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The Sacrifice of Les Murray

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THE SACRIFICE OF LES MURRAY

by Jill Reading

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements

for the degree of

Bachelor of Arts (English) Honours

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ABSTRACT

Les Murray's vivid and evocative poetry has made him a major Australian literary figure. Critics routinely note the sophisticated, often highly wrought nature of Murray's poetic language and acclaim his technical virtuosity, including gifts for pun, paradox, aphorism, idiom and metaphor. The themes of both Murray's poetry and his non-fiction prose often revolve around the divisions he sees in Australia between cultures, between society and people, and within individuals themselves. Despite his efforts to bring healing to these schisms, however, the poet is criticised for his frequent dogmatism and didacticism, which mark his work as divisive.
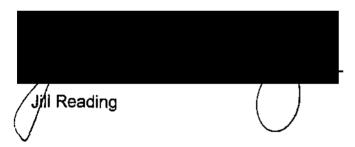
Although Murray professes to detest Enlightenment thinking and its effects in present-day modernity, this thesis seeks to show that his dogmatism is embedded in Enlightenment thought through a conceptual reliance on singularity and scarcity, or the transcendental signified. The poet's investment in a Romantic stance, in the patriarchy and in Christianity demonstrates a limitation on his conception of "being" which in turn limits the possibility of an expansion towards his desired convergence of cultures, or wholeness of being.

The use of postmodernism's concepts of pluralism and multiplicity tend to loosen the Enlightenment's grip on definitions of "being" to consider new ways of wholeness through relationship. Murray's resistance to the concepts of postmodernism is seen as the source of his sacrifice, the sacrifice of himself in a poetry whose linguistic complexity exceeds its conceptual complexity.

DECLARATION

I certify that this thesis does not, to the best of my knowledge and belief:

    (i)   *incorporate without acknowledgement any material previously*

              submitted for a degree or diploma in any institution of higher

              education;

    (ii)   *contain any material previously published or written by another*

              person except where due reference is made in the text; or

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Jill Reading

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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INTRODUCTION

Les Murray's vivid, evocative poetry has made him a major Australian poet of international renown, a powerful and influential figure. Paradoxically, Murray has achieved this prominence while abjuring a grip on influence or privilege. For instance, he customarily positions himself in isolation from Australia's intellectual and academic establishments, castigates the alleged partisanship of literary funds and the stinginess of publishers, and claims a class alliance with Australia's rural poor, which he sees as the nation's moral and ethical centre. Murray's class resentments are particularly strong, as evidenced by his confession of retreat from his early aspirations for an Australian republic:

> The ideas which revolve within our totalitarian enclaves
> are entirely imported and deployed in a typically colonial
> fashion, now lackadaisical, now pedantically savage.... My
> own people, town and country smallholders and the rural
> poor, historically excluded from even the patronising icon-
> status of the Working Class, would have nothing to hope
> for from an updated version of the privileged circles which
> have always resented their very existence. (Murray, 1990,
> p. ix).

Nonetheless, Murray has inhabited pivotal and central positions in Australian literature: for example, as editor of *Poetry Australia* magazine, poetry reader for Angus & Robertson for many years, current literary editor of *Quadrant,* and editor of a number of significant poetry anthologies, all positions which have facilitated Murray's own partisanship towards poets of his own leaning (Bourke, 1990; Bolton, 1997; McCooey, 1999). In addition, he has benefited from regular publication by receptive publishing firms and through support from the Australia Council's Literature Board.

Neither has Murray's presence in Australian and specifically literary politics appeared fainthearted, with participation in the early controversy over an Australian republic, his rewriting of the oath of allegiance, a prejudicial claim in 1996 of once seeing Manning Clark wearing an award ordinarily conferred by the former USSR, a lugubrious union with Prime Minister John Howard to write a constitutional preamble, and power struggles at *Poetry Australia,* Angus & Robertson, and *Quadrant* (Bolton, 1997, p. 185; McCooey, 1999, p. 8). Overriding all, and perhaps underlying much, has been Murray's extraordinary struggle for "ownership" of Australian poetry through his resistance, in poetry, prose and political activity, to those tendencies in Western thought represented in modernist and postmodernist poetry and in the progenitor of those movements, the Enlightenment.

This resistance is characteristic of the paradoxes which accumulate around Murray and in his writing. In works such as *The boys who stole the funeral* (1980), *Subhuman redneck poems* (1996), and *Fredy Neptune* (1998), the poet addresses divisions in Australian society, between self and society, and within the self, but his attempts to heal division create more rather than less rupture. As an intellectual stance, Murray professes to detest modernism for its opposition to and unsettling of tradition; in essence, for its *unreason.* Modernism's perceived encroachment on the poetic territory Murray holds dear results in his representation of modernism as a form of totalitarianism. Similarly, Murray detests the Enlightenment, that profound germination in Western thinking to which modernism and postmodernism could be seen as abreaction, which alleged that applied reason would eventually make the entire

universe explicable. Grounding his rhetoric in the techniques of critical

judgment and reason, Murray (1990, p. 155) nevertheless abhors

Enlightenment *reason* as totalitarian, at war against poetry. Ryan (1997, p.

199) summarises the Murray "problem" neatly:

> Murray's books nearly always contain his signature
> bipolar mix of syntactical largesse and vivacity on the
> one hand, and pinched unadorned belligerence and
> dogma on the other.

In protecting this beloved but mysterious ground to which Murray gives the

name poetry, and which he represents, like himself, as victimised and thereby

forced into a defensive position, the poet brings heavy arms: his prodigious

poetic, rhetorical and intellectual skills, and through his Romantic and religious

affiliations, a claimed partnership with the Divine which inspirits and sanctifies

poetry.

Murray's passionate advocacy of paradoxical positions begs questioning: to

what end is the poet's power and influence wielded? To what position could the

reader, in thrall to Murray's luscious, extravagant, eloquent, powerfully imagistic

linguistics, be led? Are we in the presence of a John Laws-like performative

contradiction in which linguistic representation, mendaciously purporting to be

the lived truth of the speaker, inveigles its consumer, or is Murray's poetry

testament to some much deeper coherence of thought and life? This paper's

thesis is that Murray's desire to heal division cannot be achieved through a

conceptual system based in division, however eloquent his language, and that

the poet, seeking to escape this frustration, repetitively sacrifices himself on the

horns of this dilemma. Murray's ideological positioning is examined using

definitions by Bakhtin and Eagleton, the repression of the maternal/female in the production of poetic language is considered through Kristeva's eyes, the postmodern is defined through Cahoone's description, and Foucault's both lived and theoretical postmodernism is applied to the liminal spaces between writer and writing. Finally, Derrida's assertion of the transcendental signified as anterior to Western thinking underwrites the thesis.

In asking the foregoing questions we have signalled acceptance of the critically questionable suggestion that a coherent relationship exists between author and writing. As a form of ethical preparation for such an inquiry, then, to what extent is a life and its works reasonably subject to critical examination in terms of that which enters the public domain under the aegis of the author, and that which is assumed or posited by critical theory?

CHAPTER ONE

FOUCAULT AND AUTHORIAL INTENTION RECLAIMED

Although the effect of poststructuralism and postmodernism on critical theory was to limitlessly expand the ways in which it is possible to read a text, a limiting effect was simultaneously introduced: a *caveat* on the examination of the author and the work. Poststructuralism accomplished this by demonstrating enunciation as an empty process, functioning efficiently without an essential relationship between word and meaning, effectively releasing both the Author and the Critic (both formerly considered reliable explicators of meaning in the text) from their relentlessly pervasive authority over the textual work. In "The death of the author", Barthes (1977, p. 146) confirms:

> We know now that a text is not a line of words
> releasing a single 'theological' meaning (the 'message'
> of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in
> which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend
> and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn
> from the innumerable centres of culture.

Despite the potential ramifications of such theory on critical practice, however, Foucault (1984, p. 111) was able to complain several years later that modern literary criticism continued to define the author in a limited traditional way as the governor of coherence in style, value, conceptual constructs and historical events across that author's entire production. Through the critic's examination of material such as biography, individual perspectives, social position, and the revelation of an author's basic design, Foucault observed, the author was inserted to assist the explanation not only of certain events in a work (a concept itself problematised by lack of a coherent theory of the work) but also their transformations, distortions and modifications.

In Foucault's postmodernist proposition, however, the author is a *function*, and as such "is not a pure and simple reconstruction made secondhand from a text given as passive material" (Foucault, 1984, p. 111). As a function, the author is linked to the juridical and institutional system governing discourse, with different effects on discourse depending on temporality and culture, and is defined by a series of specific and complex operations rather than by direct attribution of a discourse to its producer. Foucault (1979, p. 159) exemplifies this description by asserting that "Freud's genius" was positioned at a critical point, marked out since the eighteenth century by strategies of power, to give new impetus to the secular injunction to interrogate sex and transform it into discourse. Not least, Foucault affirms, the author function does not refer simply and unobstructedly to a real individual, but to those several selves which the personal pronoun "I" could assume in the production of a text.

Foucault's position, aligned with postmodernism, is a challenge to humanism which necessarily then draws critical attention away from the possibility of the "real" author as a source of meaning in the text. One criticism of postmodernism is that it relies on a concept of language as commensurable with being, an argument too complex to pursue here. However, biographical material on Foucault (that source material against which his *oeuvre* appears to warn) indicates the conscious integrality of his being with his work; that is, his work is based on the humanist tenet of centralising human experience as the basis for knowledge of self, God and nature. Miller (1993, pp. 30-31), for instance, notes Foucault's investment in pushing himself to the limit of

experience through potentially self-destructive practices such as substance

ingestion, asceticism and sado-masochistic eroticism, and his acknowledgment

of his theoretical work as fragments of autobiography based on these

experiences. Through these practices, Miller reports, Foucault found that

> it seemed possible to breach, however briefly, the
> boundaries separating the conscious and unconscious,
> reason and unreason, pleasure and pain – and, at the
> ultimate limit, life and death – thus starkly revealing how
> distinctions central to the play of true and false are pliable,
> uncertain, contingent. (Miller, p. 30).

By this description, Foucault attempted the postmodern as lived experience,

tempting its implicated erasure of being, and meeting with the postmodern's

erasure of the capacity to set moral limits.

Foucault is not normally referred to as a paedophile; however, his biographers

(including Macey, 1993, and Miller, 1993) do not avoid his lifestyle as a man who

loved boys, although neither do they critique the inequitable power relations

implicit in this. In an interview broadcast in 1978, Foucault (1988, pp. 276-277)

questions the emergence in France of a move to legislate against sex between

consenting children (under 15) and adults. He does so on the grounds that a

seducing child has rights of desire towards the adult.

When Foucault speaks of power in relation to sexuality, his distinctions are

reminiscent of Murray's distinctions between the Boeotian and the Athenian,

between the pastorale and the dithyramb. Like poetry for Murray, sexuality for

Foucault was at its best some time in a free and glorious pastoral: for instance,

the age of repression occurred in the seventeenth century, integral with the rise

of bourgeois capitalism, "after hundreds of years of open spaces and free

expression..." (1979, p. 5); previously, "knowing children hung about amid the

laughter of adults..." (p. 3); but "the boisterous laughter that had accompanied

the precocious sexuality of children...was gradually stifled" (p. 27); and as for

the working classes, "it is unlikely that the Christian technology of the flesh ever

had any importance to them." (p. 121).

Foucault's desire to represent children's sexuality (having accepted that

particular hypothesis of psychoanalysis) as felicitous is oddly unrevised by

historical researches such as that of deMause (1974) and others showing that

the oppression of children through sexual abuse has been common throughout

the history of Western civilisation. In addition, Christian technologies related to,

for instance, compulsory engagement in sex and childbearing have been

profoundly oppressive for women of all classes, and particularly those in low

income groups.

Such a position is peculiarly paedophilic and anti-postmodern, given that it

ignores the multiplicitous contexts in which a child can be rendered sexual. In

addition, by speaking for the child, it accomplishes the subjugation of special

knowledges, against the direction of Foucauldian theory that postulates the

liberation of such knowledges. The explanation for this lies in Foucault's denial

that his own discourse is free of power relations. In fact, the liberatory effect of

Foucault's discourse lies in achieving freedom from the assumption that

prevailing ways of understanding human beings, and of theorising the conditions

for liberation, are necessary, self-evident and without power effects (Sawicki,

1991, p. 56) Put simply, any discourse is gravid with power effects, not the least of which is the author's array of intentions which can be diachronically persistent and consistent.

Foucault's protected position as an élite thinker affords him a public arena in which to put a position, but should we attend only to the dictum of the death of the author, and not be prepared to regard as at least provisionally valid that which is said by and about him, the particular ideological positions which inhabit his own discourse may be missed. The same can be said of Les Murray as an élite figure in Australian literature.

CHAPTER TWO

MURRAY AND THE INELUCTABLE SUPPLEMENTARITY

OF IDEOLOGY

Murray's suspected ideological orientations have been the subject of intense

critical scrutiny, particularly as his poetry has gained in influence through

popular acceptance and international recognition in the latter half of a career

exceeding four decades. This scrutiny has been invited perhaps by the nature

of much of his poetry; its non-fictional, first-person, meditative style has tended

to preserve the author's authority against the poststructural status of writing as

"an interplay of signs arranged less according to its signified content than

according to the very nature of the signifier" (Foucault, 1984, p. 102).

In both prose and poetry, Murray appears not only to resist the effacement of the

author but to revel in the contractions of meaning that the construction of a

particular authorial empiricity encourages. Murray specialises in a close

consonance between his non-fiction prose works and his poetry, repeating

stories, themes and identical or similar lines (such as "the Enlightenment's a

Luciferian poem") in both genres. He frequently succeeds in persuading readers

to accept the contraction of the many possibilities of the author function to a

unitary authority, "Les Murray", a success validated by comments like Porter's

(1979, p. 45), who, in a complete identification of author and work, sees: "no rift,

...no crevasse in Les between his own life and the imagination, the theorizing of

his ideas of culture". Murray furthers this view of the author's stranglehold on

authority in his comments on the construction of his poem "The Buladelah-Taree

Holiday Song Cycle" by making a claim to ideological kenosis:

> Around Christmas 1975, I conceived the idea of writing a cycle of
> poems in the style and metre of Berndt's translation of the Moon
> Bone Cycle. As I thought about it, I realised it would be necessary
> to incorporate in it elements from all three main Australian cultures,
> Aboriginal, rural and urban.... What I was after was an enactment
> of a longed-for fusion of all three cultures, a fusion which, as yet
> perhaps, can only exist in art, or in blessed moments when power
> and ideology are absent. (Murray, 1984, p. 24).

Bakhtin diametrically opposes such a view, advocating the ideological environment as the only atmosphere in which life can be the subject of literary representation. "Reality that is unrefracted and, as it were, raw is not able to enter into the content of literature", Bakhtin (1994, p. 129) insists. Bakhtin represents ideology as inescapably present in much the same way as Foucault proposes the inescapable immanence of power relations. For Bakhtin (p. 129), in every meaningful element of content shaped by the artist, reality is already ideologically refracted: "Good, evil, truth, crime, duty, death, love, victory, etc. – all are ideological values without which there can be no plot or motif."

An expansion of the term to the point where nothing is not ideological, however, renders it useless in a practical sense, objects Eagleton (1991, pp. 28-30). His six-point ensemble summarises a number of common definitions: ideology as the general material process of the social production of ideas, beliefs and values; as the ideas and beliefs, true or false, which symbolise the conditions and life-experience of a particular socially significant group or class; as a discursive field contested by opposed sectional interest groups; as acts of self-promotion and legitimation by a dominant social power; as such acts in which distortion and deception are used; and finally, as distorted or deceptive ideas arising from the material structure of society itself, rather than from a dominant group (Eagleton uses the example of fetishistic consumerism).

Underlying Eagleton's premises is the Althusserian notion that ideology alludes to our affective, unconscious relations with the world, to the ways in which humans are, prior to reflection, bound up in social reality which is expressed in the form of conscious, lived experience. Murray's perspective, however, is most closely related to Eagleton's pejorative fifth definition, in which a dominant power uses distortion and deception to legitimate and promote itself. "The last thing brumby horses hear", declares the poet in "On the present slaughter of feral animals" (Murray, 1996, p. 42), "is that ideological sound, the baby boom."

> It is the hidden music of a climaxing native self-hatred
> Where we edge unseeing around flyblown millions toward
> a non-violent dreamtime where no one living has been.

In this somewhat complex accusation, the post-war generation, bound to an unachievable ideology of non-violence, assuages and legitimates its particularly Australian self-hatred in the slaughter of defenceless life, while refusing to acknowledge that the pursuit of ideologies, having caused the death of millions this century, is itself the problem. Taking Murray's previous quotation and this perspective together, it is reasonable to allege that the poet views ideology as a willed (conscious) retreat from the proper means of spiritual wholeness into an ersatz wholeness composed of false ideas seeking a destructive political dominance. Murray does not see himself as inescapably expressing, in the Bakhtinian sense, a particular ideology, because he discounts the role of the unconscious in the formation of ideological positions, as Hart elucidates.

Hart (1989b, p. 148) notes Murray's assertion that art remains untouched by ideology since nothing is omitted or repressed in the art work. For Murray, poetry

is complete utterance, "wholespeak", primary, deeply integrative, and naming a

fullness or presence. Murray makes a correct assumption, Hart (p. 154) holds,

that poetry survives interpretation, and therefore allows a reading in terms of

fullness, presence and inexhaustibility; but from this, the poet incorrectly infers a

completeness in poetry itself. However, the ineluctable supplementarity of

signification means no single interpretation can be formalised without remainder,

and a poem, like all texts, participates simultaneously in social, cultural and

political, as well as literary, contexts. Presence, Hart (p. 148) concludes, is a

structural illusion in the text, not a substantive origin:

> The point is that Murray works with a highly restricted notion
> of ideology as a set of views one holds more or less self-
> consciously, and takes no stock of how society is fashioned
> by ideologies which are held unconsciously, taken to be
> reality rather than representations of reality.

In other words, Murray places no credence in the way unconscious ideologies may

fashion (himself as) the author. Because his laudable desire for a peaceful,

egalitarian, convergent culture envisages no structural changes to Australian

culture, the poet *ipso facto* supports and represents the interests of the dominant

ideology. The poet's investment in patriarchal attitudes is therefore of interest.

Patriarchal ideology in Murray's writing

The scarifying event that figures *Fredy Neptune* and transfigures Fred

Boettcher, the blood sacrifice of the female and its shattering effect on the male,

is a ghost which hails from other Murray poetry. Taylor (1987, pp. 150-151)

illuminates the possibility of Murray's personal struggle to integrate feeling and

thinking, body and mind, by demonstrating, in contrast to the powerful presence

of the past in his poetry, a significant absence at its heart; that is, the exclusion

of the female:

> (W)omen and the female generally figure very little,
> and men and the male figure a great deal....Murray's
> sense of the past sustains and informs a vision of the
> present which is significantly male-oriented, even male
> dominated.

In poems such as "Equanimity" Murray demonstrates how the past for him is

not past, but immanent in the present, with the unusual effect of making origin

seem accessible. Born perhaps of his belief in the Boeotian, Murray's

metaphor for traditional rural values, the past may be more immanently present

for Murray than it is for other poets, according to Taylor. The Boeotian's ancient

rural traditions of independence and community, transmitted as acts of daily life

through cultural practices such as story, song, dance, sport, religion and heroic

action, make all myths both eternal and eternally present, Taylor (1987, p. 144)

suggests: "Our familiar distinction between past and present fails to hold, to be

replaced by a kind of "sacred present" or "eternal" tense."

Paradoxically, a sense of irreversible, painful absence, the unspoken loss of

Murray's mother, is equally integral to the sense of the immanence of the past

in Murray's poetry. "Like the strangler fig of the northern New South Wales rain

forests, the poetry weaves its baroque arabesques around an empty space

which it both conceals and preserves, " Taylor (1987, p. 155) asserts.

First published in 1983, "Equanimity" demonstrates this view by representing an

immanent, atemporal, spiritual quality ("equanimity") as existing at the heart of

human order (Murray, 1991. p. 159): "Almost beneath notice, as attainable as gravity, it is a continuous recovering moment..." But the immanence of equanimity, the impartiality, even-handedness and fairness implied in such a term, is a contextual rather than conceptual phenomenon. In 160 poems examined by Taylor, only 43 refer to women or use the feminine gender, often superficially. Taylor (1987, p. 150 - 151), having concluded that Murray's sense of the past supports a male-oriented, perhaps male-dominated, vision of the present, concludes that the spiritual in Murray's poetry is also notably male.

Bourke (1992, pp. 22-23) quotes the poet as stating that everyone has a "novel" in them, a few core concerns of an ultimately moral nature. True or not, Bourke asserts, the comment can be applied specifically to Murray, whose writing is best approached through defining its recurring themes or developed attitudes. In *The boys who stole the funeral* (Murray, 1980), for instance, Murray's thinking, instead of arising from the narrative, appears as a pre-existent grid composed of a lament for older hierarchies and values. The dust jacket's claims for reconciliation and balance contrast with the oppositional tone and construction of the poem, in which urban social breakdown is based on the disappearance of males from conventional patriarchal roles, and the abandonment by women of traditional female nurturing roles as they are drawn to fill the patriarchal vacancies. The novel rehearses a developed attitude of masculinist bias, Bourke (p.110) concludes:

> (Murray's poetry) dramatises a mythic or subjective reality
> where the interest is with a specifically masculinist
> perspective, one which willingly, and even compulsively,
> represents itself to be central.

Rather than a gender bias, or gender bias alone, however, such an emphasis may disclose the reluctance of pain to address the source hypothesised by Taylor – the death of the poet's mother.

Murray's mother died in 1951, just before he entered high school. Murray has represented this death as the chief impulse in his work (Bourke, 1992, p. 2). The loss is initially indicated in the poem "Cowyard gates", published in 1977 in *Ethnic radio*, and later in a further three poems, collectively titled "Three poems in memory of mother, Miriam Murray nee Arnall" published in 1983 in *The people's otherworld*.

"Cowyard gates" reflects on the decay of the old family farmhouse, largely demolished by a cousin, the farm's new owner, ostensibly to make gates for the cattleyard; although the poem's speaker suspects another agenda: "He didn't want an untidy widower ageing/ on his new farm." In the sharp contradiction between the penultimate stanza's initial suggestion that it is time to forget, and the clarity of the subject's memory of the mother, the poem suggests the pain of a prolonged and unassuaged mourning (Murray, 1991, p. 138):

> 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.

In the trilogy of poems claimed as autobiography and individually titled "Weights", "Midsummer ice" and "The steel", Murray tells a story and history of his mother's death and illuminates its impact on him.

Bourke (1992), a biographer for whom Murray himself was a principle source, tells a similar story, reporting that after Murray's induced birth in 1938 the poet's mother suffered some form of gynaecological injury. The family lived in an isolated valley in lush dairy country at Bunyah, thirty kilometres from Nabiac, a village and medical centre in the Manning River district of northern New South Wales. Cecil Murray, the poet's father, was a bullock drover and timber getter, as well as an unpaid tenant farmer for his father (a figure represented in both Murray's prose and poetry as frightening and vicious, perhaps constituting an early alienation in the heart of the family). According to Bourke's information, Miriam, a former nurse, suffered three miscarriages subsequent to her son's medically hastened birth. The third caused her death in particularly tragic circumstances when the Murray's old car refused to run and the Nabiac hospital doctor refused to send an ambulance, apparently resistant to Cecil's pleas that his wife was haemorrhaging. The car of the local teacher eventually transported her, but she died several days later, weakened by blood loss and infection. The very young Les Murray had a breakdown not long after, and the "black dog" of depression has continued to hound him until recent years.

Peter Alexander has contradicted this widely-accepted story of the death of Murray's mother in a new biography. In a review of this book, McCooey (1999, p. 8) reports Alexander's finding that forceps were unlikely to have been used in Murray's birth, meaning that the problems leading to his mother's death did not originate there. Alexander also shows that Cecil failed to tell the doctor that Miriam was again pregnant and again miscarrying, throwing doubt on the malpractice Murray has implied in the denial of ambulance transport. This

revision, as McCooey notes, means Murray's guilt and depression at the circumstances of his birth and his mother's death were largely misplaced, and also disputes that narrative of victimisation which Murray has made central to his mythology of the place of rural poor in Australian culture. Under this revision, if blame was to be attributed, it would lie at the heart of Murray's family – with his father.

The first poem in the memorial trilogy to Miriam Murray, "Weights", utilises Murray's frequent poetic strategy of rich and engaging description, complex to the point of being baroque, even varicose; but culminating in an apparently simple final stanza or line, expunged of description but dense with emotional impact. The first of the four stanzas reads:

> Not owning a cart, my father
> in the drought years was a bowing
> green hut of cattle feed, moving,
> or gasping under cream cans. No weight
> would he let my mother carry.
> (Murray, 1991, p. 163)

The final stanza evokes the sense of the child's mystification and the adult's eventual shocked epiphany: 'I did not know back then/ not for many years what it was,/ after me, she could not carry.' Implicit in this punchline is a sense of guilt, the speaker's cognisance in the words "after me" that something he did caused the mother's death. The poem is pungent with the adult dread of his own childhood complicity in the blood sacrifice of his mother.

In contrast, the third poem "The steel" (Murray, 1991, pp. 164-169) is a long, intense 46 stanzas, long enough to narrate the speaker's whole gamut of

emotions. There is resentment and self-pity (p. 164): "I am older than my mother./ Cold steel hurried me from her womb./ I haven't got a star." There is chagrin at the impoverished circumstances that contributed to the mother's death (p. 165): "it reaped Dad's shamed invectives -/ paying him rent for this shack! / The landlord was his father." There is despair and anguish (p. 165):

> Little blood brother, blood sister,
> I don't blame you.
> How can you blame a baby?
> Or the longing for a baby?

And there is the numbed sense of time standing still, of the contemporaneity of all tenses, while the mother's blood flows and her life ebbs (p. 165): "The local teacher's car was got finally./ The time all this took didn't pass,/ it spread through sheets, unstoppable." A longing for absolution from the child's guilt as it was expressed in "Weights" wrings from the speaker an agonised (p. 167): "I didn't mean to harm you/ I was a baby." Grief, sorrow, outrage and vengefulness have their turn, along with a certain grim satisfaction at the fate of the doctor who, judged negligent by the Murray clan, falls on the family's own "steel" (pp. 167-168):

> Perhaps we wrong you,
> make a scapegoat of you;
> perhaps there was no stain
> of class in your decision,
>
> no view that two framed degrees
> outweighed a dairy.
> It's nothing dear:
> just some excited hillbilly-
>
> As your practice disappeared
> and you were cold-shouldered in town
> till you broke and fled,
> did you think of the word Clan?

Taylor (1989, p. 153) remarks on the significance of Murray's resort to narrative in "The steel", but does not explain why this form, given that Murray's style is frequently contemplative and even ruminative, is significant.

In common with a reading of *Fredy Neptune*, the poem requires a committed reading to "feel" its pain and horror. Despite the emotional literacy of both poems, the narrative style – a "telling", an apparently detached, rationalist and realistic representation of the events – has the effect of holding pain at arms length. The integration of emotion and reason that might achieve an easeful acceptance of the mother's death, some 30 years previous to the writing of this trilogy, does not occur. In fact, the final two stanzas of "The steel" switch sharply and oddly away from the personal, thrusting the speaker onto a podium to thunder Divine judgment and eternal salvation:

> There is justice, there is death,
> humanist: you can't have both.
> Activist, you can't serve both.
> You do not move in measured space.
>
> The poor man's anger is a prayer
> for equities Time cannot hold
> and steel grows from our mother's grace.
> Justice is the people's otherworld.

Bourke (1992, p. 30) agrees that the private self is a significant absence from Murray's poetry, commenting that the poet, in the closing stanzas of "The steel", assumes the bardic posture, speaking in a representative voice. This position facilitates the submersion of individual identity in favour of assumed public concerns – justice, for instance, for poor men and "the people". The bardic voice allows Murray to construct a community of concern with himself at the centre,

thus deflecting personal issues such as grief and loss onto political issues such as justice for a whole group.

The difficulty of such an apparently inclusive position is its divisiveness. For instance, the poem's final proclamations dismiss, because their human-scale grasp of justice is too small, those of Murray's audience who might see themselves as humanists and activists; it sanctifies the anger of a particular group represented by "the poor man"; and it elevates the Christian saint Mary to universal motherhood, awarding a Christian heaven to "the people", who, in modern multicultural Australia, might hail from any of a large number of religions. In effect, the poem's speaker escapes the full emotional weight and responsibility of the poem by a feat of proselytism which, *per abruptio*, transforms a personal story into a broad religious-political statement aimed at constituting a whole community of readers, but faulting this aim by its institution of divisions. This escape from, in effect, a full identification with the mother, occurs through recourse to the paternal realm of law and judgment to which Kristeva (1986) refers in "Revolution in poetic language".

The poetic integration of emotion and reason has been proposed not only by Romanticism, but also by psychoanalysis, if we allow ourselves to read "emotion" from its Latin root, *motus*: movement, change, gesticulation, dancing, evolution, impulse, passion, agitation, emotion. On Kristeva's instruction, the semiotic and the symbolic are those placeless places of the subject-in-process which produce signification in a continuous, integrative, but unstable dialectic. Concordant with psychoanalysis' division of the speaking subject, the semiotic

is allied with the unconscious, its domain the maternal, the natural and the id. A

pre-verbal functional state and an economy of instinctual drives and primary

processes, semiotic expression concerns rhythm, tone and gesture, while the

symbolic lies in the domain of the conscious and paternal, under constraint by

grammar, critical judgment and law (Kristeva, 1986, pp. 93-97). In this sense,

poetry as genre lies with the semiotic as (p. 174) "a return to the near side of

syntactic articulation, a pleasure of merging with a hypostatised maternal body"

while narrative lies with the symbolic as "the fulfilment of a request, the

exchange of information, the isolation of an ego amenable to transference,

imagining, and symbolizing", a description applicable to much of Murray's

narrative work, including "The steel" and *Fredy Neptune.*

In Kristeva's view, the more the semiotic (the rhythmic, intonational and

gestural) occurs in poetic language (which includes all writing) the more

revolutionary that poetic language is likely to be. By corollary, the more

symbolic the language, the more establishment the writing. Kristeva (1977,

pp.139-140) goes so far as to suggest, as Murray has claimed, that poetic

language has a powerful role in mediating democracy:

> Through the permanent contradiction between these two
> dispositions (semiotic/symbolic), of which the internal setting
> off of the sign (signifier/signified) is merely a witness, poetic
> language, in its most disruptive form (unreadable for
> meaning, dangerous for the subject), shows the constraints
> of a civilization dominated by transcendental rationality.
> Consequently, it [poetic language] is a means of overriding
> this constraint. And if in so doing it sometimes falls in with
> deeds brought about by the same rationality, as is for
> example, the instinctual determination of fascism...poetic
> language is also there to forestall such translations into
> language.

The higher valuation Kristeva advocates for poetry revolutionary in her terms

relies on supposing that experimental or avant garde writing leads literary

development, but, as critics such as Hart have pointed out, heavily semiotic

writing (Kristeva's example is Mallarmé) is not necessarily more emotionally

provocative than writing generated from the symbolic. "Much of the greatest

modern writing is lucid sentence by sentence while its vision is intensely

demanding (think of Beckett, Blanchot, Kafka)" urges Hart (1992a, p. 29). "The

steel" meets this standard for lucidity, and its ultimate vision is challenging, if

not demanding; but, despite the equality of power between the semiotic and the

symbolic as postulated by Hart, it is not particularly emotionally provocative

(discounting any irritation provoked by Murray's bardic posture). A possible

explanation may lie in the hostility expressed towards the mother in "The steel"

(Murray, 1991, p. 166):

> Sister Amall, city girl
> with your curt good sense
> were you being the nurse
> when you let them hurry me?

Although the rhythm, tone and gesture of the semiotic are marginally present in

the almost-rhythm of natural speech, the hostile tone and the accusatory

gesture, the stanza is under the control of the symbolic domain of grammar,

critical judgment and law. One would not necessarily expect the "pleasure of

merging with a hypostatised maternal body" in a poem of grief caused by

sudden death, yet, taking Kristeva's implication that such a body necessarily

abides in each speaking subject and is essential in the process of signification,

its pleasures seem repressed or absent from Murray's work generally. Lucas

(1993, p. 81) has complained that Murray has written no memorable love

poetry, by which he clearly means no heterosexual love poetry since, for

example, an intense love of nature, of animals and of God is memorable in

many of Murray's poems. Murray rarely writes the erotic, although when he

does it is potent; as it is, for example, in "The powerline incarnation", a lush and

generous poem about visionary, ecstatic death (Murray, 1991, p. 109):

> ...keep my wife from my beauty from my species
> the jewels in my tips
>   I would accept her in
> Blind white remarriage cover her with wealth
> to arrest the heart

"Cover", it should be noted, is a traditional rural term to indicate the mating of a

female animal. But the body of pleasure, the physical, the erotic – those

necessary conditions of existence assigned to the underside of their binary

opposites, the body of suffering, the mental, the insensate (tough) which

emerge so fully in *Fredy Neptune* – are, like the female and the maternal,

largely absent in Murray's poetry.

Cranny-Francis puts the view that the body and its metaphorical equivalents

(the female and femininity, emotion and reproduction) are the terms which

underlie and thus constitute the creative masculine. She points out that in the

artistic world, prestige and value is invested in distinguishing oneself as a

"creator" or producer of unique works, while women's unique reproductive

(childbearing) work is cast as secondary. "This Romantic conception of the

artist as a figure alone and outside society, supposedly independent of earlier

times and texts, is based on the devaluing of any notion of re-production, the

copying of an earlier work," Cranny-Francis (1995, p. 36) asserts.

Taking Kristeva's approach together with Cranny-Francis' theory, and bearing in mind Alexander's disputation of Murray's story of his mother's death, the creative masculine, working to repress the feminine, emotive and reproductive as a necessary ground of its constitution, may well emerge with more emphasis on the side of symbolic expression; more basely, the suffering and sacrifice of the female/maternal represented in Murray's poetry may mirror the suffering and sacrifice of the female/maternal within the artist. It is in this context that the second work in "Three poems in memory of my mother..." assumes importance by its pinpointing of the onset of the process constituting the creative masculine in this way.

In contrast to "The steel", this second poem of the trilogy bears its own emotional weight fully. A child's remembrance of the effort and excitement of carrying block ice from the road to the farmhouse for his mother, "Midsummer Ice" (Murray, 1991, pp. 163-164) opposes the fascinated sensuality of the boy's exploration of the ice to the child's numbing realisation of the maternal void (p. 164):

> I loved to eat the ice,
> chip it out with the butcher knife's grey steel.
> It stopped good things rotting
> and it had a strange comb at its heart,
> a splintered horizon rife with zero pearls.
>
> But you don't remember.
> A doorstep of numbed creek water the colour of tears
> but you don't remember.
> I will have to die before you remember.

The second line of the final stanza is crucial in suggesting the emotional blight afflicting the boy who loses his mother suddenly. The mother to whom he speaks

is silent; she no longer responds to the child's effort to bring this frozen weight

home nor shares his joy in its startling existence, "the only utter cold in all those

summer paddocks". The final stanza transforms the block ice into the blocked

and frozen emotions of a shocked child unable to grieve.

It is an apt description of a dissociated state of the kind suffered by Fred

Boettcher in *Fredy Neptune*, to whom Murray, half-jokingly calling the novel his

secret autobiography, has drawn a parallel with himself: "Fred learns the worst

potentials of humankind very suddenly and very hard. I took them on board a bit

more slowly but I suspect just as hard." (Murray, personal communication, August

20, 1999). This is partly a reference to the bullying Murray encountered on

entering high school soon after his mother's death, a bullying in which the

participation of girls was more hurtful than that of boys, and for which Murray later

coined the term "erocide" to indicate its morbid effect on his sexual development.

By implication, Murray (1999a, p. 66) sources his fear of mobs, fashion,

discrimination and totalitarianism to this experience, simultaneously implying

reactive revenge as an explanation of the destructive and divisive qualities of

much of his poetry:

> If triumphant Lawrentian sex, the kind that stares
> challengingly out of films and glossy magazines all over the
> Western world, is a Nazi – and it is if you think about it, with
> its tall, beautiful blond idols – then those who have suffered
> erocide, along with the children and the old, are its
> subhumans.... The terrible potential for revenge which some
> people damaged in this way exhibit is well canvassed in the
> annals of crime... The erotic doesn't explain everything but if
> someone, or some group, put (Hitler) off physical love and so
> turned him away to will and power, it would be interesting to
> know who they were and how they did it.

In summary, the repression of the feminine/maternal, the fetishistic construction

of oppositions, and the practice of control through grammar (as poetry), critical

judgment and law (especially in its forms of blame and revenge) reveals

Murray's personal investment in the patriarchy, to which he gives political

expression by his resistance to, and participation in, Western philosophical

formations exemplified by the Enlightenment.

To the formative experiences of the death of Murray's mother and the

persecution he suffered at school, Bourke (1992, p. 9) adds a further trauma,

the loss of the family farm at Bunyah. Cecil Murray believed his unpaid work

would entitle him to the farm on his father's death, but his father left the

property to Cecil and his brothers equally. Cecil refused to pay for what he

believed he rightfully owned, and another brother bought the farm, which went

to his son, Murray's cousin, from whom Murray finally purchased the land for an

eventual triumphant homecoming. Bourke intimates that the poet's sense of

loss and injustice resulting from his mother's death was compounded by the

loss of the farm, a dispossession by kin (and therefore a betrayal) which

terminated the dream of independent landholding, central to the Murray family's

mythology since their migration to Australia in 1848:

> The drama which his poetry rehearses is one of loss
> and exile: if there is a homecoming, it is because there
> is first an exile; if the farm is bought back, it is because
> it has been usurped. Much of the power of Murray's
> poetry comes from the working through of these
> themes of exile and loss, recovery and repair. (Bourke,
> 1992, p. 25)

Thus Bourke (1992, p. 25) holds that the conservatism so frequently noted in

Murray's poetry assumes a more complex signification than simple political

"conservatism": it is a desire to conserve origins, "a desire to maintain and cultivate experiences which, Murray fears, scientific progressivism too often denies, perverts or destroys."

The poet against the Enlightenment

Scientific progressivism is a signifying term for that grand narrative of human reason, justice and progress, the Enlightenment, to the modern effects of which Murray has expressed bitter opposition. Almon (1997, pp. 2-4) sees this resistance as based on the Enlightenment's unforeseen modern consequences, such as the exploitation of nature, third world degradation, and the transformation of human beings into economic commodities. In this, Murray joins modernity's more scathing critics who view its outcomes as class and ethnic domination, European imperialism, anthropocentrism, environmental destruction, the loss of community and tradition, increasing alienation, and the blight of individuality by bureaucracy (Cahoone, 1996, p. 12). Murray's view, says Almon, is that human beings are estranged from nature and the human mind itself when rationality is the test of institutions and practices:

> He believes that poetry is "Wholespeak", and embodies a full
> humanity by balancing the needs of waking and dreaming
> consciousness, needs which rationalism neglects disastrously.
> The opposite principle is "Narrowspeak", the discourse of
> daylight reason. (Almon, 1997, p. 15).

The poet illustrates this view in "The conquest", published in 1972 in *The vernacular republic*, a rancorous poem ironising the finer intentions of the Enlightenment's "founding" of Australia, and detailing its bitter results. The poem begins (Murray, 1991, pp. 38-40):

> Phillip was a kindly, rational man:
> Friendship and trust will win the natives, Sir.
> Such was the deck the Governor walked upon.

Middle passages describe the progress of reason:

> And once again the Governor goes around
> with his Amity. The yeasts of reason work,
> triangle screams confirm the widening ground.
>
> No one records what month the first striped men
> mounted a clawing child, then slit her throat
> but the spear hits Phillip with a desperate sound.

And the final stanzas describe its outcome:

> We make our conquests, too.
> The ruins at our feet are hard to see.
> For all the generous Governor tried to do
>
> the planet he had touched began to melt
> though he used much Reason, and foreshadowed more
> before he recoiled into his century.

In a well-known passage from Murray's prose work, *Blocks and tackles*, the poet

links Enlightenment reason to the sacrifice of poetry and of people:

> The Enlightenment is a Luciferian poem, that is, one in revolt
> against poetry itself. Its claim to power in the world is based on the
> claim that it arises from something more solid than poetry –
> reason, intellect, science are candidates it frequently proposes,
> and it confirms their mana with repeated bouts of human sacrifice.
> One such secured our country for us. In a world ruled by such a
> paradigm, poetry has not only to be explained, but explained away,
> and a rationalist equivalent for it developed. (Murray, 1990, p. 155).

The Enlightenment's founding dichotomy between reason and unreason has

become the ground for Murray's concomitant critique of power as oppression

only, particularly oppression using techniques of discrimination (for which

Murray commonly uses the term "relegation" to indicate both the technique and

its results). As purveyors of oppression, Murray includes the academy,

especially the theory and practice of literary criticism, and socially discriminatory practices (1990, p. 157):

> Criticism has a seeming authority to which weak and inexperienced readers succumb. Like all of education, it converts such individuals into mediocrities and robs authors of them.... Intensely elaborated theory is clearly yet another attempt to trump poetry and replace it with a principle amenable to Enlightenment values. Earlier contenders include wit, terror, snobbery, drug abuse and affluence, with fashion as a constant. All of these can be controlled and directed against target groups, since all are about power.

Murray (1990, p. 154-155) relates totalitarianism and modernism in his prose essay "The suspect captivity of the fisher king" as interconnected extremes of oppression: "Literary modernism is totalitarian politics in a literary disguise while totalitarian politics is modernist literature with no disguise at all." Murray sees modernism as a pathological state with depression at its heart and, apparently without irony, as obsessive, ritualistic and hostile in tone. At the same time, he exonerates from the tasks of disseminating oppression those practices in which he places his faith for the healing of oppression, principally religion and poetry (given his modernist resistance, traditional rather than avant garde). Murray attempts to unite Christianity and poetry through the concept of sacrifice as a prophylaxis against violence:

> A poem which stays within the realm of literature completes the trinity of forebrain consciousness, dream wisdom and bodily sympathy – of reason, dream and the dance, really – without needing to embody itself in actual suffering or action, and without the need to demand blood sacrifice from us. It is thus like Christ's Crucifixion, both effectual and vicarious. (Murray, 1990, p. 69).

In his reading of history and psychology, Murray's parable for the Enlightenment and its resistant Other occurs as the ancient struggle between Boeotia and

Athens, Greek province versus Greek city-state, represented as contrasting

modes of civilisation between which the West has vacillated since the rise of

Athens in 6 BC (Murray, 1978, p. 177):

> We are beginning to be conscious here of a nexus of thinking
> and oppression that extends all the way from personal to
> international relations.... Athens has recently oppressed
> Boeotia on a world scale and has caused the creation all
> over the world of more or less Westernized native elites,
> which often enthusiastically continue the oppression...

Murray (1978, p 175) views this Western "war" with anxiety as a moral dilemma

likely to draw the rest of mankind [sic] into it, and believes "resolving this tension

may be the most urgent task facing the world in modern times." In Murray's

exegesis, Athens stands for an imperialistic, urbanising principle responsive to

"fashion" or the novel, removed from and unresponsive to a natural, cyclical

experience of the world. Athens' centre is the marketplace, its intellectual

marker is abstract, analytical reason, and its power lies in the individual and in

the forebrain, the most modern evolutionary addition to the cerebrum. Its mode

of expression is typically transcendent, Murray's "Narrowspeak" of daylight

reason. In Athens, the artist is an intellectual, "a member of a class for which

entropy and the corrosive analysis of value are principles of life" says Murray

(p. 182).

The term Boeotian, reclaimed by Murray from its pejorative vernacular sense in

which it refers to the boorish, dull and proverbially stupid, valourises the rural,

traditional, robust and eternal, connected to the natural world and its cycles.

Boeotia's centre is any place sacred to any Boeotian, its intellectual marker is

the imagination, and its power lies in community and in the ancient reptilian

brain. Its mode of expression favours immanence, Murray's "Wholespeak", meaning a fusion of reason with dream, breath and bodily movement. "Athens is lasting, but Boeotia is ever-new, continually recreated, always writing afresh about the sacred places and the generations of men and the gods," says Murray (1978, p. 179).

The Boeotian-Athens hypothesis metaphorises cultural polarities like religion and philosophy, nature and culture, rural and urban, national and international, religious and secular world views, privileging the former in each dichotomous pair. To a large extent, these hierarchies reverse that order attributed to the Cartesian *cogito*, in which the privilege accorded to mind and its association with the male tends to valorise philosophy, culture, the urban, and the secular world view. The Boeotian-Athens hypothesis has figured at the heart of Murray's work for many years, explicating his vision of a global model for the resolution of the alleged dichotomy as it occurs in Australia: a "convergence" of Aboriginal, rural and urban cultures to create "that lasting organic country where urban and rural no longer imply a conflict, and where one discovers ever more richly what one is and where one stands and how to grow from there without loss or the denial of others." (Murray, 1978, p. 183).

The passage of years, or perhaps the accumulation of failures, has intensified rather than diminished Murray's familiar thematic concerns. For instance his 1980 verse novel *The boys who stole the funeral*, which rehearses concerns re-appearing 18 years later in *Fredy Neptune*, establishes the urbanised, fashionable intellectual in opposition to the rural traditional worker in the first

stanzas when (p. 6) "Jowled, fortyish, suppliant in the midst of all, Stacey

Forbutt, venting wine into Orrefors glass" refuses his son's request to finance

the Bush burial that was the last wish of their old digger relative, a bachelor

farmer. Similarly, in the first stanzas of *Fredy Neptune* (Murray, 1998, p. 13),

one man dies and all others are exhausted by the intense manual labour

required to coal a German battleship escaping port at the outbreak of war, but

they may not stop until "the ship's only clean man/ came and nodded Enough,

with his Higher Matters expression..."

Even more recently, in his prose essay, "The preamble's bottom line", Murray's

version of his preferred introduction to Australia's constitution refers to God,

prejudice, fashion and ideology, and he comments (Murray, 1999a, pp. 217-

218): "Making the whole significance of government revolve around protecting

people from coercions and relegations is intended to be the moral climax of

those values [expressed in the preamble]." He goes on to allege "first world"

totalitarian control of culture in pursuit of parliamentary and police power, and its

"emasculation" thereby of poetry as a source of fresh and powerful thinking (p.

230): "The point of literature is never literature, but the alienation from

mainstream society which it connotes..." Murray (p. 235) concludes by hoping

for the realisation of an "inclusive Creole Australia we have all seen forming but

have been forbidden to describe."

The error in Murray's politics does not lie in his desire for peace and justice, but

rather in his means of achieving it; Hart (1989b, pp. 148-149) claims, for

instance: "Concerned to support convergence in Australian society and to

promote art as fundamentally integrative, Murray has at the same time
generated more distinctions and antitheses than almost any other Australian
writer." As feminist theory has long since clarified, a simple reversal of
dichotomous terms does nothing to deconstruct power relations.

By activating the negative power of "otherness" in much of his work, Murray
impedes the understanding of difference, an understanding which might
otherwise eradicate the malicious effects in those traditional Western
dichotomies crystallised in Enlightenment thinking. Murray's failure has to do
with an inability to approach the liminal, chaotic and potentially productive space
where oppositions recognise their necessary constitution by each other – a
postmodernist approach which Murray rejects (and has reviled in other poets,
such as Tranter). The poet's relationship with Romanticism may help to
illuminate this perturbation.

The Romantic influence in Murray's writing

Romanticism, a Western cultural movement arising at the end of the eighteenth
and early nineteenth centuries, is often posed as a reaction to Enlightenment
rationalism, mechanism and industrialisation. Marked by recourse to nature,
the unconscious, the imagination and the sensibilities, Romanticism asserts the
primary role of the perceiver in the world perceived, making central the role of
imagination. The imagination opposes the clockwork precision of the empirical,
mechanised universe; it funds the creative moment, the irruption of original
genius, the point of compatibility between personal identity and the work
produced such that the cause must be a "true" moment of vision. Thus induced

is the elision between the author and the work to which post-structuralists object and to which Murray assents by techniques of production of himself as author.

Also commonplace in Romantic thinking is the notion of art as a sensual embodiment of thought and feeling, allied to the view that art assuages desire (Hart, 1989b, p. 153); a view Murray expresses through his description of poetry as "Wholespeak", that is, poetry as primary, integrative, and the natural vehicle of religious expression which brings healing through the non-rational mind.

Another influence lies in the advice of "Longinus", Romanticism's progenitor of the third century AD, advice with remarkable persistence in "common sense" thinking about poetry. "Longinus" recommended the blending of "manifold tones" to bring the poet's emotion into the listener's hearts, and the piling of phrase upon phrase to build the "majestic whole", techniques common in Murray's poetry, the latter especially in *Fredy Neptune*. Longinus' instructs poets to achieve grandeur in poetry through the immanence of genuine feeling in the words:

> I would confidently lay it down that nothing makes so much
> for grandeur as genuine emotion in the right place. It
> inspires the words as it were with a fine frenzy and fills them
> with divine afflatus. ('Longinus', 1988, p. 168).

Murray's (1990, p. 170) opinion is similar:

> Another element essential to the fusion out of which the
> poetic experience flows is emotion or feeling, which may be
> strongly evident or only subtly present, but must be
> convincing, true to instinct and intuition, capable of stirring
> involuntary sympathy in the beholder. The easiest way to
> 'do' that sort of effect is with sincerity, or else so unstudiedly
> that it disposes of itself through the language more or less by
> itself.

Kane (1996, p. 188) however, places Murray in a neo-Kantian Romantic tradition, influenced by Rudolph Otto's idea of the numinous. The numinous is defined as an *a priori* category directly cognising the holy or divine and, not being susceptible to ordinary rational interpretation, "cannot be 'explained,' only affirmed and experienced." In other words, the numinous occurs outside the grasp of language. In addition, according to Kane, Coleridge's reasoning continues to exert enormous influence on poets; his definition of the imagination in *Biographia literaria* suggests that the poet stands in unmediated relation to the divine, participating directly in an original act of creation. This introduces pressures on the poet to establish as a person of the imagination, leading "directly to the notion of the poet as someone apart, a genius, an inspired and even heroic individual (and often someone alienated from others)." (Kane, pp. 34-35). Murray (1978, p 174) introduces Hesiod, the great Boeotian poet, in such terms – the Muses breathed a "godly voice" into him, commanding him to make poems. Many poets, asserts Murray, have had similar visionary inductions, real or metaphorical, into their craft; and the implication to be read is that this is Murray's experience also. This may account for the disjunction implied in Murray's appellation "the Bard from Bunyah" – the poet made élite by a godly inspiration who nevertheless identifies himself with the rural poor.

The affinity of Romanticism for the Divine, for genius and for the numinous marks its relationship to the transcendent and to that dogged spectre allegedly anterior to Western thinking, the transcendental signified. The transcendental signified is itself implicated in imperialism by its usefulness in grounding the meaning of God, King and Empire. In addition, the relationship of Romanticism

and imperialism can be viewed as closer than usually recognised; as Arthur

(1997, pp. 73-75) argues, Coleridge's volume of writings in support of British

colonial imperialism was vastly greater than his poetic production. Arthur holds

that the historical literary canon was not innocent when social mores absolved

the aesthetic from political intent. The consequent occlusion of Coleridge's

moral and political outlook resulted in Romanticism sponsoring imperialism on a

cultural level, Arthur (p. 75) explains:

> It does so in that it provides an alluring distraction or "decoy,"
> a set of principles and texts which *passionately*, innovatively
> and in a spirit of adventure, focus their attention on
> something other than the political and social circumstances
> in which they were written.

The epithalamium "Toward the imminent days" (Murray, 1991, pp. 32-37), in

which the poet constructs a seductive pastoral of farmland blurring with

paradise, ends with: "For your wedding, I wish you the frequent image of farms".

A knowledgeable reader might wonder whether this is benediction, or fair

warning that in the seasons of marriage the mud and manure will crest your

wellies; but, having described dairy farming as drudgery, "The bush permits

allusion, not illusion" the poet opines in "Extract from a verse letter to Dennis

Haskell" (Murray, p. 243).

To be fair, Arthur is referring to the broader political milieu, and Murray's

trenchant engagement of social and political issues testifies to his desire for

change in social conditions. The form in which his Romanticism occurs, in both

his theoretical framework and in his poetry, lies not in evasion of social or

political circumstances, but in the way Murray privileges poetic imagination, the

numinous, the divine and the synthesis of beings. However, because of its broad popular reception, allied to the authority the poet claims arising from his Romantic reliance, the poetry can exert imperialising tendencies based on destructive dichotomies which render impossible an integrity of *being*.

A conceptual reliance on the construction of hierarchies as natural to, or inherent in, human order, produces the practices or techniques of hierarchy frequently seen at work in Murray's poetry, techniques of power as transcendent, and therefore repressive rather than productive: judgment, scorn, blame, revenge for the bad and wrong, praise and reward for the favoured. Alternatively, the concept of heterarchy requires techniques of power as immanent and productive: acceptance, inclusivity, empathy, consensus, equanimity.

This is not intended to suggest that hierarchies are uniformly useless and heterarchies the only good: for instance, if the plane threatens to fall from the sky, most passengers would prefer a hierarchy based on training, skills and knowledge to swing into action, without a heterarchical impulse to facilitate a circle of consensus about who should be in charge. Similarly, while Foucault's lived postmodern has advantages in raising cultural and social issues which, however uncomfortable, need discussion, living in the Enlightenment is no bad thing if it helps clarify the boundaries of change.

The point is that to achieve a social change of the kind advocated by Murray, forms of social interaction are likely to mirror the content required. To

paraphrase an old saying from the peace movement, the way to the postmodern *is* the postmodern. Thus we return to the point that the poet's resistance to other theoretical frameworks obstructs an expanded understanding of "being" within which a sympathesis, if not synthesis, of beings, might be possible.

CHAPTER THREE

POSTMODERN POSSIBILITIES

According to a number of commentators, Western thinking is undergoing a transition sometimes referred to as a move from Newtonian to post-Newtonian thinking (Overman, 1996). Lincoln (1989, pp. 69-72), referring to the work of Schwartz and Ogilvy (1979), aligned the shift in kind, diversity and magnitude to the emergence of the Enlightenment, and likened it in metaphor to a shift from the machine to the human body.

Essentially a revolt against scientific objectivity and a move towards interactionist modes of knowing, the change is styled by Lincoln as a contest about who will be heard in the ideas marketplace of the future. She describes the transition as a pervasive change in beliefs in which an emergent paradigm is in the process of replacing a dominant paradigm of thought, and lists seven dimensions on which change is apparent: a movement from hierarchic to heterarchic concepts of order in which an understanding of order progressing from the simple to the complex is replaced by a perception of systems as networks, unpredictably under mutual constraint and influence; a shift from simple to complex realities, indicating the belief that diversity and interactivity are more characteristic of phenomena and systems than simplicity and isolation; the rejection of an image of the universe as a clockwork machine, replaced by an image of the universe as holograph, in a process of dynamic interconnection, interaction and differentiation; the movement from determinacy to indeterminacy, in recognition that ambiguity about the future is a condition of

nature; a movement from understanding causality as linear to seeing it as mutual; a shift from change as assembly to change as morphogenesis; and a movement from objectivity to perspectivity, which recognises the value-bound nature of observation and substitutes morphogenetic perspectivity as a way to develop a whole picture.

These changing conceptions of the universe lead to new conceptions of the change process itself, thus generating models of thinking and acting that can help human beings synthesise rather than aggregate. The postmodern could be considered a metonym for that which Lincoln describes, and a pathway to that synthesis of being and beings which Murray consistently desires.

Postmodernism, like modernism, can be regarded as the most recent in a succession of critiques of Enlightenment principles as embodied in modernity. In repaying its debt to structuralism, which established the relativity of meaning in language and gave impetus thereby to poststructuralism's death of God, the author and the unitary self, postmodernism takes issue with certain assumptions (Cahoone, 1996, pp. 14-16). For instance, it opposes the notion of *presence* (that "the thing" is immediately and transparently available to perception) to its own concept of representation or construction, meaning that it prefers to examine "the thing" in its construction in language (a shift from the simple to the complex).

Postmodernism is similarly suspicious of *origin*, the attempt by rationality to establish ultimate foundations on the road to authenticity. By this view, "authorial

intention" is no more crucially relevant than the multiple other influences in the writing and reading of a text (meaning as heterarchy rather than hierarchy).

Also important to postmodernism is the concept of multiplicity or plurality, opposed to the unity, or metaphysics of presence, in which modernity is grounded. The *self*, for instance, is not a neatly controlled, hierarchically composed unified being; it is instead a muster point for multiplicitous forces (mutually causal rather than linearly causal).

Similarly, any text can be read in many ways, none offering a complete or final reading (perspectivity rather than objectivity). The transcendence of norms, that is, the idea of the ideal against which judgments of truth, beauty and justice can be made, is opposed in postmodernism to the idea of *immanence*, the deployment of power (in its Foucauldian meaning) which results in the constitution of norms (morphogenesis rather than assembly).

In bringing all of these themes together, the postmodernist may apply *constitutive otherness* (holography) as an instrument of textual analysis. Supposing that any unity is constituted by its exclusions - or in other words, defines itself by that which it represses, denies, occludes or marginalises - postmodern analysis tends to look past style and privileged themes for the marginal elements in a text. These margins may disclose the operations of power in the disenfranchisement of particular groups - racial, ethnic, sexual and religious groups, for example.

As previously conceded, none of the foregoing is intended to advocate the postmodern as unproblematic. In the sense that postmodern analysis attempts to pinpoint oppression, it is a liberatory social movement, but in the sense that postmodern analysis must apply its criteria to its own writing, its liberatory momentum can be rendered confused – partly by the moral and ethical liminescence referred to earlier in relation to Foucault, and partly by postmodernists' attempts to produce writing in such a way that it escapes postmodern demolitions.

Despite its potential for self-sabotage, or perhaps for the fun of it, the postmodern's aesthetic permissiveness has attracted a number of Australian poets; Phillip Salom, for instance, is one who has been compared to Murray for his imaginative exposition (Haskell and Fraser, 1989, p. 147) and for his tendency to speak expansively in verse to himself and others (Hart, 1989a, p. 69). Like Murray, Salom was raised on a dairy farm (on the West Coast), knew loneliness and isolation, and developed the meditative and introspective habits that being both lonely in, and connected to, the bush can bring. Murray's academic training in English, German and psychology in the late 1950s was relatively traditional (alleviated perhaps by his experience of social life in the Sydney "Push") but he was apparently not innocent of cultural change, nor reticent to judge it in Satanic terms: "The degree we attained was that brilliant refraction of will/ that leaves one in several minds when facing evil." ("Sidere mens eadem mutato", 1976, p. 17).

Salom, 12 years younger, received a broadly eclectic literature degree and has

noted with concern Murray's conservative influence on Australian poetry. Salom

abjures the influence on his own poetry of fellow Australian poets, acknowledging

instead the powerful inspirational influence of South American fiction writers like

Borges, Márques and Paz and claiming a deconstructive approach to poetry prior

to any intellectual contact with Derrida (Williams, 1988, p. 61):

> Anything we create of understanding...falls into its
> parts, becomes a different version, comments upon its
> self and its origin: the projection's going out, but also
> back in....

Salom's 1996 sequence, *The Rome air naked*, is a vigorous stand for the

postmodern, using the multiple open windows form of the computer to, for

instance, juxtapose texts from distinct genres and with distinctly different tones in

single page layouts, increasing the possibilities of merging and misreading, and

emphasising the general multiplicity of the texts. Using the technique called "cut-

up" borrowed from Burroughs and Gysin, Salom creates "poems of dissociation"

which use seemingly random and incoherent selections of lines and phrases,

rewritten to refine rhythm and structure and to preserve the emotional impact of

the unfamiliar. The end result suspends and then defers meaning, according to

the author's note (Salom, 1996, p. xii), a claim fairly met in the ironic humour of

the following example (p. 79):

> On the stamp they issue of him at the Vatican
> the Pope is green. At least he's warmly dressed,
> each day posted in his thousands into Europe.
> Notice how I've stolen even him, the Polish
> one-time poet. A sentimentalist, I bet.
> Perhaps he's read our own well-dressed RC
> Les Murray, to pass him onto God: *You*
> *should read him. We think he's good,*
> unless he disapproves, and that's a likelihood.
> As the poet smugly pulls his lips right over him.

Perhaps the sentimental Pope is another Romantic, and can recommend Les

Murray as more omnipotent than God, who has not yet read the poet; arsey is

certainly another form of RC for a big-mouthed corpulent poet evangelical with

"The dream of wearing shorts forever" (Murray, 1991, p. 205), and whose

trenchant critiques of postmodern, or even mildly experimental, poets has

extended to the poetic conversion of one to Catholicism. On the other hand, is

it Murray who's being recommended to read God because "we" (all of

Australia/Planet Earth?) think God may have disappeared under the weight of

Murray's linguistic representations of the Divine, and because "we" too rather

like the appropriated authority of the bardic position? Or is it that the Pope, and

maybe God, (the masculine pronoun having overdetermined its generic status)

would (unthinkable) disapprove of our Les?

In Salom's hand, the determined application of the concepts of postmodernism

invites engagement and play with its characteristic instabilities of meaning. On

the other hand, a commitment to (dominant paradigm) conceptual singularity,

for example, a belief system vested in the transcendental signified, obstructs

the conceptualisation of complexity. "While not always specifically named

God," asserts Mark C. Taylor (1996, p. 523), "the transcendental signified

functions as the purported locus of truth that is supposed to stabilize all

meaningful words."

Taylor's optimistic postmodernism takes the opportunities offered by postmodern

critique to reconceptualise the idea of God, that idea maintained by Murray in its

pristine state under modernity - by no means an unusual position. As Taylor states

(1996, p. 515):

> The failure (or refusal) to come to terms with the radical
> implications of the death of God has made it impossible for
> most Western theology to approach postmodernism.

This resistance is most obvious in the closures of meaning sought by Murray in

relation to his theology. In *The boys who stole the funeral*, Murray (1980)

presages the centrifugal theme in *Fredy Neptune* of blood sacrifice and its

relationship to Christian observance. A practising Catholic, Murray was born into

the dour and puritan Free Kirk Presbyterian religion, converting to the relative

gaiety of Catholicism in 1963, the year after his marriage. His later works have

borne the dedication "To the glory of God", and Murray openly acknowledges his

desire to be Australia's foremost religious poet. In the exegesis of his views,

Murray contends (1999a, p. 21) that the spiritual dimension exists universally in

human beings, and must be fed. Those unable to accept as nourishment the

spiritual grace offered by God and mediated by the churches may feed the spirit

in damaging ways; for instance, in the form of sacrifice.

> Without that transcendence which is the only coin the soul
> recognises, you are left restless and unfulfilled, though
> clinging perhaps so fervently to the substitute you have
> found that, in order to crush down your unadmitted
> disappointment, you may be capable of any enormity that
> serves to exalt the supplier of your substitute and bind you
> to him.... The hunger of the soul remains, even if we feed it
> on our very heart and mind and on the lives of millions of
> the innocent. The first of these [soul hunger] is the
> essence of ideology, the second [the sacrifice of millions] is
> its ultimate tendency. (Murray, 1999a, p. 36)

The human sacrifice of Jesus implies that sacrifice is wrong, Murray (1999a, p.

23) determines, but not erroneous because it is a universal and inherent

tendency in human behaviour that must be resolved, and that act of resolution

kept alive. In other words, blood sacrifice feeds a soul which has not found its

spiritual transcendence in God. Murray explores this thesis in "Blood" and "The

abomination", two poems juxtaposed in *The vernacular republic* (Murray, 1976,

pp. 16-19). In the former, a pig is killed according to "Law", that is, in

simultaneous accord with rural conventions for animal slaughter and with the

sacrificial requirement for spiritual wholeness (holiness). "What's up, old son?"

inquires the country cousin. "You butchered things before... / it's made you

squeamish, all that city life." Under this offer of male bonding by kindness, city

cousin recovers the real meaning of slaughter/sacrifice and is released to walk

fearlessly in the valley of the shadow of death:

> I walk back up the trail of crowding flies,
> back to the knife which pours deep blood,
> and frees sun, fence and hill, each to its holy place.
> Strong in my valleys, I may walk at ease. (p. 17).

In "The abomination", in contrast, a man checking his rabbit traps, routinely

releasing and killing the catch, is drawn fascinated to a tree root burning deep,

black and fiery in the ground. Unable to retreat from this metaphorical hell, he

finds "a rabbit in my hands and, in my mind,/ an ancient thing. And it was quickly

done." This sacrifice is a sin, committed in isolation, outside both holy Law and

the human conventions of ritual. The poem represents Murray's philosophical

commitment to Original Sin, and the act's repercussion is the fear of retribution:

> Afterwards, I tramped the smoking crust
> heavily in on fire, stench and beast
> to seal them darkly under with my fear
> and all the things my sacrifice might mean,
> so hastily performed past all repair.
> Murray, 1976, p. 19).

In *The boys who stole the funeral* Murray (1980, p. 35) represents holy

communion as that act of resolution which displaces humans' inherent

murderousness onto a ritual which creates disarmament, peace and global unity:

> As the priest does measured things
> with cruets and with cups and blessings
> the coffin, between right and left,
> flower-heaped at the aisle-head, points
> like a long bomb at the altar
> and the menaced Mass-bell rings.
>
> God, the ungraspable still trace
> withstands the dead with a small round face,
> fractured across, lifted and shown,
> moonrise, moonset above the stone,
> food that solves the world is eaten
> over the aimed and varnished case;
>
> humans are stilled, the worlds are linked
> and the centred Mass-bell rings.

Schwartz (1997), in her critique of Western theology, puts a less beneficent view

of the function of communion. As she sees it, the Bible, an heterogenous

document constructed over centuries by numbers of people under varying social,

cultural, political and economic circumstances, has been used by hermeneutics

to convey widely different meanings. These meanings, however, can be

represented within two paradigms: one of scarcity, and the other of plenty. The

chosen view for Western purposes is the former. The concept of scarcity

supports notions of monotheism, patriarchy and capitalism by securing the

F/father's hegemony through the alleged paucity of resources, including paternal

authority. In every generation, beginning with Cain and Abel, biblical brothers

are enemies, contends Schwartz (p. 109); sibling rivalry fostered by the father

sets the sons against each other and preserves the F/father's dominance. In the

substitutive violence of the covenant, Abram cuts an animal in half to signify

obedience to God's law in exchange for the lands of Israel, enacting a narrative of conquest.

Like Murray, Schwartz (1997, p. 28) considers that "the laws that regulate the social order from On High displace the potential of violence from within the community to a violence vested fully in God." But the cut, says Schwartz (pp. 21-23), is symbolically made to the weaker, inferior, partner entering the covenant; it is a warning of the F/father's retributive violence. In Schwartz's deconstruction, holy communion is a spiritualised narrative of conquest aligned with patriarchy.

Murray's escape from postmodernist implications for his theology results in a "premodernism" of a kind described by Cahoone (1996, pp. 9-10):

> More prominent in Western society as a whole has been the desire to turn back the clock, to respond to the problems of modern society and culture with a partial return to or reincorporation of earlier, traditional cultural forms. This "premodernism" can be seen in the widespread political conservatism of the 1980s, the call for moral regeneration, for a return to community and religion, and in an extreme form, in religious fundamentalism (most famously, Islamic and Christian).

In light of postmodernism's dialogue with modernity, however, Murray's atavistic disavowal of modernism may be a step in the wrong direction; partly because some of his concepts are modernist, and partly because these concepts need not be rejected absolutely in any case. A postmodern writer need not necessarily disavow modernist assumptions of presence, origin, self and transcendence; the task, as Hart (1992b, p. 55) puts it, is to loosen the structures of the traditional Western cogito so as to reformulate the question of "being" more rigorously.

Murray's quest, the healing of division, falls within this contemporary philosophical reformulation.

Taylor (1996, pp. 514-515) agrees with Derrida that deconstruction obstructs every relationship to theology. Based on challenging a metaphysics of presence, in which "B/being" grounds beings and therefore continually grounds Western thinking in a metaphysical origin, deconstructive technique searches the text's gaps, silences and subtle self-subversions, and the effects on language of *supplement, trace, différance* and *dissemination* (Hart, 1992b, pp. 54-59). By this, according to Taylor, deconstruction also opens out the prospect of the Divine Being as a moveable feast, based in "scripture" not as books but as the continuous process of generating, reading and rewriting "the word". Constituting a "divine milieu" of continuous becoming, this process renders every human judgment unreliable, limited by its time and circumstances, unable to fully represent that Divine which it seeks; the process of representation is then "erring", in its many senses of wandering, or missing the mark.

In this sense, both despite and because of its monotheism, Christian theology inscribes itself in binary terms which mark a passage between competing paradigms of scarcity and abundance: for example, God/world, good/evil, presence/absence, One/many, sacred/profane, order/chaos, natural/monstrous, purity/stigma, identity/difference, transcendence/immanence (Taylor, 1996, pp. 516-519). Such a list bears out Derrida's view (a view similar to that of his philosophical preceptor, Heidegger) that a metaphysics of presence is not only

inevitable but also inseparable from non-metaphysics, and his famed comment concerning interpretation is applicable to the above-named oppositions: on the One side of the slash, "(t)he one seeks to decipher, dreams of deciphering a truth or an origin" while the Other "affirms play and tries to pass beyond man and humanism" (Derrida, 1978, p. 292).

Hypothesising that Murray's conceptual system lies preponderantly on the One side of the slash, and Salom's on the Other, it is interesting to consider their different treatments of similar traditional poetic forms, in this case, their moving elegies for dead fathers. Murray's elegy, "The last hellos", was written for his father Cyril and published in *Subhuman redneck poems* in 1996, the same year in which Salom's father died and in which "Elegy for my father" (Philip Salom, personal communication, April 28, 1996) was written.

Both poems are in free verse and both use a repeated line; in Murray's poem, as an unrhymed couplet of introduction with its heavy drama emphasised alliteratively: "Don't die, Dad-/ but they die." The line is repeated early in the poem as: "Don't die, Cecil./ But they do." Expressing anguish and the hopeless desire to hold on to a dying loved one, the line represents a contractionary movement, the desire to maintain a certainty, the pull towards a singularity, an interdiction. In Salom's poem, the line: "if you want to go, go" occurs late, in the eleventh of 15 stanzas, and reappears twice more before becoming the ultimate line. It expresses resignation, acceptance, permission, and an expansion towards the unknown and uncertain.

Within its free verse, Murray's final stanza is attentive to poetic tradition: "Snobs

mind us off religion/ nowadays, if they can./ Fuck thém. I wish you God." The

assonant vowels in "snobs", "off", and "God" are marked by heavy stresses

which hold the stanza in tight conformation, while the final line is reminiscent of

the oldest meter in the English language, the accentual, in which a line halved

by a long caesura is dominated by two strongly stressed syllables on each side.

The stanza rehearses Murray's resistances to the intellectual elites who have

declared the death of God, with the vernacular rage expressed in "Fuck thém"

balanced by a benediction in which an "I", marked as unitary by its self-

righteous tone, delivers the dead to a unitary God. The stanza exemplifies

Murray's ability to use tradition and the vernacular in its own defence.

Traditional poetic techniques are used too in Salom's final stanza:

> And if by saying go we get you back, then go.
> And if by saying go we hope for life ahead, then go.
> And while we want you here, with us,
> these are mortal things of never
> turning back. Your breathing's intermittent
> then slow. We love you.
> Go safely, now. Go.

The repetition of an initial conjunction in the first three lines confers a gentle

tone, contrasting with the anguished tone of the dialectic within and its almost

urgent, repetitive use of "go". A terminal enjambment in the fourth line causes a

heart-stopping pause between the word "never" and the words "turning back",

leading into medial and terminal caesurae which force the reader to take the

dying man's last breathy gasps of life. Most of all, an aggregated self and

other, "we", effects release in the context of an undefinable, uncertain theology:

"we hope for life ahead". In this sense, the concepts of postmodernism, that is,

theoretical pluralism, expand the possibilities of personal and social ontology,

loosening the structures of the traditional Western *cogito* so as to consider

other ways of being.

CHAPTER FOUR

FREDY NEPTUNE

The theme of *Fredy Neptune* seeks a resolution between *cogito* (I think, therefore I exist) and *sentio* (I feel, therefore I exist). In the body of the novel's hero, merchant seaman Fred Boettcher, Murray wages a struggle to unite reason with feeling, to heal the Cartesian split, that declaration which crystallises the dualistic concept of the mind and body. Fred's mind and body are not completely dissociated: "I haven't lost feeling!" he snaps at a doctor. "I've lost sensation, damn you." (Murray, 1998, p. 34). But: "I couldn't love" he mourns later (p. 117). "My idea of love was like landmarks staying in place,/ people being like places." But on the whole, Fred is Enlightenment reason's teleology: the (male) mind unburdened by the (female, erotic) weaknesses of the body is rendered powerful, but as a machine. Murray's teaching in this occurs through Fred's fear: being different invites the reprisal of the mob – a familiar theme in Murray's *oeuvre*. Other familiar themes include police repression, class division, urban élitism, blood sacrifice and religion.

Murray has referred to the book alternatively as *The man who lost his sense of touch*, and *The man who gave up his body out of shame* (Murray, 1999b, p. 1). Having called the novel his secret autobiography, Murray (p. 5) elaborates:

> This is an exaggeration, of course, but there are slivers
> of truth in it that feel poignant to me. Any narrative *in*
> *extenso* is liable to be something of an alternative
> personality for its author, with elements of a different
> life story.... For one thing, his inner life did not change
> when a coma in 1996 mysteriously dispelled my
> chronic depressive illnesss, and it changed quite
> differently from mine when he did let it do so.

The novel, 252 pages of eight-line stanzas in mainly free verse, is a rollicking

fast-paced odyssey which transports Fred from the family farm outside Dungog,

in New South Wales, across the globe and back to Australia again three times,

cutting him, in cinematic technique, into many of the major events affecting

Planet Earth from the start of World War I to post-World War II. On the way, he

encounters a number of celebrated historical figures; for instance, Banjo

Paterson (Fred admires him) and T. E. Lawrence in the Middle East (Fred

detests him for his class privilege); Marlene Dietrich in Hollywood (Fred is awed

by her beauty and loves her for her long recitations of classical German poetry);

and Adolf Hitler (Fred loathes him). Hitler's ascendancy, Fred is told in

Germany, occurred because the State lacked poetry (Murray, 1998, p. 200):

> Now that Hitler's in, he is the fashion
> like the War was, you remember....
>
> That whole opera
> of the World War isn't sung out yet. But Hitler didn't win
> the voters' mandate, not ever. He conned the snobs is the fact of it.
> Now I think we're in for the opera again.

Fred speaks German, the language of his mother's homeland, and in one of the

many odd misadventures which constitutes the story's breakneck forward

momentum, and despite his resistance to fighting on either side, belongs to the

German-allied Turkish Navy at the outbreak of World War I. The novel's

founding event, based on the Armenian genocide of 1915, occurs on the borders

of the Turkish Black Sea. A group of petrified women is doused with kerosene by

a group of jeering men (Murray, 1998, p. 15):

> They were huddling, terrified, crying,
> crossing themselves, in the middle of men all yelling.
> Their big loose dresses were sopping. Kerosene, you could smell it.
> The men were prancing, feeling them, poking at them to dance-
> then pouf! They were alight, the women, dark wicks to great orange flames,
> whooping and shrieking. If we'd had rifles there
> we'd have massacred those bastards. We had only fists and boots.

Fred cannot incorporate the incident, and his impotence against it, into his being. He literally starts to fall apart, apparently suffering from leprosy (Murray, 1998, p. 18): 'My numb bits were changing,/ stinging like burns, and coming off at the rims./ I was terrified. I was coming apart.' For a while, Fred's body serves to symbolise war between nations (p. 17): "I opened my clothes and showed my islands and countries,/ white, with red crust borders" but, once the leprosy passes, Fred's mind and body simply dissociate, his body refusing to the mind any but the faintest sensory information (p. 19):

> No pain, no pleasure. Only a ghost of that sense
> that tells where the parts of you are, and of needs from inside
> so I wouldn't disgrace myself. It seemed I was not to be
> a public cripple. And somehow I knew I wouldn't die.
> That the leprosy, or whatever it had been, was lifted.
> On the other hand, a hatch-coaming dropped on my boot
> was supposed to hurt. The blokes were looking at me.
> *Good, these steel toecaps,* I thought to say, feeling nothing.

Simultaneously, unconstrained by the sensible body, Fred becomes Superman: he feels no pain, heals rapidly from wounds, develops superhuman strength and the ability to perform heroic feats (Murray, 1998, p. 35): "When effort doesn't reach pain you can take it much further."

Shortly after the onset of what Fred variously calls the nothing, the null and the numb, he enters Jerusalem and is drawn to the Holy Sepulchre. Murray marks this, the spiritual core of the novel, with four rhymed stanzas. A mysterious black-hooded clergyman tells Fred (Murray, 1998, p. 24):

> Your response to the death of our sisters is good,
> best of all outsiders. If ever you can pray
> with a single heart to be free of it, it will leave you that day.

Fred's brief confused praying - *"Vater unser* and bugger it, there's no heed to prayer against itself" (Murray, 1998, p. 25) – lifts the numbness only temporarily; a much longer passage of moral challenge is needed to bring him to full resolution of the divided self.

As a principle of right action abroad in the world, Fred's heroism is sometimes perfectly uncomplicated. On a New York wharf, he lifts a flatcar loaded with a ship's diesel engine from the man screaming beneath it (Murray, 1998, p. 148) and as a result meets Jerry Siegel and Joe Schuster, the originators of the comic strip Superman, a reminder of *Fredy Neptune's* quick-change content and form. At other times, perhaps in parody of the finer intentions of the Enlightenment, his heroism has unintended negative outcomes. For instance, when Fred routs four German SA (*sturmabteilung*) officers who are forcing an old Jewish rabbi to scrub the footpath with his beard, the rabbi thanks him thus (p. 199): "You have killed me, young man.... You have got me my death."

Relatively law-abiding but persistently accident-prone, Fred is frequently preoccupied keeping one step ahead of various police – a corrupt police commissioner in Queensland, the American cops who persecute the hobo railroad riders of the Great Depression, and the Gestapo of Nazi Germany. The corollary of Murray's insistent focus on the forces of State institutional repression is his consistent portrayal of cultural oppression through discriminatory practices at a microsocial level, particularly between the working class people with whom Fred mostly moves. Fred's expectation of severe discrimination at this level means his petrified response to "the nothing" is to

keep it secret at all costs (Murray, 1998, p. 25): "The last, the very/ last thing you allow ever: to be caught out both different and helpless./ Humans kill you for less."

Both forces, legalised and informal oppression, meet in the character of Hans, a young German caught out both different and helpless by an intellectual disability, whom Fred rescues from being castrated under the Nazi eugenics program. It is Fred's single-minded, wholehearted compassion for Hans, who has to be saved again from repressive Australian authorities, that opens the way for Fred's redemption from his insensate body. The Nothing was about "a way I couldn't let the world be," says Fred (Murray, 1998, p. 261), and his Aboriginal-Jewish friend Sam advises (p. 235): "I think myself it's a story of law that you're carrying for all places." So saying, Fred occupies the omnipotent position of the One, and Sam's cultural authority confirms His law as having priority over all others.

Fred's redemption finally occurs through acts of counter-logic, of unreason: forgiveness of those who have not offended against him. "Forgive the Aborigines" commands Fred's inner man (Murray, 1998, p. 264).

> *What have I got to forgive?*
> *They never hurt me!* For being on our conscience.
> I shook my head, and did. Forgiving feels like starting to.
> That I spose I feel uneasy round you, I thought to them...

Next, the Jews:

> *That's really not mine, the Hitler madness* – No it's not, said my self.
> It isn't on your head. But it's in your languages.

Then women, and finally, God (p. 264):

> I shuddered at that one. Judging Him and sensing life eternal,
> said my self, are different hearts. You want a single heart, to pray.
> Choose one and drop one. I looked inside them both
> and only one of them allowed prayer, so I chose it...

There is an opening out in this climax; an acknowledgment of language as plastic, not only a source of division but also of healing. The choice between "Judging Him" and "sensing life eternal" is a choice between Enlightenment reason and postmodern pluralism – and reason is the reject. Murray's (1998, p. 265) final line: "But there's too much in life: you can't describe it" is partly a joke on this huge novel's extraordinary range and meticulous historical detail, partly the poet's inconsolability after triumph, perhaps desperation for an end to prolixity, and even a recognition, in postmodern terms, of the ungovernable nature of representation. Post-forgiveness, Fred recovers from the nothing to reclaim his body in "love and swears" (Murray, 1998, p. 265); it is not a pleasurable reunion: "Now I was sore and heavy and bogged in chairs."

CONCLUSION

In a revision of "forgive those who trespass against us" to "forgive those against whom we trespass", Murray recovers from his dalliance with the postmodern to explain, in a reclamation of classism, didacticism and dogma, that without forgiveness by the person who hates, the victim is to blame for our hatred (Murray, 1999a, p. 225):

> English people above a certain, not always very high, class line sometimes despise Australians for having convict ancestors, and I've told them they'll need someday to forgive us, because such dislike comes from an uneasy conscience. They'll have to forgive the Irish likewise, in a much more major way. *Most peoples have some victim-group they need to forgive, because the victim has power over us and distorts our soul: we hate him for lowering our self-esteem.* (My emphasis).

Murray contracts and reduces the field of forgiveness, in which an oppressor group might reasonably be expected to ask the forgiveness of its victim-group, to a field of One who keeps the power (of forgiveness) firmly in His grasp. It is a refusal to say sorry on the grounds that the hierarchy might crumble, a retreat to conservatism in which no structural change is envisaged.

Hunter (1993, p. 350) has proposed that aesthetic culture is "the means by which individuals undertake a special kind of ethical work on the being whose incompleteness they have accepted as their own." The being on whom Murray works as himself is the sacrificial victim, that same one who, as Fred Boettcher, could neither embody the world's cruelty nor feel its joy, beauty and love; "a doorstep of numbed creek water the colour of tears". Release from this incompleteness is a conceptual task, called into prominence in late capitalism

by global extremes which demand healing through an understanding of postmodern concepts and the communication practices they suggest. Murray's sacrifice is to be blessed with linguistic complexity and cursed with conceptual simplicity, and to be oblivious to the task of self-forgiveness which might begin the process of deliverance.

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APPENDIX

How Fred and I wrote *Fredy Neptune*

by Les Murray

At times, I have jokingly called <u>Fredy Neptune</u> my secret autobiography. This is an exaggeration, of course, but there are slivers of truth in it that feel poignant to me. Any narrative in extenso is liable to be something of an alternative personality for its author, with elements of a different life story. ███████████████████
And that is really as close as Fredy comes to being me. It isn't wholly fanciful to say that this book doesn't <u>like</u> being talked about in lofty class-terminology of literary studies. It feels far more defiantly proletarian (now that word is becoming safe to use) than I do, and more vulnerable to the control which jargon seeks to impose. It doesn't quite trust me for knowing some of that jargon, or believe I know enough to protect it if need be. Both doubts are probably justified. I'm scrupulous about anything that looks like directive authorial comment, not least because of the flak and resistance it attracts; I want only to tell how the book got written, without instructing people how to read it or interpret it.

The trigger for writing <u>Fredy</u> was the Armenian poem quoted in translation as its epigraph, but it was a trigger that didn't fire for several years after I first saw it. I found the poem in an otherwise unimpressive rag-bag anthology titled <u>The Angus and Robertson Book of Oriental Verse</u>, edited by Keith Bosley and published in Sydney in 197
The cocking-hammer which made that trigger fire was probably Derek Walcott's <u>Omeros</u>, which Farrar Straus sent to me in the early 1990s. I admired the wealth of beautiful writing in that long poem, but I remember thinking No, you don't just transpose an existing myth into modern dress, not at this major-poem length anyway. The decent thing for an epic-sized composition is to invent your own brand-new myth! A few critics have been at pains to link, or hogtie, Fredy to other mythic stories, especially that of the Ancient Mariner, a tale whose moral-mystical, ██████████ has never convinced me. Others allude to the Odyssey, on the slender grounds that Fredy is a sailor and spends a lot of time trying to get home. He also spends repeated long periods a home, which rather complicates that analogy. Not being Germanisten, they've so far missed Adalbert von Chamisso's <u>Peter Schlemihl</u>, the young man who sold his shadow. But all this is really just lit-crit reflex. There is quite simply no other story that could be called The Man Who Lost His Sense of Touch. Or the Man Who Gave Up His Body Out of Shame.

trajectory [handwritten annotation in left margin, circled]

This, though, is how the poem came to me, in embryo, in 1992. Fredy stood up in the centre of my imagination, like the Weeping Man in Martin Place years before him, and said I'm Friedrich Adolf Boettcher a German-Australian sailor from a farm outside Dungog, in New South Wales. I lost my sense of touch because I saw something unbearable and couldn't prevent it: I saw Armenian women being burned alive in Turke in 1915. How could I bear to be in a world where that could happen? I knew which ██████████ poem the image of burning women had come from, b. I also knew the rest of the ██████ story was for me to discover and ██ tell, in language which faithfully reproduced those which Fredy himself spoke. It would be a long story, covering probably the whole centre of a human life, the usual years of marriage and reproduction and working life. I might face a major struggle with the unities — but then it struck me that the way out of literary problems of that sort would be inherent in the bigger step I was to take, out of usual literary language and convention. There was no way to embed Fredy's speech and sensibility in conventional literary diction without unbea-able condescension, and frankly I revelled in the prospect of a vast holiday from the strain of always building bridges between my inherited culture and the suave snob-talk of Culture. Without political huff ing and puffing, I would simply shift the centre of gravity of my story to where its hero could feel at home — *and be most at risk, among the classes most vulnerable to officialdom and mass slaughter.*

of the great Armenian genocide [handwritten annotation in left margin, bracketed]

> The first ~~language~~ I learned to speak was ~~that Australian~~ of rural workers, and small farmers, which still exists, though educated Australia often dismisses it as a speech of the past. ~~~~ Examples of its usage are marked 'Aboriginal' in standard Australian dictionaries. I think I've corrected the Macquarie Dictionary on this point now, without taking anything away from our Aboriginal cousins, much of whose English has developed on from rural white-talk and assumed forms of its own. The language Fredy uses, when he speaks English, is essentially the socio-lect I'm describing, rural men's talk of my father's youth. Earlier in the century, when Australia was more comfortable with a proletaria. identity, this language was widely enjoyed and valued. A rather desp-erate gentrification ~~~~ which our elites have devoted themselves to in the last three or four decades has abolished this older sympathy, along with any lingering loyalty to bush or outback references; repudiations of these can be almost hysterical. ~~~~ explains the resistance which Fredy has encountered in Australian this literary circles, as compared with its ready acceptance overseas. My object in putting my native language to literary use, in a time when dialect and indigenous usage are at a premium, wasn't so much to upse the keepers of our culture as to explore and reveal an alternative sophistication, and make fresh discoveries which standard Bohemian high vernacular would prevent. From that initial big disobedience, I could reach out to ~~~~ other ~~~~ unlicensed disobediences, fresh imageries, fresh turns of speech and thought. I have always had it firmly in mind not merely to master high culture but to match it, on terms it has my got away with despising.

When Fredy came to me, I was just beginning to emerge from the very worst of a depressive breakdown that had overtaken me in 1988. During the really awful period of that, when I had to chase Macbeth's witche away from their cauldron every afternoon and stew my head in it for a few hours — to make the black soup I would then spoon ~~~~ down col in the predawn dark — I'd turned away from humans and my wretched self to write about and as it were from the inner lives of non-human creatures. This became the book Translations from the Natural World, a mental refuge which may have saved me. Now I had another big proje one at a complete tangent to Translations, and it was work, real work the glorious trance-bringer that sustains and re-makes us. Fredy took me four years to write, from 1993 to 1997, with intervals of six to eight months between each of its Books in which to do necessary resea -ch on details and r -charge my inner batteries. Throughout its comp-osition, the book remained a kind of standing trance which I could leave and re-enter. In those years, I would step aside from it to write shorter poems as well. All of Subhuman Redneck Poems comes from that period, as do the first poems of my new slim vol Conscious and Verbal, due out later this year. There was never any conflict between these poems and Fredy, no syphoning-off of energy one from the other, and not a lot of carryover either, except at a few obvious points suc as the slants Fredy's story puts on that notorious half-line Sex is a Nazi, in 'Rock Music', with its critique of determinism from an angle others have seemed reluctant to look from, in an era of sex-worship.

Something else I had to settle before starting to write Fredy was the matter of his two languages, and how to reflect both of them in just one. His German mostly belongs to what we might once have jokingly called the worldwide Australia of working people, but with refinement that have come from his immigrant mother, who unlike his father was educated in Germany, and perhaps better educated into the bargain. Hi German dimension would need to be evoked by bits of translated idiom and what is ponderously called language-interference, a thing almost universal in bilingual people, apt as they are to make slight errors both ways, I think I kept all this from ever taking on a stereotyped Katzenjammer heaviness; When ~~~~ is in German-speaking milieux, we can tell because of ~~~~ an increase of Germanisms in his speech and

Fredy use of 'circumstantial' to mean fussy and bothersome is a sample of how it goes in real life.

modes of thought. Since cultural differences are mainly filterings-down
from higher up in a society, I felt free not to make much at all of them
at the social levels ████████████████████████ on which Fred mostly
moves while in Germany or among Germans. When he occasionally moves some
way upward, they become more noticeable, but his story is mostly on the
workers-of-the-world level of commonality, where there needn't be much
visible motivation for stuff that is thrown at you. As there wasn't, and
isn't, in the century's great proletarian art forms of film and the comic
strip. My aim was to bring off an illusion, as far as possible without
dropping actual German sentences into the text — I aimed at a limit of one
full sentence per book — of his sometimes speaking German but in English
words. Touches like using Scots dialect to translate Swiss dialect are
perhaps in-jokes, but they have their historical suggestiveness too. Fre
is, I think, pretty clearly an intelligent man from a time when the forma
education working people got was apt to be elementary and short. Their
culture was thus essentially oral, and the model Fred has to tell his
tale is not the novel, but the spoken reminiscence, in which earlier
events may be seen through the glass of later ones and no conventions
such as a gun seen in Chapter One has to fire by Chapter Six exist. Fred'
estrangement from book culture comes up at times, notably in Basil Thoro-
blood's fine library in Kentucky, and links up with his flashes of real
resentment at the impertinences of privilege, as when he and T.E. Lawrenc
understand and detest one another at sight, right in the midst of Fred's
successful emergency career as a Hochstapler, German for an imposter
passing himself off as a member of a higher class. That term comes from
Rotwelsch, the old German thieves' jargon or Flash language; we hear more
of it when Globke the spiv from Berlin tries Fred out in the underworld
cant: "You're stacking high". Which would be Du stapelst hoch in the
language they're really speaking.

My research for Fredy consisted almost wholly of my own lifetime of
reading and travelling. Plus half the wondrous ████ lies I'd ever been
told. I was very proud of getting small things right, using the contempor
ary 1918 name of the street outside Shepheard's Hotel in Cairo rather
than the modern name. The nice Turkish interpreter who gave me phrases
appropriate for a leprous beggar to use in late-Ottoman Constantinople
amazed me by not knowing that her language had still been written in
Arabic script in her grandparents' day. Rural people, white and Aborigin-
al alike, are typically conscious of vast networks of family, ██████
██████████ and I supplemented my own knowledge of surnames and even
of actual then-existing persons around Newcastle and Dungog and the Myall
with reading of old local newspapers and digests. Some German surnames
from my own district I knew, of course; others came from an old ship's
manifest of immigrants ████████ to the Hunter vineyards, a few came
poignantly from war memorials in my region. Germans were for a very long
time the next largest settler nationality in Australia, after the British
and the Irish. It was in a Dungog paper — the Dungog paper — that I
found Mr Jack Boots, who joined the Australian Army from that town in ██
1941. My prudent rule for real people was never to defame them; scandal
was only for fictional figures. And for Adolf Hitler, who'd earned it. I
spent £60 on a very battered late 1920s Baedeker so as to locate streets
and other features in German towns and cities, because whole streets and
much else simply disappeared during the bombing in World War II and was
never rebuilt; you couldn't simply read back from modern guides. For
much countryside and most of the cities and towns in the book, I could
draw on visits I had made. Exceptions were Cairo, Shanghai and New Guinea,
plus a few places Fred touches in passing. For Shanghai I relied largely
though not exclusively on four years' worth of anecdotes told to me in th
1960s by my then colleague in the Translation Unit of the Australian
National university, Constantine Ivanovich Kiriloff, first professor of
Chinese, later on, at Canberra University and now alas! dead. He had been
a policeman in the French Concessions of Shanghai and Hangzhou in the
late 1930s and early Forties, until Vichy fell and the Japanese closed
the French territories down. Con was never Vichy himself; he was a brill-

scholar and a man with a great storytelling gift, and Ilya Chaikin, the
first copper Fred ever shakes hands with, is his largest but not his only
guest appearance in my work.

When preparing for Book One, I talked to a couple of psychiatrists about
psychosomatic phenomena, neuroses and dissociative conditions, for example
the so-called hysterical blindness suffered by many who saw the Killing
Fields in Pol Pot's Cambodia: their eyes objectively see, but they are no
aware of it and are blind because they believe they can't see. One specia
ist told me that among modern Western people, 'metaphorical' symptoms such
as Fredy or those Cambodians evince are much rarer now than earlier in
the 20th century or before. Nowadays most people are better equipped by
education to verbalise their neuroses, and have lots of jargon in which
to do so. For most of the dissociative dimension, I could draw on things
I knew from within myself. And because dissociation goes back in me to
times before my conscious memory, I could put it into Fred's mouth in
stumbling baby-talk free from all analysis, the semi-articulate speech of
innermost things. All the same, I was at times struck by Fred's reluctanc
ever to dwell ███ on his condition, beyond its weird external effects,ʌ B
I knew that fear and deflection are part of the armour of a neurosis, as
it protects itself from being brought to light and analysed away. I was
intrigued by his never noticing that whenever his Nothing state went away
for a time, it was never wrongdoing on his part that brought it back, as
he always feared, but viciousness committed by others.

Nearly all the skills of vernacular storytelling in Fredy probably come
from my late father Cecil Murray, who was a true master. Fred isn't my
Dad, though. That *role* ███ is *played* in the book largely by Fred's surrogate
father Cos Morrison. Where Fredy's mentor Sam Mundine the Jewish Aborigine
chef de cuisine comes from, I can't fathom, but I love him and I relished
his every walk-on. The inner controller of the story wanted him to be
important. An Aboriginal cousin of mine, the historian Vicki Grieves, save
me from a gaffe by pointing out that Mundine is a Banjalang name. It thus
belongs to far northern coastal New South Wales and the Border Ranges,not
to Gabi-Gabi country farther north in Queensland. I had to slide in a
Banjalang grandfather and suggest that Sam himself was raised for some
reason outside his ancestral territory; ██████ being raised in the new
region made that his country in the Aboriginal sense. Making him a chef
when he came from two very ancient peoples full of wisdom but light on in
culinary matters may have appealed to me first as a joke or paradox, but
it was always also a device for making him a man of the world, in ways that
would break with stereotype pretty strongly. Fred's politico-cultural atti-
tudes (how he'd ridicule and flee from that phrase!) are those not maybe
universal but still very common among working people worldwide, even in
the teeth of television. The book very nearly got titled The Policeman's
Hat, but it refused that because it was unwilling to be defined by its
antagonistic principle. Since its language and essentially its period were
native to me, I never felt the need to pack the text with museum-exhibits
of old-time slang. Only once did I go to Sydney Baker's wonderful but now
historic The Australian Language, to find a quasi-underworld term from
Fredy's period. The word I found was shelf, meaning to inform on someone;
I wasn't sure whether to fizz on them went back far enough. As discoveries
I also got kate for an undefined prison sentence and forties, meaning
criminals and dating from the middle of the 19th century, when British
police would let someone commit forty shillings worth of larceny so that
they could be hanged, not merely imprisoned. I gather Marlene Dietrich
really could recite hours of classical German poetry and had a deep love
of it. Not just a glamorous movie star. People also wonder why I spelled
Fredy with just one d. Not merely because the apparent error would catch
the eye in bookshops, but really because his mother, in a rare deference
to where her boy lived, used to call him Fredy, with a long e to rhyme
with cared he, rather than the older and by this century less chic Fritz.
Examples of smart half-English-looking German nicknames abound: Hardy
Kruger, Romy Schneider, Hedy Lamarr.

*Swearing was a question I had to deal with early. It has been a constant in working men's
speech for longer than elsewhere, but many men & most women have always eschewed it, & Fred's
use of it mainly which furious is typical.*

Perhaps because I didn't want to spend thinking time on the taxonomy of Fredy's book as I was writing it, I always vaguely thought of it and spo/ of it as a verse novel. The term is as misleading as any other, but less twee than 'Story' or 'tale' would have looked on a book cover. 'Legend'a ████ would have been much too portentous, and quite out of tune with the style of the book. Since it came out I have joked that it might equally well be termed a verse mini-series, of five episodes. That would accord better with its tone than the very posh 'Narrative'. We might come close to the truth if we called it an impersonation. But that would look defin itely odd on a book jacket, and frighten shoppers away even more than ve does. As a versified reminiscence, it has mainly prose parallels such as Little Big Man (a good deal too knowing and satiric for my money, lookin over the heads of its characters to where the toffs are sitting)or the Flashman books of George Macdonald Fraser, which aren't seen as Literatu but do amount to some of the best historical writing about the 19th cent anywhere. I told the story in verse because that is my medium, the one I am trained in and thus best equipped to use and stretch; it allows effec which are harder and more artificial-sounding when essayed in prose. Wha may be most novel-like in the book is what verse novels sometimes leave ████ out, but which E.M.Forster reminds us is the essential element of a novel: **narrative energy flowing resistlessly under everything, and clear** going somewhere. The power of that allows us all the luxuries of digress and detail and delay. Since narrative was the only plot the story permit ted, I didn't know how it would end until I got there ── or to put that round the other way, the story eschewed plot so as to be a journey of discovery. It's little use travelling on the fine single skate of your pen if you know where you're going. The key to Fred's release hides unforgotten in ████ ʜs mind almost from the start, but I was curious when and at what behest he would try to use it.

To end where we began, Fredy still feels to me very much like an alte ego. He carrieʃ a charge of alternative life that sometimes daunts me, even though I have evidence he isn't me. For one thing, his inner life d not change when a coma in 1996 mysteriously dispelled my chronic depress ive illness, and it changed quite differently from mine when he did let it d so. My parents nearly christened me Frederick, and it's a name I would have preferred, though maybe I had to bear the androgynous name Leslie i order to be a poet. As I wrote the story I had a strong sense of guidanc from deep within my psyche. Whenever I would slip off the underlying rai of the story, as I was discovering them, I would soon falter to a stop, and have to go back and find the rails again. Sometimes it wasn't rails, either, just a frail thread, but I wasn't permitted to drop it. After ea Book was finished in the rough, I would carefully and slowly type it up, from the longhand in which I write all verse. The type-up would comprise pretty much all the reworking that Book would ever get. I feared to fals anything by too much calculation, and there was and is a strong inhibiti in me against going back and interfering with any of the Books, even at points where I've never known why something came up, or lasted longer th I might have wanted it to, or refused explicit resolution. The imitation *like riches of excess,* of life rather than of disciplined art allowed human figures to appear a then vanish without apparently doing much. Only a very few stanzas were ever added or transposed or dropped: I remember only one case clearly, where Ansaug, the grotesque vaudevillian from Berlin who could hang from a wall or the ceiling by the suction of his big lips, arrived late for Book Four and demanded to be let in. I still don't know why, but he woul furnish a useful momentary reference later, in Book Five. A small number of critics have been fazed or irritated by the supposed blokiness of the book ── I suspect the real irritation is ● finding tolerance and comple and moral strength where stereotype says they don't exist, in a ████ blokeish man and his oick language. Right at the outset, I decided never to try to gloss or soften the reality of that language. Good British TV series such as Minder and When the Boat Comes Inhad taught me you needn't ████ do that. If the language you use is consistent and rings true, readers will quickly cotton on and start to enjoy it on its terms.

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