily penetrating ear and eye. But, it should be mentioned, he never includes vernacular for the purpose of exploiting his subject. We never laugh at a character, because of his speech, but with him. Murray has often publicly expressed his deep resentment of the "cheap Ocker-baitings and Edna Everage shows". He posits the integrity of the idiom, its potential as a creative resource, and the integrity of his canvas of characters. Typically, the poem "Folklore", in Lunch & Counter Lunch, moves quickly from situational humour to more serious bush musings:

What are the sights of our town?

Well, there is that skeleton they hang
some nights in the bar of the Rest
and everyone laughing in whispers
the barmaid broke down one time, laughing.
The cord goes up through the ceiling
to the undersprings of the big
white bed in the Honeymoon Suite
and when those bones even jiggle
there’s cheers (and a donnybrook once)
and when they joggle, there’s whooping
and folk stalking out in emotions
and when they dance - hoo, when they dance!
he knows every tune on the honeymoon
flute, does the hollow-hipped fellow.

There are a few, mind, who drink on
straight through it all. Steady drinkers.
Up over the pub there’s the sky
full of stars, as I have reflected
outside, while guiding the course of my
thoughts. Some say there’s a larger
cord goes on up there, but I doubt it
I mean
but then I’m no dancer.
Besides that, there’s meatworks and mines.

Other poems such as "The Bush" and "Escaping Out There" work in a similar way, utilizing the riches of the local vernacular, but it is in his two most recent books, Ethnic Radio (1977) and the novel in sonnets The Boys Who Stole the Funeral (1980), that the poet produces new dimensions in his use of speech. In these books, language and character subtly merge. Out of the mouths of absolutely ordinary people come the larger, more enduring truths of nations. The poem "Visiting Anzac in the Year of Metrication" illustrates the point. Contemplating the participation of Australian soldiers in World War I, in particular the Gallipoli debacle, the poet eulogizes:

When hard-case jokes and frantic help
poured content into noble sieves
that human lives cannot keep filled
it was the day of turning round,

when, firing, wags might turn around
and yell How’s that? and in a push
a hundred jokers might turn round
and sprawl, and leap. Towns died of that
and the bush went underground:
the nation stalled in elegy
with a Day for massing through the streets
in pub time, wearing rosemary.

I suspect the reference to the cry "How's that" or should it be, "Howzat!" - comes from the poet's reading of the book *The Broken Years*, by the Australian historian Bill Gammage. Apparently the Australians at Gallipoli had been game to the end (despite the fact that 7,594 of their number lay dead on the Turkish ridges). When evacuating the Gallipoli peninsula, some of them played a game of cricket on the area ominously called Shell Green, "just to let [the Turks] see we were quite [un]concerned... and when shells whistled by we pretended to field them".(8) Murray commemorates one aspect of (white) Australian mythology in this unassuming heroism. A certain defiant comaraderie. Sonnet 43, in *The Boys Who Stole the Funeral*, taps a similar area in the poet's larger scheme of Australian things:

> After that, on the mountain, they meet Cousin Wayne
> planting peas up there in the ferny basalt tith.
> He has come across for a yarn, having stopped his tractor
> and, rolling tobacco, winks once about last night.

*Drily spoken, burnt black - he may be Aboriginal -
Wayne talks like a man who has elected not
to join his generation. Too homeless an idea,
no tradition in it. Mysteriously, rather, he tells*

*a story of two sleeper cutters out on the Breakaway:*
They were always rowing. They were bellowing and cooeeing one day
then old Roan comes to me, with his wedges in his hand:
That's not right, Wayne, is it? A child with a mother and a father,
he can't be a bastard? They're often the worst, I tell him,
the real bad bastards. Well shit, I never knew that -

The Anzacs, Cousin Wayne with his bush logic and instincts for survival in a changing world - their values underlie the country's certainties. They are an integral part of its uniqueness. Murray locates these values, in part, through their speech. A poem entitled "Platypus", from *The Weatherboard Cathedral* (1969) - on the surface at least dealing with the duck-billed Australian mammal of that name - seems more closely relevant to a host of subjects in his later books:

>> *Hold the thought of him*
>> *Kindly to your skin.*
>> *It is good to have him in our country,*
>> *Unique, beneath our thoughts*
>> *To nurture difference.*
>> *Changless beneath our thought*
>> *And its disjunctions.*

The poet prizes uniqueness, permanence, resilience and, perhaps most of all, eccentricity.

Murray's more intense focus, in his later books, on the light and sounds peculiar to the Australian continent indicates a poet in firm control of his subject and craft. I could cite numerous examples of the attention he gives to light, in the context of place, but none would surpass the rhapsodic heights of the last two sections of "The Bulahdelah-Taree Holiday Song Cycle", Murray's stunning testament to, and celebration of Australian culture - or, should I say, all three cultures: Aboriginal, urban and rural.(9) The whole area around Taree, just north of Sydney, is, by the poem's end, unobtrusively placed into a universal context: *of the universe*. White and Aboriginal ways of life converge beneath the predominant symbol of the night sky in the south: the Southern Cross. The thirteen-part song-cycle sequence is Murray's tour-de-force
thus far as a writer. Line-lengths simply spill over with material, in a manner suggestive of Whitman. The last lines of the poem serve as well as any to illustrate the point:

> People recover the starlight, hitching north,
> travelling north beyond the seasons, into that country
> of the Communes, and of the Banana;
> the Flying Horse, the Rescued Girl, and the Bull,
> burning steadily above that country.
> Now the New Moon is low down in the west, that remote
> direction of the Cattlemen,
> and of the Saleyards, the place of steep clouds, and
> of the Rodeo;
> the New Moon who has poured out her rain, the moon of
> the Planting-times.
> People go outside and look at the stars, and at the
> melon-rind moon.
> the Scorpion going down into the mountains, over there
> towards Waukivory, sinking into the tree-line,
> in the time of the Rockmelons, and of the Holiday...
> the Cross is rising on his elbow, above the glow of the
> horizon;
> carrying a small star in his pocket, he reclines there
> brilliantly,
> above the Alum Mountain, and the lakes threaded on the
> Myall River, and above the Holiday.

Equally impressive are Murray's achievements with sound, in his most recent poetry. He can now propose the distinctive regional cadences of an Australian scene as either background or the principal subject. One of the first poems in Ethnic Radio, "The Returnees", elaborates on the unique environmental acoustics:

> ... a lifelong sound

> on everything, that low fly-humming
> melismatic untedious endless
> note that a drone-pipe-plus-chants...
> cicadas were in it, and that Gothic
towering of crystals in the trees,
> Jock Neilson cutting a distant log

Apparently cattle are in it, too (see the section entitled "Walking to a Cattle Place", in Poems Against Economics (1972), where the poet cleverly uses onomatopoeia to realize certain conclusions). And powerlines are in it, and water tanks. Another poem in Ethnic Radio, "Rainwater Tank", virtually recreates the symphony of its subject. The musical drops establish a magical presence as we focus on

> the tank, roof-water drinker.
> The downpipe stares drought into it.
> Briefly the kitchen tap turns on
> then off. But the tank says Debit, Debit.

Murray's most significant contribution to Australian verse so far as a poet, though, undoubtedly resides in that verse in which he clearly recognizes his true mission as a poet in a relatively young land. Emerson and Whitman, remember, agreed that in a New World the poet has to assume the crucial role of namer, sayer and seer. Whitman, in his 1855 preface elaborated: "If [the greatest Poet] breathes into anything that was before thought small it dilates with the grandeur and life of the universe".(10) As namer, Murray has continued to celebrate and commemorate the seemingly unimportant as he steadily works his way around
and through the continent. He gets colours, for example, just right. A case in point is the last stanza of his first major poem, "The Fire Autumn", a poem in which he discovered, in his own words, "a whole new mode of writing. The track opened from five foot to twelve foot wide":

With gold of emergence, with claret, cerise, liquid green,
Faint blues fat with powder, new leaves clustered thick down the length
Of charcoal-stiff bark. Brush water is licking stones clean.
The tracks of birds glitter. Blunt mountains steer towards noon
And all down December, black thaw will be riding the streams.
For this also is order. This is a farther season
In the ancient of rocks, the paradise of far eons
And I am asking the dead to wait, with forgiveness,
The innocent planets are grinding their keepers to gold.
Like a distant coast beyond shimmer, too still for cloud,
The trees of my forests and breakaway mountains are feathering

Murray gives the same scrupulous attention to the varieties of flora and fauna. Part VII of "Toward the Imminent Days" has the scene set by its opening line, "Dog roses, wild clematis, indigo" (the last, a native pea-flower which has no English name). In the same section "the cornplanter" (a species of owl in Australia) appears, who sings when it's time to plant corn. The seasons, too, the poet accurately places in a southern setting:

Watching from the barn the seedlight and nearly-all-down currents of a spring day, I see the only lines bearing consistent strain are the straight ones: fence, house corner, outermost furrows. The drifts of grass coming and canes are whorled and sod-bunching, are issuant, with dusts. The wind-lap outlines of lagoons are pollen-concurred and the light rising out of them stretches in figments and wings. The ambient day-tides contain every mouldering and oil that the bush would need to come back right this day, not suddenly, but all down the farm slopes, the polished shell barks flaking, leaves noon-thin, with shale stones and orchids at foot and the creek a hung gallery again, and the bee trees unrobbed. By sundown it is dense dusk, all the tracks closing in.
I go into the earth near the hay shed for thousands of years.

("Thinking about Aboriginal Land Rights, I Visit the Farm I Will Not Inherit")

Again, the seminal "Bulahdelah-Taree Holiday Song Cycle" best illustrates Murray as namer-section 8, too long to quote, in particular.

In the role of namer, Murray encourages individual words to fly, to take on a life of their own - they are at once resonant and pregnant with deeper intent. Many poem titles give a clue to their heraldic content - such as "Birds in their Title Work Freeholds of Straw", "The Broad Bean Sermon", "The Fire Autumn", "The Flying-fox Dreaming", "The Presentiment" and "The Powerline Incarnation". These poems proclaim sacred Australian rituals. Casual meetings and observances, in Murray's sympathetic hands, become the
lasting ceremonies and cornerstones of the culture. See, for example, the "Dedication, written Last: For the Vernacular Republic":

I am seeing this: two men are sitting on a pole
they have dug a hole for and will, after dinner, raise
I think for wires. Water boils in a prune tin.
Bees hum their shift in unthinning mists of white

bursaria blossom, under the noon of wattles.
The men eat big meat sandwiches out of a styrofoam box with a handle. One is overheard saying:
drought that year. Yes. Like trying to farm the road.

The first man, if asked, would say I'm one of the Mitchells.
The other would gaze for a while, dried leaves in his palm, and looking up, with pain and subtle amusement, say I'm one of the Mitchells. Of the pair, one has been rich but never stopped wearing his oil-stained felt hat. Nearly everything they say is ritual. Sometimes the scene is an avenue.

This heraldic language, of so much celebration and commemoration, can at times take us with the poet into undreamed of realms. In an early poem - from The Weatherboard Cathedral - Murray asserted that "This country is my mind", and later referred to "the Quest that summons all true men". (11) Subsequent books communicate the most dramatic moments of the search. Murray assumes the role of seer at those times when his poetry suddenly shifts from reality to personal vision - revealing the fertile landscapes of the poet's mind. He senses that place can have positive forces of renewal for the individual. Transcendence may even be possible. This position closely parallels that of Americans such as Rothenberg, Dorn, Snyder, Pound, and of course, Whitman. Section III of "Toward the Imminent Days" makes the climactic leap. Shamanist language depicts the journey:

Singing All living are wild in the imminent days
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 worm-ocean that heaps
Between skid and crumble with lumped stones in ambush for feet
But it marches with seed and steadiness, knowing the land.
As the dogs set out from the house, minute, black, running,
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. Dead men in the fathoms of fields
Sustain without effort millennial dark columns
And to their suspension, the crystal centuries come...

In sequences like this, we alert to a poet concerned not just to get his subject right but to fully test the capacity of his linguistic resources. It is certainly not too far-fetched to suggest that Australian poets in years
to come may well talk of their country's poetry post-Murray, just as most contemporary American poets gratefully pay their dues to father Whitman.

NOTES


3. The sun metaphor is not mine. It stuck in my mind when I heard Les Murray use it in an address he gave to an in-service teaching seminar at North Sydney in late 1978.


7. Les Murray, "More Wow than Flutter", *Quadrant*, XX, No. 10 (October 1976), 50.


