

## “Walking Knee Deep in Ferns”: Salvational Themes in the Poetry of Les Murray

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**Abstract:** *Cinema-goers today will hear metaphysical and ‘religious’ type references in movies like “The Matrix.” In this search, secular society shows its need for paradigms better than consumerism to guide human existence. Coincidentally, the interdisciplinary study of theology, the arts and literature is doing the same, and this article demonstrates one attempt to raise theological questions in the arena of literature. This discussion argues that Les A. Murray’s poetry provides an insightful understanding of salvation in the contemporary Australian context. For him, happiness, fulfilment or salvation is most optimally foreshadowed when “walking knee-deep in ferns.”<sup>1</sup>*

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**Key Words:** Les Murray; religious-spiritual poetry; theological poetry; human fulfilment; salvation; experience of grace; Australian bush culture

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This discussion argues that Les A. Murray’s poetry provides an insightful understanding of salvation in the contemporary Australian context. For him, Salvation is most optimally foreshadowed when “walking knee-deep in ferns.”<sup>2</sup> This discussion will provide a reading of his poetry that highlights some images of that salvation already won, being won now and promised to us. Inevitably then, within poetry’s particularities, the discussion will be gathering gleanings of various instances of ‘salvation,’ either as crumbs of insight, scraps of experience or more reconsidered reflections that suggest a worthy destiny for human beings.

Art and literature explore glimpses of the imagination and expand their applications. Pertinently, Patrick Sherry<sup>3</sup> makes a distinction between ‘illustrations’ that depend on and foster a religious understanding explicitly for a secular culture, and ‘primary expressions’ that are derived from people’s own lives and experience. The former usually refer to and display, explain or ‘illustrate’ salvation by depending on religious sources, while the latter express or point to contexts of salvation when “they touch on what is most profound and moving in human life with deep human responses.”<sup>4</sup> The literary, poetic images of redemption we are reviewing here will be mainly the “primary expressions” of Redemption. Theology is likely to seek to make the former intelligible, while poetry will valorize such life experiences.

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<sup>1</sup> Line 61, “Noonday axeman,” *The Ilex Tree* (Canberra: Australian National University, 1965), 33.

<sup>2</sup> Line 61, “Noonday axeman.”

<sup>3</sup> Patrick Sherry, *Images of Redemption: Art, Literature and Salvation*. (London and New York: T & T Clark, 2003), 162, and “Saying and Showing: Art, Literature and Religious Understanding” *Theology Today* 18.1 (2002): 38-39.

<sup>4</sup> Sherry, *Redemption*, 163.

For a Christian reader but to different degrees, both kinds of images express that happy Revelation that God has saved the world and loves his creatures and his creation to the extent that he will bring them to a worthy end. 'Illustrations' of that truth will be dependent upon religious traditions and contexts, usually by shedding light upon major established themes. Donne's 'religious poetry' would typically be 'illustration,' whereas primary expressions would be more powerful, being "derived from people's own life experience and feelings."<sup>5</sup> Dramatizing the liberation found in some natural processes and social rituals, these partial images can be read to prefigure, foreshadow and anticipate that Final Salvation promised in the Scriptures in local and personal events. Our concern here then is with these 'primary expressions' as they occur in Murray's 'secular' poetry.

Poetry is not narrative. So necessarily, it will present only fleeting phrases, employ glancing images, traces, shadows or outlines of plenitude, happiness or liberation. In Murray's work, they will generally point to a better future for the poet and his local community, and by implication for all of humankind. Our discussion here then will appropriate these phrases, ideas or key words and themes from some selections for consideration, and show how a believer would strive to contextualize them within religious contexts.

Sometimes too what is positively meaningful in images of rescue, these traces of salvation, may be expressed by a dramatic exploration of a negative *contrast experience*.<sup>6</sup> Readers with secular viewpoints could be envisaging them as cries for political liberations, while readers in faith traditions will be appreciating the theological vectors such pain and inhumanity draw towards the Saviour who grants a final happiness after present misery. Some discussion of the enigmatic poem, "An Immortal" to come will show that contrast method applied.

This project cannot be accused of being an irresponsible 'appropriation,' which is often defined as "the act of setting apart or taking for one's own use."<sup>7</sup> For example in revising history, historical data and images are appropriated to serve an alien ideological or political agenda and that is reprehensible as scholarship. That process ignores the validity of their original role in their social and historical contexts. However, the use of appropriation as a postmodern artistic practice<sup>8</sup> is done so as to understand the social and historical contexts of the artistic works in which they were used. In the field of art appreciation, "Appropriation is used by [two nominated] artists to enable a reflexive and critical engagement with our colonial history."<sup>9</sup> This is a reputable method of critique, for it observes a conscious regard for the social and political implications of their use in their own era, and also anticipates their usefulness in the present rather than being merely a 'revision' or reinterpretation for contemporary purposes, a revision which takes little regard for their pertinence and potency in their original environment. There is indeed a

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<sup>5</sup> Sherry, "Saying and Showing," 39.

<sup>6</sup> Dennis Rochford, "Schillebeeckx, God and Postmodernity," in Lieven Boeve and John C. Ries *The Presence of Transcendence Thinking Sacrament in a Postmodern Age* (Leuven: Peeters, 2001), 82. Negative theology is much concerned today with critical resistance to what is not meaningful, just or consistent with human rights.

<sup>7</sup> *Collins English Dictionary, Australian Edition* (Sydney: HarperCollins, 1992), 74. "Appropriation - To take possession of another's material, often without permission, reusing it in a context which differs from its original context, most often in order to examine issues concerning originality or to reveal meaning not previously seen in the original. This is far more aggressive than allusion or quotation, it is not the same as plagiarism however. An image reused in collage is an example." *Artlex Art Dictionary*, <http://www.artlex.com/ArtLex/a/appropriation.html>, accessed 12 August 2003.

<sup>8</sup> Anna Lawrenson, "Responding in Perspective: Historical Narratives in the Art of Gordon Bennet and Geoff Parr," *Crossings: The Bulletin of the International Australian Studies Association* 7.1.2.3 (2002): 72.

<sup>9</sup> Lawrenson, "Responding in Perspective," 72, quoting Davidson (2000:71).

difference in kind between 'taking out of context' and 'respecting historical contexts' of texts; the first is dishonest while the second strives to be honestly interpretative. Our reading is an appropriation of the second kind.

In this hermeneutical and theological task, we may indeed be reading beyond the text 'for surplus' to create our own new texts in front of Murray's texts. Thus, in growing our sense of an attainable salvation, we will contextualize it to our own living situations and recognizable circumstances, with the result that our needs, aspirations and dreams compose a religious focus as *incarnational* data. Inevitably, these images of human salvation will not be remote or exotic but connote decisive events presaging final happiness; they will convey states of plenitude, fulfilment or liberation in social contexts.

This discussion of some of his poems is not criticism or critique but an exercise in hermeneutics, responsibly respectful of poetry's unique languages, for like Murray, this writer is well aware that "criticism's a prison for all poems."<sup>10</sup> Poets like Murray see themselves as "the volunteers conscripted to storm the house of meaning,"<sup>11</sup> as willing messengers of the Muse, even too witnessing to the Lord's salvation by challenging prevailing evil mores and practices that deny freedom to humans.

## I. MURRAY EXPLORES THE NUMINOUS

As seers, prophets, poets and critics, poets offer surprising insights: they can throw new light upon the familiar, and read much more in the seemingly mundane and ordinary. Poets show that the ordinary is suitable grist for poetry. They challenge the assumption that poetry is only for heroic legends, or intoned on special occasions, or even worse, is sequestered entertainment for the *literati*. Suspicious of the power of grand narratives, post-modern readers also challenge those assumptions, often reading 'for surplus' from the data of poetry's particularities in the ordinary world.

Happily then, Murray's poetry alerts us to the "braced, casual normality" of life, in that "it is serious to be with humans,"<sup>12</sup> implying that in the wider, and invisible divine domain surrounding all of life, freedom, joy and faith are superbly and satisfyingly surprises in store for receptive humans. As a poet, Murray is intensely aware that because we live in a language-bound cosmos,<sup>13</sup> the poet's work articulates the inner voice of illumination for more fully comprehending human existence. Happily too Murray's explicit Christian faith supplies a clear interpretative framework for an intelligible comprehensiveness about its purpose. We could well call him a mystic for "mysticism occurs whenever an intuition of the invisible is the decisive determinant of behaviour."<sup>14</sup> In his poems, those metaphysical beliefs are the primary framework for interpreting life experiences. It enables him to read the sacred in the ordinary.

The following discussion of selected poems by Les Murray shows how he views the ordinary as media to what has been termed the 'numinous.' In his poetry, he exercises the

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<sup>10</sup> Line 16, "Each Morning Once More Seamless," in *Subhuman Redneck Poems*, 56.

<sup>11</sup> Line 16 of "An Immortal," in *Collected Poems, 1961-2002*, 201,

<sup>12</sup> Line 39 of "The Fishermen at South Head," from *The People's Otherworld* (1983), *Collected Poems*, 168.

<sup>13</sup> Typically, the post Enlightenment mindset of belief in reason and science as the emancipation from superstition and irrationality has been now overturned. The primary role of language and ideology in shaping our responses has been revealed, and the newer respect for the intuitive and 'emotional intelligence' focuses on the poet as its primary articulator.

<sup>14</sup> Paul Gifford, "Writing and the Spirituality of Absence: Paul Valéry's 'Station sur le terrasse,'" in Bevan, *Literature and Spirituality*, 14.

poet's traditional role to alert, inform, raise awareness, evoke emotions, and challenge and resist unjust structures. In exploring the numinous, Murray's work reasserts the poetic arts' traditional role of having a distinctive view upon events: to view them from within a larger frame, enabling readers to be more aware, more reflective and perhaps even more moral.

For a poet and a religious man, Murray's chiasm<sup>15</sup> of the sacred and the mundane is based on Otto's idea of the 'numinous.' Rudolph Otto (1869-1937) regarded metaphysical knowledge as an *a priori* (already given) concept, which he demonstrated in using J. F. Fries' doctrine of the *Ahndung* ("inkling," surmise, foreknowledge) that permits one to directly access the holy or divine. Otto established his concept of *the numinous* along these lines as an already given concept like time or causality, "qualitatively different from anything that 'natural' sense-perception is capable of giving us."<sup>16</sup>

Murray uses this as a model for his "substantial inspired imaginings."<sup>17</sup> His neo-romanticism privileges the poetic imagination as a source of value to access the numinous and sacramental dimensions of existence. Thus, in the contemplation of nature and on one's experience in the world via poetry, one could access God's immanence. As Kane notes, to Murray "poems become ritual enactments that catch the numinous as 'God is the poetry caught in any religion / caught, not imprisoned.'"<sup>18</sup> Thus, the poet is building bridges between the ordinary and the spiritual, accessing immanence and 'making room'<sup>19</sup> for the numinous.

This chiasm of the ordinary and the extraordinary as I will call it, the happy intersection of human action and divine purpose represented by the Greek letter chi, achieves a cultural highpoint in Murray's famed poem, "An Absolutely Ordinary Rainbow,"<sup>20</sup> published in *The Weatherboard Cathedral* (1969). It has achieved a considerable profile in the landscape of Australian poetry; many consider this to be the best crafted and most typical of Les Murray's poems, indeed Murray comes back to it as a paradigm of his professional work in discussions with his biographer Peter Alexander.<sup>21</sup>

Murray's anonymous character weeping in Martin Place reads as a kind of a prophet, but an absolutely ordinary kind of prophet. Incidentally, Jeremiah is called the weeping prophet. It soon becomes clear that the public tears of this man weeping in Martin Place are cleansing tears, not tears of regret or despair. Only tears such as these can break the drought of self-sufficiency. These tears bring healing, they are tears that bring a reconciliation so that, with the dignity of one who has wept, the man gets up and walks off down Pitt Street, renewed, done with it and cathartically-cleansed. His tears then are regenerative, are transformative, for they enable people to dispense with negative stages and access the impossible.

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<sup>15</sup> I use 'chiasm' from the Greek letter χ (chi) as a very suitable reference for the process of accessing the numinous in its intersection of sacred and profane in the local, temporal and particular instances of experience. In it, the horizontal (human) and the vertical (divine) axes of intentionality coincide within a singular effect.

<sup>16</sup> Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy: In Inquiry into the Non-Rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and its Relation to the Rational*, trans. John W. Harvey (London: Oxford University Press, 1923), 5, also cited in Paul Kane, *Australian Poetry: Romanticism and Negativity* (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 188.

<sup>17</sup> Kane, *Australian Poetry*, 189.

<sup>18</sup> Les Murray, "Poetry and Religion," lines 17-81, *Collected Poems, 1961-2002*, 265.

<sup>19</sup> Kane, *Australian Poetry*, 193.

<sup>20</sup> Les Murray, *Collected Poems, 1961-2002*, 28.

<sup>21</sup> Peter F. Alexander, *Les Murray: A Life in Progress* (Melbourne: Oxford university Press, 2002), 287, 308.

Saints prayed for the gift of tears so they could more palpably join with Our Lord in his passion to feel some of His suffering with him. Their identification with the suffering Christ may seem a long way from service of the poor, but that spirituality focuses on the person and the humanity of Christ. This poem is an excellent example demonstrating Murray's access to the numinous within the ordinary; for this weeping man resists or negates contemporary, urban culture, challenges its repression of instinctive (and God-given) humanity and achieves an equanimity truly surpassing what more complex therapies can ever achieve. His actions are prophetic and indeed become sacramental of that structure of the real that can be accessed only in the numinous via this instantiation of ultimate freedom.

Using a method of contrast from negatives, the poem shows a range of responses to the weeping man. Some stand by in simple curiosity, some are drawn to him in sympathy, and some others even join with him in empathy being granted the gift of tears themselves. The diners at swank restaurants and business clubs are alerted, the Stock Exchange scribblers leave their posts to see what cannot be stopped. Crowds bring more crowds pointing to the weeping man who cannot be stopped. This event becomes a crisis of freedom; someone has stepped outside the bounds of their normality. Uniforms who had tried to seize him cannot now but stare in amazement. Some scream "who [had] thought themselves [to be] happy" (29) but now found that a limitlessness beyond theirs in this man. The slickest, the most cynical, the fiercest men among the crowd, tremble "with silence." The smallest children even come to sit with him in his moment of paradise. Some others on the brink of contact "refuse to weep for fear of all acceptance." Their inability to access his Otherworld (Murray's own neologism for a valid interpretative framework beyond public access) deprives them of its meaning.

In its critique of Society, and conventional and capitalistic attitudes, the poem drives a clear divide between the sophisticated and the instinctive, the truly human and the veneer behaviour expected by society. The man evokes a wide range of positive and negative responses in people, with the effect to assert that the truly human, Schillebeeckx's *humanum*, is often more beyond perceptible reach and range the more people remove themselves, as Murray writes elsewhere, from "the cesspools of maturity"<sup>22</sup> Unlike the false teaching of unbelieving and finite Man that "nothing not founded on the irrational can stand,"<sup>23</sup> the Infinite Man is liberated and free, open to such gifts of salvation as weeping even in this present life.

## II. RITUAL, LUCK, CHOICES AND YEARNING

Murray's usual pattern then is to portray a slice of experience and then to suggest the numinous within it. For instance, in "The Mitchells,"<sup>24</sup> after digging a hole, two men have a bush lunch of tea and meat sandwiches. Their discussion is very sparse indeed and sardonic; but the authorial voice observes, "Nearly everything they say is ritual" (lines 13-14). Two of the standard features of sacramental rituals are their sparseness and clear symbolism, and so Murray's use of the term, 'ritual' here is technical in that what they say and do is already understood but reaffirmed in its execution: they share the unspoken understanding that both are of the family of Mitchells. In its fourteen lines, this poem,

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<sup>22</sup> Line 52, "The Fire Autumn," in *Collected Poems, 1961-2002*, 35.

<sup>23</sup> Line 54, "The Fire Autumn."

<sup>24</sup> Les Murray, *Anthology of Australian Religious Poetry*, 45; *Collected Poems, 1961-2002*, 117.

while being focused on a sacred icon in the Australian ethos – eating together in the bush round a campfire – speaks beyond that to hallow family, belonging and keeping simple company. What is numinous to Murray is their ritual behaviour for revealing blood relationships. It structures their reality, extends its space and time location, and interprets it. For Murray then, ritual works in everyday life to enormously productive and even saving effect.

In its mere sixteen lines, "The Euchre Game"<sup>25</sup> is not unlike "The Mitchells" for showing how a ritual engagement structures a social reality, in the same way religion does. Some players believe the game is chance-based-on-justice, others that chance is fixed to their benefit. The narrative fragment reaches a philosophical turn when the poetic voice pauses to observe: "Intelligence here / is interest and the refusal of relegation" (lines 9-10).<sup>26</sup> Thus this poem celebrates the saving value of inclusivity in its denial of exclusivity, in its (numinous) affirmation of a shared common humanity. As the concluding line clinches it, "The game's loosely sacred; luck is being worked at" as if to say that they trust that the justice of their Aboriginal cause for recognition will be addressed in good time, but right now simple luck and skill at cards extend their short-term enjoyment. In effect, the poem demonstrates how false values that distort one's shared humanity lie and deny. In the players' calm acquiescence and mutuality, they are celebrating their present reality as a foretaste of that communion they all long for. Rather than teaching a virtue, this poem demonstrates its success in a particular embodiment. It very much ritualises that banquet of salvation it foreshadows.

Thirdly and philosophically, Murray's poem, "An Immortal,"<sup>27</sup> asks many questions upon experience to reveal its numinous substructures, and in so doing, builds up a climactic meditation on life. This twenty-one line, three-stanza poem falls into three equal parts of an interrogation, which we could characterise as the accusation, the evidence and the verdict. The poem firstly depicts a graffiti image of youthful daring and seriousness in a superhuman hero. It seems he is driven by one of the many immortals, or perennial drives in human life, and this one, daring, is the positive drive for heightened experience, the one most often seen seeking for ecstasy and transformation. This drive, it seems, has been a universal and perennial yearning among humans. For some, it appears as a demand for satisfaction in the present, in self-indulgence and immediate satisfaction in *hubris* and foolishness. But in others, it appears as the genius of creativity, that impetus to serve and patiently remain open to possibility. Some strive hard to grasp it and fail; some mistakenly claim it prematurely, while others fall away achieving only its shadow in certainty and death.

In the course of the poem, this immortal, this perennial impulse, is first of all accused. In Homeric tones and taunts, this drive in humans, which is identified as almost a universal spirit incarnated when humans reach for the sky, when they go beyond their assigned and mortal limits to reach beyond convention, is identified in its ugly effects. Using the contrast approach already referred to above, it appears too often as "lord of the demi-suicides." As bathos, "demi-suicides" incurs a special opprobrium. This poetic device powers the interrogatory, accusatory tone of the first stanza.

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<sup>25</sup> *Anthology of Australian Religious Poetry*, 62; *Collected Poems, 1961-2002*, 117.

<sup>26</sup> It is not possible to underrate the power of this key term "relegation" in Murray. It is the key to much of his fight against injustice. See his usage in the "Our Man in Bunyah" column, *A Working Forest: Selected Prose* (Sydney: Duffy & Snellgrove, 1997), 75, 162.

<sup>27</sup> *Anthology of Australian Religious Poetry*, 67, *Collected Poems, 1961-2002*, 200.

Then this drive to immortality is identified as Death, who appears among the frantic screaming of a fatal motorcar crash, which "stills a screaming among the jagged images" (4). Death brings the dust thus raised high through daredevil skidding showering to the ground, and stills that foolhardy activity into deathly silence. This Grim Reaper suddenly stills a reckless drive with certain death. This Death is invisible yet ever-present and real for its impact and power. This immortal is visible not in himself but in the effects he causes; impulse and hubris and addiction ("harness") show his clutches to be fatal. This second immortal then is Death, an ever-present, perennial shadow over mankind, who is the invisible opposite to Life, the friend of mankind.

Stanza two outlines the evidence of the work of these 'immortals' in the universal but false drive to risk all: he is both destructive in excess and creative in his impulse. It appears both in greed and excess of power and also brings inspiration and creativity to artists. He even appears in love, in the eyes of "the Beholder."

Stanza three sifts the 'evidence' of the initial 'accusation' to reach a 'verdict.' This Warrior within us, incarnated in the lone venturer and the foolish daredevil, is the Will to Power within our natures. Once fascinated into confusion and entangled by the Siren music of its charms and illusions, humankind finds itself unable to share any sense of salvation. Once touched by his "wheeled blade" like the hot-rod enthusiast, people thus captured or "infected by glory" and bedazzled beyond rescue, are never able to retrieve what is their true worth as humans. They act cut off forever beyond reprieve, reproach or return. This risky skidding is no kidding, for this kind of *hubris* is a deadly serious dance of death. This intoxication with self and *hubris*, egotism and self-justification is necessarily closed and humourless. In this logic, infected by its lethal tonic, the aficionado necessarily becomes *incomunicado*, beyond reach of salvation.

In true sonnet style, the poem's final clinching couplet shows how, on idle evenings, the country townspeople "burn" in wonder, frustration, tantalised by its particular appearance, in the incarnation of this Immortal in the youth spinning his car out of control in wheelies, daring death and risking immortal loss. Death is physical and final, serious and decisive. In such a lethal game, the youth is infected by man's drive to go beyond his natural limits. On the other hand, it is implied, Life is free, open, respectful of progress, is humorous, and indeed overall a better choice. The poem's verdict falls against this Immortal.

This poem is a pertinent and complex meditation upon critical choices, exploring the evidence for Death or for Life, for certainty now or for mystery to come, for continuity and openness, for physicality or for spirituality. The hammer-falling punch line phrase, "unbelief in joking" reveals the poet's purpose to guide a meditation upon critical attitudes and choices. If the person chooses physicality and immediacy, he gets death; but if he or she has the capacity to wait for mystery and a tolerance for ambiguity, they may transcend any failure to go beyond immediate certainties, predictabilities and answers to reach the more humane free space of creativity or realm of questions not yet answered. That, it is suggested, is a better state to be in, since "We will never find out, living" (15).

For Murray, it seems, this critical choice reveals the numinous, for its criticality accesses the structure of human reality. Poets can be mediators of salvation, as unpaid volunteers, "conscripted to storm the house of meaning" (16), both the wavering and the firm. They reach their people's 'Otherworld,' quite probably because people enable poets to communicate in their own relevant categories. They "have stayed inside, with the music" (17), consoled, comforted, entranced, self-interested, even if they remain secretive, sequestered, indulged, self-limiting, addicted or entangled. Murray's observation is that,

we mortals remain in a state of natural longing and tantalised, both ignorant and fascinated by the vectors our own potentials might lead us to in that otherworld. Only accessing the numinous about life will yield the salvations that it offers.

One of the many immortals examined in this poem, Life's saviour is referred to indirectly in the terms "the Beloved" and the "Warrior." Metaphysical questions about origins and destiny are the proper domain of philosophy, while the numinous is a suitable subject for religion. Man has a drive to a destiny but false agents that restrict one's rightful freedom to choose it are liars. Unfortunately, the critical choice of which immortal to follow decides one's salvation.

Another investigation of ordinary experience appears in his "The Powerline Incarnation"<sup>28</sup> where the poet narrates a simple event of rescue from near-electrocution after attempting to remove power lines that had fallen on the roof. In a split narration interweaving the conscious and rational with an unconscious and irrational dream of nightmare in the throes of electric shock quite nearly fatal, the poet reconstructs his own last frantic thoughts. Having had this experience myself, I relate to it readily, when the past and the present collide in a final fumble for breath. Being granted life again, there remains a regret that the joy of immortality glimpsed beyond this life during the electric shock is now lost in the return to human life. In an interweaving of the language of electricity and afterlife fulfilment, the poet concludes with an insight that the great white space in the sky sought by religious cults can be presumably no substitute for the real "Friend" of Christian faith whom he called upon in his distress. One wonders whether it might have been better entitled: a power line resurrection. His rescue from death reveals his firm hope of salvation.

The poem "Senryu"<sup>29</sup> offers a haiku-like joke about Man's longing for eternal life. Just as youth pills are jokingly wished for, so someone would almost immediately overdose on eternal life pills if they were released. Again indirectly, Murray suggests something intrinsic to human nature, a longing for eternity. In the instinctive and impulsive, there resides a seed of the divine within us.

In this second section, "Ritual, Luck, Choices and Yearning" then, we have surveyed some poems that explore ordinary experience. It successfully shows the poet finding positives in negatives, like "a non violent dreamtime where no one living has been." For undergirding it, Murray finds the structure of reality in the numinous dimension. Not only does that meaning makes life intelligible; it makes it optimistic. Truly in moments of crisis and in reflection, that intelligibility can be accessed to overcome modern angst and pessimism. One's ability to discern among many false choices is clearly an indicator of one's success in finding salvation.

### III. NATURE, DIRECTIONALITY AND GRACE

Every rank of creation has its due role to play in the universe and that is how it was ordained; in the divine plan, salvation comes when each creature observes the law of its entitlement in that universe just as the snail does, as Murray has written elsewhere: "Birds in their title work freeholds of straw."<sup>30</sup> Unfortunately alone among creatures, Man seems

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<sup>28</sup> *Anthology of Australian Religious Poetry*, 83; *Collected Poems, 1961-2002*, 122.

<sup>29</sup> *Anthology of Australian Religious Poetry*, 86; *Collected Poems, 1961-2002*, 31.

<sup>30</sup> "Birds in their title work freeholds of straw," from *Poems against Economics* (1972), *Collected Poems, 1961-2002*, 57.

blind to this natural law. In "Mollusc,"<sup>31</sup> Murray celebrates the divine plan in the ordinary processes of nature demonstrated in the purposive activities of the humble snail. With five leading present participles, the silent presence and innocuous activity of this humble creature is affirmed and celebrated as if in present view. In the mollusc, he finds thirteen attributes to celebrate (each introduced litany-like with the preposition, "by..."). Its serenity in equipoise, its "toppling motion" is a "lifelong kiss," its passage over razor sharp edges is wondrous to behold, its place in a seemingly limitless evolutionary scale ("Oligocene" dates it from the third epoch of the Tertiary period of prehistory lasting fifteen million years) makes it a living but silent witness to the wonder and endurance of life on Earth. We can conclude that the mollusc's organic life shares in the creator's gift and models its evolutionary directionality; its humble life is a model for human salvation, which will surely come in living life true to one's nature.

Of course, salvation is recognised only in reflection and interpretation. It cannot be named, nay pursued, by blindly following natural laws. As Pieterse and van der Ven point out:

Human salvific activities are not to be founded, as to speak in nature, as through we can observe and identify them with the naked eye, without reflection. Just as human action is an interpretative category – we interpret behaviour (afterwards) as action – so is salvation. Without reflection there is no action, without reflection there is no salvation. We interpret behaviour as action, and only then – here we are analysing conceptually, what is experienced holistically – do we interpret this action, or some actions, as salvation.<sup>32</sup>

This act of existence or 'presence' can be interpreted or 'translated' in poetry. In his "The Meaning of Existence"<sup>33</sup> Murray really reads or interprets nature, or in his word 'translates' in this way when he writes: "Trees, planets, rivers, time / know nothing else. They express it [the meaning of existence] / moment by moment as the universe" (lines 4 - 5).

Similarly, he makes this 'translation' of presence in the natural world in "Mollusc" with a prayer to celebrate its activity: "May this and every snail sense itself an ornament [in the great] weave of presence" (16). In its life and activity in the microcosmic world, it "ornaments" the macro, not as mere decoration for added variety but in the more profound sense of re-presenting within itself and its work the whole structure of life on Earth. For Murray and his like-minded believers, in the immediacy of its presence and in its purposive activity, the mollusc reflects the activity and the creative Presence of the Creator and Sustainer of life itself. But it takes a reflective believer to realise that, and a poet to intimate it.

This same theme of a shared gift of presence is taken up in the theological reference in "the unceasing on-off / grace that attends their nearly every movement" in "Equanimity" (from *The People's Otherworld*, 1983).<sup>34</sup> This poem is a longer celebration of love and a berating of its substitutes. Again we see Murray exploring opposites. To be philosophically correct, the first verse distinguishes love from will, an important determinant for what follows, for the discussion ranges over many natural and human situations where love comes in many guises. Love is signalled in the "droughty light...

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<sup>31</sup> *Collected Poems, 1961-2002*, 361.

<sup>32</sup> Hendrik J. C. Pieterse and Johannes van der Ven, "Human Rights: A Channel for Salvation?" *Journal of Empirical Theology* 16.2 (2003): 55.

<sup>33</sup> *Collected Poems, 1961-2002*, 551.

<sup>34</sup> Lines 50-51, *Collected Poems, 1961-2002*, 178.

above carports" shining like the welcoming candle in the window. Love is implied, but missing in the "profoundly unwished / garble of a neighbours' quarrel" (line 18). Love is not found in the smog of daily news but is expressed in the eternal search for food by "hungry mountain birds, drifting in for food" (15). We are told there is no Acadia on earth, not even in a remote place of final happiness, for "there is only love" (22). Whatever the situation, guise or form, "human order has at heart / an equanimity" (24). This insight surely is that grace found in a trans-rational understanding of reality.<sup>35</sup> In this way, grace is reconceived as making its transcendent origin apparent by infusing believers with love about their destiny through it.

Indeed, we find that equanimity is a *habitus*, an enduring disposition and coherent set of values, where remorse can become creative, where identity comes down off its high horse. In fact, it heals, for "it is a continuous recovering moment" (33). In that "peace beneath effort, (even within effort)" (the "will" of earlier observations), "comes unpurchased lifelong plenishment" (39). The free gift of fulfilment comes with attaining equanimity. The poet says love and equanimity cannot be purchased, are often substituted for and bring most necessary healing for humans. Indeed this equanimity is the most desirable salvation-on-earth, and, surprisingly, is "as attainable as gravity." Christ spoke to people most often on its level, "all holiness springs from it," and it is a grace<sup>36</sup> that attends our every movement. It is indivisible and scarcely willed. We sometimes grasp that it "lights us from the incommensurable" (54). Equanimity combines perspectives, all foreground and all background, for it is "Of infinite detailed extent / like God's attention." (58). Furthermore, equanimity is a form of grace for it enables its initiates to glimpse "Where nothing is diminished by perspective."<sup>37</sup> The paradox is that, being mysteriously pervasive and non-visual, we seem unable to find its essential *locus*, and one we universally seek as humans.

That same mystic/poet's celebration of life occurs in "The Wilderness,"<sup>38</sup> an obituary tribute to his friend Peter Baden. "The Wilderness" revisits the wide Australian outback. In his own voice and penniless in Sydney, Murray muses about happier times since his university days when frivolous games "put spine into shapeless days" (27). The poem celebrates Peter's simple innocence and their transformative friendship when they met in the limitless time and space of the Great Australian Outback beyond Port Augusta where Peter worked as a mining engineer. These recollections convey well the appeal and dynamism of the silent plains, the burnt mountains, the glittering sky, the blind grey scrub and the dust devil. This recollection of their times together concludes to clinch the tribute to say that their games together "sustained me like water" in the desert. Such friendships recreate and sustain us, and their rituals bring us salvation through mediating such unconditional belonging.

Being autobiographical, the poem is a statement of his hard-won faith too. Wistful, nostalgic and even elegiac in mood, the poet connects his grief with cameo descriptions

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<sup>35</sup> Echoing our postmodern distrust of rationalism as our only source of knowing, I prefer this term to show the continuing dynamic interrelation between natural and any 'supernatural.' The term originates in Jeannine Thryreen-Mizingou, "Grace and Ethics in Contemporary American Poetry: Resituating the Other, the World and the Self," *Religion and Literature* 32.1 (2000): 68.

<sup>36</sup> This 'grace' could be defined as a celebration of an event, or an enactment to assist the experience of salvation. Grace is found in glimpses of the imagination and it expands potentials and expectations. Hence, we might ask: To what extent does poetry create contexts for and stimulate the experience of salvation? Clearly if it is celebratory and insightful, poetry is salvational in this sense.

<sup>37</sup> "Equanimity" line 59, *Collected Poems, 1961-2002*, 180.

<sup>38</sup> Murray, "The Vernacular Republic," 21.

and happy memories of life with Peter Barden. He resolves his grief on an optimistic note: the Outback offers a sense of the boundless in its infinite silence, sky and land. In his sixth stanza comes a one-line key to the reverie: he was sustained by and fascinated with "the *is-ful* and the *ah!-ness* of things" (33). Presumably now in recollection, they still sustain him. His faith in the gifts of friendship and creation were morale-sustaining gifts. Those simple facts of existence, so taken for granted then, are full of wonder even now. His friend's memory is surrounded with happier days when brewing tea.

That same significant sense of a silent place is celebrated in his celebrated poem, "Noonday axeman" (from *The Ilex Tree* 1965).<sup>39</sup> Here we hear the voice of the axeman, now the poet working on his land and reflecting on its heritage and his own bonds with it. A longer poem in twenty-one four-line verses by a poet now confidently finding his own voice, this simple narration of felling trees is interspersed with recollections specifically about the natural silence, which is considered Lawson-like to be a quality far superior to the clamour of city. The thematic words "silence" or "stillness" occur some twenty-five times in its mere eighty lines. First described is the benign silence or stillness of the bush itself, which then becomes the humanized silence of the land worked for generations; there is the ever-present stillness after labour, a concept which is furthered to become "the presence of silence," in fact "the silence of trees," a natural state which men foolishly fought against.

Furthermore, this perception conflates to become a conception of a "dreaming silence" for locating himself psychologically in the flow of time as well as geographically in his Bunya valley. His pioneering forefathers are said to have necessarily made "a human breach in the silence" in life until they passed from this silence to "into great silence" after death. Their silence becomes a touchstone for the rural man; others, unable to bear it, rush back to the cities in retreat. In this access to the eternal silence, life is viewed as a sacred site. The almost animistic silence becomes metonymic of the central Still point of creation. Salvation is glimpsed in such simple experiences of the numinous.

Others read this poem as a trope of negativity,<sup>40</sup> for arguing in the same way that negative theology is very wary of any claim to speak the veridical positive. The poem certainly accesses a description of a dearly felt conception, for clearly the bush even at noon rustles with its life. The poem is an attempt to deal with a condition of life, a quality of experience, or as an horizon of life's dimension, permitting an access to some infinity such as described in "The Wilderness." It might even be read as describing a deprivation of an ambient security that others need or as a qualitative waiting for fulfillment. Certainly, the silence he listens to is contingent upon the great silence his forefathers inhabited. Highly suggestive that this silence is desirable, the poem draws attention to the quality of silence in his homestead valley in an affirming way, approving of a final peace always possible at the last.

To close, he images his preferred life in that wonderful image of "walking knee-deep in ferns" (63), as rare freedom, intimate connection with nature, and a carefree belonging to the earth that has an uncluttered, unromantic, religious quality and appeal. Such an image infers a rescue from idle, and man-made noise, confusion, senselessness and impersonality. Walking in the ferns suggests it is possible for someone to enjoy a natural coherence with the natural environment, and to be honestly companionable with it. With the same natural simplicity, Murray yearns to rebuild a place where he draws physical and

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<sup>39</sup> Murray and Lehmann, *The Ilex Tree*, 31.

<sup>40</sup> Kane, *Australian Poetry*, 199.

spiritual sustenance: "Our croft, our Downs / our sober, shining land."<sup>41</sup> Salvation asserts a positive negativity that life here is good but that better is yet to come, for it prefigures and anticipates "a non violent dreamtime where no one living has been."<sup>42</sup>

In this third section of the discussion, "Nature, Directionality and Grace," we surveyed four poems, "Mollusc," "Equanimity," "The Wilderness" and "Noonday axeman" to demonstrate how being attuned with the natural environment is a desirable disposition for realising salvation. Nature's presence can be 'translated' and celebrated in poetry to access the numinous intelligence under-structuring existence. Murray certainly honours here Schillebeeckx's first anthropological constant of salvation,<sup>43</sup> which declares our embodied relationship with nature in the universe, a creation numinously infused with grace and presence, potentialities, directionality and optimism. Thus, the ritual of reading the poem is a means for a direct apprehension of the numinous, that perception about what is of sustaining value. In this way, Murray is able to access the sources of human salvation.

#### IV. GLORY, HUMOUR AND ART

Murray dedicates all his anthologies "To the glory of God" and in celebration of the ordinary, the accessible, the vernacular he has taken the Christmas scene for his celebration of glory. "Animal Nativity" is part of the *Presence: Translations from the Natural World* (1992) anthology.<sup>44</sup> In five short verses of four lines each, the Bethlehem stable scene of the birth of the Saviour is revisited realistically from the points of view of all its participants, even the non-human, as in an Ignatian meditation.

Technically, this short poem bears forth some revelations in form. Murray's use of capital letters is sparse and irregular, but closer inspection suggests that, when listed in reverse order, they spell out the acronym DESCENT, enwoven to encode the incarnational mystery of God descending to become human (Phil 2:8). Two key terms occur in each verse, highly metonymic in the Christian story: peace and girl (virgin), stable and manger, calf and lamb, snake and apple, crux and star. Paradoxically, Christ was no temporary "star" (in the sense of a self-styled cynosure) yet he was the centre of attention, the Reason for the event, the central Person and the explanatory Presence in that poor stable, Baby as explanation and inspiration, the extraordinary in the ordinary.

The Christian story grows its Christian mythology, which is a proto-narrative, a meta-text explaining all that follows it. Just as Homer's *Iliad* was such a defining epic of the Greek society, so is this manger scene the beginning of the greatest story ever told. This is indeed an "Iliad of peace" in contrast to that old legend of war, violence and domination. Murray's theme at the Saviour's birth could be called a *cosmotheandric*<sup>45</sup> event in affecting even non-human nature where all creatures great and small "feel vivid" at a result. They

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<sup>41</sup> Last verse "Laconics: The Forty Acres," *Collected Poems, 1961-2002*, 129. In *Ethnic Radio* (1977). See also Steven Matthews, *Les Murray* (Carlton South: Melbourne University Press, 2001), 6 when discussing the deep hurt at the way the seemingly simple facts of possession fuel the anger of injustice.

<sup>42</sup> Line 30, "On the Present Slaughter of Feral Animals," in *Subhuman Redneck Poems*, 42, and *Collected Poems, 1961-2002*, 408.

<sup>43</sup> Edward Schillebeeckx, *Christ: The Experience of Jesus as Lord* (New York: Crossroad, 1986), 733-743.

<sup>44</sup> Murray, *Collected Poems, 1961-2002*, 374.

<sup>45</sup> Raimon Panikkar's term for that world-divine-human view of reality that integrates these three irreducible dimensions, which constitute the real. In *From Alienation to Atonement*, ed. F. A. Eigo (Villanova: Villanova University Press, 1977), 89, and R. Panikkar, *Faith and Belief in Inter-Religious Dialogue: Some Principles* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press 1975), 83 and *passim*.

do not merely react salamander-like to externals but in an harmonious rhythm, they pulse more true to their natures, are true to themselves – becoming more fisherly, more goatily or more swallowly as a result of their participation there. In nature's adoration there, creation's salvation is promised and guaranteed as possible in the birth of this Saviour.

Like Chesterton's famed donkey humbled under the hosannas, the creatures witnessing the Saviour's nativity are granted appropriate perceptions about this youngling born in the stable before them, in terms appropriate to their own species. Swallows flit over a hatchling "turned human." Also true to their own natures, compliant cattle are content "that this calf must come in human form"(10). Even Robert Bruce's spiders were not given the some high wisdom as these, enough to "discern a [fellow] water-walker" (11). Normally restless "dogs crouch agog" when placed round the manger. Murray's slide into the surreal here is serious poetry to convey the miraculous and profound effect and significance in "Animal Nativity"; this advent of Presence is indeed a translation of old into new; nature is indeed in adoration when its Creator is set among them. Thus, St. Paul's *omnia omnibus* formula for evangelisation ("Be all things to all men," I Cor 9:22, 10:33) is well demonstrated here. The animals' participant position permits the poet to assume a surplus of description.

Since meaning is in the perception, humans receive the truth in revelatory events. They do not yet recognise it fully, but with their residual (but luckily truth-seeking) instinct it seems, they can "sense" that this newborn babe is *the* lamb, the *Agnus Dei*, "He who frees from the old poem"(13). This Child is identified as the Deliverer, the Saviour, and the Lamb who would be slain for the salvation of the world. This is the one who perfects the Law, who rewrites the Sinai Covenant in his own blood. His birth and his life will "get death forgiven" and bring restoration of the original compact of Eden, "put the apple back," in short, restore salvation.<sup>46</sup>

The poem's simple brevity belies its profound wisdom. Actions and events need translation into meanings, and this poem does indeed explicate faith by revealing theological meanings. Having surveyed this zoological hermeneutic round this Child, the poet now moves from creatures' perceptions to his own more generalized, impersonal voice, wherein he can read time's course and this Child's birth as one combined view of its significance. This advent of his Presence is indeed, it seems, a translation of old poetic icons into new. From manger to cross, from Star of Bethlehem to Son of God, this man's birth is "a crux of presence remembered as a star" (19-20). That crucial intersection of starving animals and human poverty becomes a paradigmatic icon for Christian service. In stressing the particulars, poetry can be seen to aver the general, to reveal mystery in the ordinary, and so again Murray has provided significant images of salvation-being-realised.

In this fourth section, "Glory, Humour and Art," we explored a pivotal translation for his incarnational faith, the birth of the Saviour of the World in "Animal Nativity." Again we see how triangulating various, before-now, unexpressed viewpoints yields comprehensiveness and indeed greater access to the numinous.

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<sup>46</sup> "Salvation is understood to be whatever is considered to be the end, goal, destination, or destiny of human kind." Panikkar, *Faith and Belief* (1975), 83. Through its holistic complementarity within the whole of reality, these animals could be said to witness that salvation being realized in this Birth.

## V. IMAGES OF PLENITUDE, MARRIAGE AND HOLIDAY: "TOO MERRY WITH FARMS"<sup>47</sup>

Salvation achieved is a state of plenitude, a final resolution of dialectics and the full explanation and fruit of pain. For salvation is a decisive turning point, the end stage of development, and its recapitulation. Murray's 'fullness' is not too rare nor is it injurious; it is the natural outgrowth of unfolding processes. Speaking about a house made of ten thousand bottles, in "The House of Four-X," he celebrates its magnified light and spaciousness; conjoining that fact to Christmas conviviality when the owner brings home his new bride to it, he remarks, "there must have been almost excess/.../of fullness, of wholeness."<sup>48</sup> That happy conjunction of holiday, marriage and architectural novelty images a wonderfully rich image of fullness.

Similarly, "The Warm Rain"<sup>49</sup> must surely be regarded as a wonderful patterning of images of refreshment, achievement and natural fulfilment. The arrival and effects of a fall of plenteous warm rain is described within the microcosm of the farm. The plural voice is likely to be the poet and his family's viewing the scene through the window as through a sepia-like frame of a 'forties still picture. Their apparent objectivity however rapidly becomes an unsaid involvement in the growing scene, as it becomes clear that rain is their farm's life-blood. In this very focus on what might be simply disregarded as a pleasantly ordinary diversion, the poem builds up a valid generality from the observed particularities, in the same way that Bernard Lonergan asserted true objectivity resides in true subjectivity. Murray here infers the representative value of particularities, for in this poem the world's macrocosm is imaged in these microscopic events happening round the farmhouse. A true appreciation of the whole order of nature starts in valuing the parts, since in Murray's coherent worldview, a Mendelbrot-like regular pattern underpins nature's wonderful diversity. It seems the worth of the whole resides in the accumulation and cohesion of the detail. Nature's gift lies in her cycles of refreshing rain.

The poem's worth lies beyond being an afternoon's entertainment or a series of clever observations; it lies in retelling a miracle. In eight verses of thirty-nine lines, the poet narrates the wonderful refreshment affecting everything, especially organic life from rain's effects. Various signs of its arrival structure the fulsome description. It is first perceived as "a subtle slant locating the light in air" in a wonderful conjunction of perception, activity and light. The next sign is the knotting of pepper-white dust into peppercorn puddles. The rain darkens leaves to lustre. The forest's canopy is gradually saturated until its leaves' dullness grows into sheen with vibrant colour as the rain does its cleansing work. Engaging parallels with road traffic vitalise the descriptions: the rain dissolves "the race way of rocket smoke behind cars," and the refreshing wetness makes lorries whiz, until "fixtures get cancelled." Finally, emergency workers' shovels are called out to work upon its excess abundance.

Then in the following night's TV reports, meteorological maps link this local event with the nation's overall weather, in patterns "like the Crab nebula." Their "borders swell over the continent and they compress the other / nations of the weather." The falls saturate everything: "crepe-myrtle trees heel," "every country dam brews" and "air and paddocks are swollen." In sympathetic fallacy, the ocean too pumps up and "explodes in gigantic cloak sleeves," as "the whole book of foam" opens disclosing the sea's foundations.

<sup>47</sup> Line 65, "Toward the Imminent Days," *Collected Poems, 1961-2002*, 39.

<sup>48</sup> Lines 22-24, "The House of Four-X" in *The Weatherboard Cathedral* (1969), 65-66, unfortunately not included in *Collected Poems, 1961-2002*.

<sup>49</sup> *Subhuman Redneck Poems*, 93; *Collected Poems, 1961-2002*, 442.

The poet's voice returns in conclusion to relativise the humans' place in nature's dynamic artistry to remind us we are but insignificant 'chirpings.' Humans might choose to remember this event of the downpour by "hiding the warm rain back inside our clothes" or, if less spiritually aware, take it for granted; however, their views have no effect upon its capacity to progress the season's growth wherein previously "grey trees strip bright salmon."

It seems the rain's life-giving plenitude replaces notional possibility with sure continuity, and now reaffirmed, humans attuned to its mystery do learn a wonderful humility within its natural laws. Readers find in this poem to be another reassertion of Murray's paradigm of a rural Acadia, and another wonderful demonstration of the divine design for creation. Unfortunately again, in choice lies salvation for some either lose or learn from its forty lines: the forty days and forty night of Noah's flood were a lesson to those faithfully on-board and destruction for the wicked world focused on city mores.

In another celebration of plenitude, a wedding is a powerful and accessible image of salvation. In pledging their troth, the bride and groom image the eternal covenant Yahweh made with his chosen people. In their solemn promise, they give themselves selflessly and singularly to one another in fidelity as a free gift of their love. The wedding day itself bears forth the beauty and romance of their love in a prelude and model of the marriage through the years to follow. A wedding promise structures something basic about the future: that the partners will be together through thick and thin, for better or for worse for over some fifty years to follow.<sup>50</sup> The marriage vows affirm the pattern of their lives as an image of God's eternity of love. At the basis of their contract for the duration of the partners' lives, marriage locates love's centrality and heralds its superiority as the primary image and powerful model for society as a whole. For this reason alone, it is sufficient that their wedding promise has the divine blessing upon it.

Appropriately, Murray's poem "Toward the Imminent Days"<sup>51</sup> is an epithalamium<sup>52</sup> where he celebrates his friends' marriage and wishes them recurring images of joy. It becomes a prayer to pour out blessings plenteously upon them. Appropriately, it concludes with his gift: "For your wedding I wish you the frequent image of farms" (183). This should not be understood as a mandate to acquire many farming properties, but that he wishes his friends Geoff and Sally Lehmann<sup>53</sup> the myriad joys of country life. That is the constant joy he celebrates here, for he is himself "too merry with farms." The poem then becomes an occasion for a wonderful celebration of farming life and faith, liberty and hope, and an ever-fertile nature in the mid North Coast countryside.<sup>54</sup>

In seven rather extended verses running to 183 lines, Murray reflects on a wide range of related emotions: the meaning of the wedding day itself, the seasonal gossip at the advent of spring, dancing and singing, the rich dark earth and the soil's promise,

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<sup>50</sup> I wrote this appreciation after singing at a wedding at the historic St. Mary's Kangaroo Point on 5 July 2003, and acknowledge this comment from the pastor's address to the couple.

<sup>51</sup> *Collected Poems, 1961-2002*, 37-43.

<sup>52</sup> Although Edmund Spenser's celebrated "Epithalamion" (1595), written to celebrate his own marriage (a 'wedding song' of wedding joy and rustic solace) runs to 433 lines, Murray's poem echoes rustic sentiments and broadly follows the same poetic form. In Allison, Burrows, Blake *et al.*, *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (New York and London: W.M. Norton, 1983), 138-146.

<sup>53</sup> Alexander notes it was written in July 1969 upon Lehmann's marriage to Sally McInerney. Alexander, *A Life in Progress*, 151.

<sup>54</sup> Expressed as "He lives on forty acres . . . / He knows the map of Earth's fertile soils" line 10 in his tribute to their autistic son, "It Allows a Portrait in Line-Scan at Fifteen," *Subhuman Redneck Poems*, 49 and *Collected Poems, 1961-2002*, 412.

happiness itself: "I am deep in butter-thick native broom / wading, sky-happy, a . . . drover of bees" (61-62); the significance and beneficence of marriage; the serenity of country life in "the teapot of calm" (72); a wish to instil hope in youth; a happy ending in a typical day's work of taming a Jersey bull; the continuity of marriages and families into eternity "the voyage of families... into Paradise continually" (169-170); and the consolations of memory, "the heavenly faculty"(174). Rich in local history, rural imagery and Christian hope, this song in praise of marriage, family and country life must stand long and strong as a powerful testament to the worth of Murray's own chosen life-style among his own people there.

The occasion of his friends' marriage prompts the poet to think of the progress of time and how it shapes the future: "I think of a day too great for a calendar numbers / that... grows like a buried moon" (27-8). Their future life together images a salvation already begun in the marriage and beginning to be realised in the here and now, into "the imminent days" (title, 48, 49). He prays that their marriage will grow to flourish, from crescent to full moon in its due course "swelling through the horizons / beyond September" (30). The continuity and optimism of the institution of marriage, he suggests, addresses the ills of present times: for example, of his aunt and uncle's marriage he observes; "The depth of this marriage will heal the twentieth century" (96). In fact, he surmises, our works do shape the future, for farming is a fruit of marriage wherein the fathoms of fields hold without effort "our human mark" the longest, and will sustain "the crystal centuries to come" (60). Finally he leaves the festivities very happy, "full of a lasting complicity about the life of this world" (181), no doubt now even more surely reassured of his faith-filled vision for life's betterment and eventual happiness in this shared secret about finding happiness in marriage. For overcoming life's *longeurs* and despair, bringing certainty in its contract of unconditional love, and healing the temporary breaches of everyday life, marriage here comes to be a primary image of salvation.

Since in the country family ties bind farmers into dynasties or "Houses," Murray praises his hosts to be "good friends are blood relations that you choose" (5). Like the indissoluble marriage bond, their friendship is the ultimate security in life. On this point, he suggests the institution of marriage will save youth from their restless, wasteful daring, and that incidentally it will also keep them on the land by preventing them being called up in the national conscription for Vietnam then in progress:

young men leap rivers and, lounging in grasses threaten  
the smaller brick towns, they long for a splendid alert  
Only marriage will save them. (40-42)

Marriage brings a sole salvation, for it is a unique rescue and the reliable fixed point in the flux and foolishness of this modern world.

In stanza 5, he observes children his cousins "yarding up fresh milkers" (102); they are naturals at it apparently. The poet is at a loss to find a suitable salutary anecdote to deflect the hired boy's hopeful inquiries about city life where life needs a "merciless cunning" in contrast to the country where health and freedom are granted everywhere. Children are naturally curious about what is beyond them, but he muses their youth is better focused than wasted. In an echo of Jesus' tense injunction, "Consider the lilies of the field!" (Matt 8:28) and its message of simplicity and trust, Murray begins a simple story of caution with "consider the turkeys . . ." for city society today requires more than the boy can quickly learn to survive there. It seems a tall amusing bush story is a better deterrent to his enquiry than the painful trial of city reality. Stanza 6 supplies such a wild

bush narrative to defuse his inquiries; its happy ending is that man and bull return home linked "supporting one another." (155).

Murray's culminating last verse reflects on "the voyage of families" through the years and how the remotest generations influence the present. The life of this world is indeed rich in meaning and significance, once one is very aware of one's time and place coordinates within interlocking marriages and histories. Surely, it is inferred, that rich knowledge is a salvation not to be missed or despised. Living in a valley farmed by generations, in the trusting embrace of a living community of farmers, and subsisting on the work of human hands and the produce of one's own fields, one cannot but be "too merry with farms." No wonder then that his marriage gift to Sally and Geoff Lehmann is his on-going wish that they enjoy "the frequent images of farms." It is such a shame the friendship broke down later over an unfortunate misunderstanding with Geoffrey.

Our final poem similarly is a similar celebration of the natural world at a significant time. Murray is well aware of dualism and dialectics in outlooks, in society and in his own worldview. His own individual stance has led to a rocky critical reception. To remedy growing divisions, he does show a profound concern for ideas of 'convergence,' Murray's word for a hoped-for integration or fusion of Australia's three main cultures, the Aboriginal the rural and the urban. His sympathetic translation of Aboriginal culture reaches a peak in his long poem, "The Buladelah-Taree Holiday Song Cycle,"<sup>55</sup> a recasting of an Aboriginal poetic mode illustrating harmony when people come together when on holiday, in those "blessed moments when power and ideology are absent."<sup>56</sup> It celebrates the power of history and memory and significant events recalled for meaning today.

As a theological term, salvation has its own historical and cultural provenance as a return to the Garden, a restoration of all that was lost in Eden: in its freedom from strife, fear and worry, a liberty not to work for survival, and universal harmony, peace and contentment. Thus, there is commonly a close connection in the cultural understanding of salvation in the link between feasting and holiday. Murray's 1976 innovation, "The Buladelah-Taree Holiday Song Cycle"<sup>57</sup> is such a portrayal in its courageous and successful attempt to reconnect Australia's three cultures, the Aboriginal, the rural and the urban, with our humanity's celebration of life and relationships that occurs in going on holidays. When people are on holiday, they are most truly themselves, at liberty to do what pleases, feasting and socializing outside the constrictions of ordinary life. Holiday is extraordinary time, earned time, a long awaited-for time for rest, refreshment and relaxation. It is often a time for reassessment of the self and one's path through life. Our holidays pre-echo the one great Holiday that heaven presages. On holiday, one is surrounded by one's family and friends, banqueting at leisure and at one with one's environment. When on holiday, one can more truly appreciate the freedom and pleasure to "walk knee deep in ferns,"<sup>58</sup> or as he puts it in this poem, at ease "sitting down near ferns."<sup>59</sup> Murray's poem then requires our attention as a celebration of all that holiday suggests and brings. Holiday is a powerful image of salvation achieved.

Murray's recent biographer, Peter F. Alexander, notes approvingly how in this poem, "Murray focused on the annual holiday migration of families to the bush or the sea, 'going

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<sup>55</sup> *Collected Poems, 1961-2002*, 137f.

<sup>56</sup> Les Murray, *Persistence in Folly* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1984), 24.

<sup>57</sup> Les Murray, *Les Murray: Collected Poems* (North Ryde, NSW: Angus and Robertson, 1976, 1991), 122-130. He refers to the Moon-Bone cycle in "The Vernacular Republic" in *A Working Forest*, 118.

<sup>58</sup> "Noonday axeman" line 6, *Collected Poems, 1961-2002*, 3.

<sup>59</sup> Verse 1, line 13, *Collected Poems, 1961-2002*, 123.

back to their ancestral places of a kind of unacknowledged spiritual walkabout,' or as he put it, 'looking for their country in order to draw sustenance from it. Or newcomers looking for the real Australia.'"<sup>60</sup> He notes that Murray wrote it in the genre of the song cycle he had read and admired in Ronald M. Berndt's translations of the Wonguri-Mandjikai Moon-Bone Cycle of poems from Arnhem Land.<sup>61</sup> Always on the lookout for opportunities to find convergence for Australia's three cultures, Murray wrote this poem in thirteen sections, the same number as in the Moon-Bone cycle despite the likely accusations of cultural arrogance, disrespect or sheer ignorance of Aboriginal cultural sensitivities from his critics. In effect though, the poem was received very well indeed, more so overseas than at home. This poem shows Murray's refusal to accept cultural apartheid, in his ready appropriation of an already existing literary form to new purposes, although ones not foreign to Aboriginal spirituality, for the term 'holiday' shifts seamlessly to the theological reference, Holiday. Metaphorically, the poem recapitulates the search back to ancestral sites and the universal search for life's meaning.

The poem's thirteen verses each of about thirteen lines plot the advent, progress and effects of holiday on people in a rural landscape. Not surprisingly, that landscape centres on Murray's own valley at Bunya on the central North coast of New South Wales and the region round the Manning River. Each verse has a focus: people eating and anticipating the holiday with recollections of local matters to do with their destination; the queue of cars with "fumes of fun" crawling through the landscape; their arrival and checking for changes; the birds "always out there" and always interesting; the ritual pilgrimage to the graves of the family members; the activities of snakes, dogs and toddlers; the children innocently at play on holiday; the singing mosquitoes with humans who dance to their song; the world of surfers at play like warriors; the foraging ibis; the abandoned 'fruit trees of the Grandmothers' reminiscent of the pristine Garden; the sun and the storm, and finally the evanescent stars invoke some intimations of continuity and immortality. Full of variety, stimulating word play and consistent optimism, the poem celebrates the details of reality and explores the shadows of significance for them and for the poet.

The poem assumes a universal relevance in its Dylan Thomas-like focus on variety and local particulars. The calls of children at play, the fun-filled cries of the rosellas, heron, and magpie, the 'little socket noises' of the ibis, and the purificatory deluge of an afternoon storm are some aural images of a landscape reminiscent of an Eden. The setting is tactile, vibrant, lively and intensely happy. It is an enhanced environment, as occurred to him on a visit to Anzac Cove, where it seemed the scent of salvation is rosemary, for remembrance:

The Day of our peace will need a native  
herb that out-savours rosemary.<sup>62</sup>

This song cycle depicts variety, plenty and abundance and the ordered workings of a natural landscape, and more significantly, peace among families. The poem is a wonderful celebration of an Australian icon, the annual holiday, and translates it to salvational status.

"The Buladelah-Taree Holiday Song Cycle" features many proper name references, tying its theme to a familiar locality. "Naming implies respect"<sup>63</sup> We hear of Legge's Lake, the Old Timber Wharf, Pitt Street, the Myall river, the North Coast, O'Sullivan's Gap,

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<sup>60</sup> Alexander, *Les Murray: A Life in Progress*, 176.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Verse 15, lines 3-4 of "Visiting Anzac in the Year of Metrication." *Collected Poems* (1991), 108.

<sup>63</sup> Murray, "Eric Rolls and the Golden Disobedience," *A Working Forest*, 164.

Wootton, Coolongolook, the Wang Wauk River, the Wallamba dam, the town of Nahiab, the forests of Kiwarrak, Tuncurry and Forster, Wingham, Taree, Waukivory and the Manning River. Familiarity is engendered with references and associations recalled in Deer's Hill, Rail Fence, the place of Slab Chimney, Dingo Trap, the place of the Cowbails, the Broadwater along the lake, the place of the Seagrass, and the Steep Country. Sleeper Dump, Tallowwoods, the places of the Stinging Tree and Staghorn Fern, the paddocks round Darawank, the Boolambayte pasture flat are filled with associations as are the poet's own little Germany, Firefly Creek and Bunya. Geographical features like Burrell Creek, the place of Coal Oil Creek and the Crockery, the Old Bar, Manning Point, Middle Brother, Cape Hawke, Seal Rocks, and Mounts George, Tipperary, Krumbach, and Bulby marker the coordinates of local history, shared pleasure, local mythology and evocative remembrance. This string of place names adds a mythical ring to the poem, as it would in an *Iliad*. They hold local sacred associations for the holidaymakers returning to ancestral lands. The spirits of place are alive and strong in this song cycle, as they would be in the Moon-Bone original it imitates.

That other critical coordinate, time, "in the time of the Watermelons, and of the Holiday," is significant too for ritual and is tied to place. Memory builds on place and such opportunity-time, or *kairos*, as these happy events of social ritual bear religious significance. The poem's texture is rich in salvational themes for recognizing the initial *grace* of the gift of creation, for *disposing* the holidaymakers in the abundant summer environment towards change,<sup>64</sup> and for invoking justification *and renewal* of their inner selves as they peel off the old year's dialectics and put on the optimism of transformation. The summer cycle triggers an internalisation in each and every element of the system, both human and organic, within the seasonal movement of the natural system as a whole.

In this song-cycle, new meanings are regenerated, annual rituals are honoured, and the process of the reconfiguration, indeed a transformation of relationships, is carried out. Resistant to stasis and stagnation, the holidaymakers in their willing submission to annual change could be said to image Christian believers, the leaven in humanity who is *primed for transformation*. For, in that search for *salus* (health and salvation), Christians respond in the *kairos* with the hope of the *eschaton*, capitalized here to infer the eternal Holiday. In the recurring ritual of holiday, God's righteousness is thus operative *in* the world transforming it. In "The Buladelah-Taree Holiday Song Cycle" then, grace, redemption and salvation are dramatised as being accessible, operative in ordinary life, and efficiently effective sacraments of salvation being won already.

## VI. CONCLUSIONS

God is "a mighty Saviour," who grants "a knowledge of salvation." (Luke 1:69, 77). The Good News is a gift which brings: "the day of salvation," a *dies salutaris*, the day of the initiation (II Cor 6:2a, b). It is a daily gift of newness. In this way St. Paul reminds readers that salvation can be accessed and is already begun in the here and now. Thus, a poet finds enhanced awareness in the events of life. Murray finds it is serious to be with humans, as his poetry across the years, 1965-1992, surveyed here shows. For the poet, ordinary events are mysterious and revelatory. "Mollusc" celebrates right function and relationships in the natural world; "Equanimity" celebrates the universal right to grace in

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<sup>64</sup> Following the traditional stages of salvation as outlined by A. J. Maas in "Salvation" in *The Catholic Encyclopaedia Volume XIII* (Robert Appleton Company, 1912), <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/13407a.htm>, accessed 27 June 2003.

the human world. In the ironic plainness of "Animal Nativity," the epic Christian story began its cosmic impact on the human and natural world. To such a seer, ordinary experience is shot through with the fire of divinity, or as Judith Wright observed, life is: "The play of opposites, their interpenetration – there's the reality, the fission and the fusion."<sup>65</sup>

Murray's now memorable "The Buladelah-Taree Holiday Song Cycle" is a wonderful celebration of the theme of convergence, wherein families and neighbours reunite in the annual rituals of holidaymaking. Their interactions with one another and with the abundant earth are surely chiasmic<sup>66</sup> of the lost Eden and the final liberation promised in Christ. Here the ordinary betokens the extraordinary and anticipates it when everyone is in his own ancestral environment, is at ease and in harmony with the earth. Thus, in his poetry, Murray's affirmative stance is particularly appealing whereby his Christian anthropology permits a reintegration of sacred and mundane through poetic access to the numinous. In it, his Christian values can be seen as glittering eyes in the peacock's arrayed plumage of life experience, materially part of the panoply *structuring* the display by their mysterious action, as *lending intensity* as important foci or nodes for its interpretation, and as evaluative *criteria* of its capacity for bringing human happiness and salvation.

Murray's embedded values are both descriptive of and prescriptive in his Christian identity. His positive attitudes, acute observations and insights, his affirmations of reflected-upon experience, and his pervasive sense of meaning and purpose in experience and the natural creation are all celebrated by readers far and wide to be characteristic of a hope-filled outlook. Kane puts it well:

In his articulations of the unremarkable quality of the numinous, Murray often writes with such wit, élan and verbal facility that the reader is momentarily amazed... This affirmative stance is particularly important in the poems, which thematize cultural convergence.<sup>67</sup>

Thus, Murray's *Otherworld* may have the necessary generality of "a blizzarding idea" and "the blue dimensionlessness of an idea" but also it eminently well contextualizes the particularities of our segmented lives as lived experiences within a salvational journey. Murray shows that in the wider, and possibly divine domain beyond work and ideology, freedom, joy and faith are superbly and satisfyingly surprises in store for receptive humans. Convergence, plenitude, fulfilment and harmony recur thematically in his work. In his images of liberation, transformation and rescue generated in the secular society, scenes of Man in harmonious relationship with his environment feature strongly.

Murray's famed "An Absolutely Ordinary Rainbow" shows the vulnerable man, fully freed from convention, now under public scrutiny. This figure of the weeping man is an excellent chiasm of the divine in the ordinary. The mollusc's supremely serene organic life foreshadows a Christian's happiness, for it both shares in the web of life and models its natural evolutionary directionality to completion. Equanimity is a form of "grace" for it enables its initiates to glimpse "Where nothing is diminished by perspective." Through it, grace is reconceived as making its transcendent origin apparent by infusing believers with love about their destiny in this earthly life. In "The Wilderness" Murray muses about happier times when frivolous games "put spine into shapeless days." This poem celebrates simple innocence and a transformative friendship when Les and Peter met in the limitless

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<sup>65</sup> Judith Wright, "Patterns" lines 1-8, from *The Shadow of Fire* (1985), *Collected Poems* (1994), 426.

<sup>66</sup> Redolent of that happy intersection of human and divine harmony experienced in the Garden of Eden narrative (Gen 2-3).

<sup>67</sup> Kane, *Australian Poetry*, 194.

time and space of the Great Australian Outback. With the appeal and dynamism of the silent plains, the burnt mountains, the glittering sky, the blind grey scrub and the dust-devil when their games together "sustained me like water" in the desert, the poem describes a personal salvation experience. In the imagery of a weeping man, the serene snail and friendships in youth, Murray captures images of salvation eminently well.

In "Poetry and Religion," Murray argues that God is immanent in creation, and can sometimes be sensed in the numinous. In "Towards Imminent Days" he images his preferred life, "walking knee-deep in ferns," as freedom, connection with nature, and belonging to the earth. He presages happiness itself: "*I am deep in butter-thick native broom / wading, sky-happy, a... drover of bees.*"<sup>68</sup> Such images describe a rescue from idle, and man-made noise, confusion, senselessness, violence and impersonality.

"Animal Nativity" shows that the birth of the Saviour at Bethlehem was a *revolutionary* event affecting even non-human nature by which all creatures pulse more truly to their natures, are true to themselves as a result. Salvation is promised and guaranteed as possible in the birth of creation's Saviour. Lastly, "Toward Imminent Days" celebrates marriage and the fertile country as wonderful images of God's love and salvation. Overall then, Murray's 'substantial inspired imaginings' exemplify Schillebeeckx's first anthropological constant of salvation, which declares our embodied relationship with nature in the universe, a creation infused with grace and presence.

Our discussion has identified significant themes for appreciating salvation from secular poetic sources. First, salvation was recognized as being realised in human rituals like shared meals, companionship, marriages and holidays together. In its "refusal of relegation" (*Euchre*) and denial of substitutes, salvation is seen as the "continuous recovering moment" (*Equanimity*) and demonstrated in humankind's yearning for 'eternity pills.' Second, salvation is achieved in seeing the positives in the negatives, in overcoming and transforming lacks, shortcomings, ignorance and malice. In critical resistance to negative experiences, the Christian shares in that Otherworld, a "mystery that confers reality" learning through the path of negation and suffering about "a non violent dreamtime." In accepting the silences, enduring the pain and in productive waiting, the Christian's critical resistance to injustice, inadequacy and negatives of all kinds, he or she transforms them into experiences of salvation being realised.

Third, through an exploration of 'contrast experiences,' believers may gain access to the real structure of existence, in gaining greater perspective from reflecting upon those intensive negative experiences. Furthermore, salvation also appears as glory, humour and Art," both "To the glory of God" (Dedication) and when "dogs crouch agog" (*Animal Nativity*). In irony, creativity and significant event, the transcendent is received in responding to the numinous. Unexpectedly in the many and various incidents, circumstances and exigencies of life, we access the numinous, we "get death forgiven" (*Nativity*), for experiencing them through the memory of the Saviour our Lord who suffered and died for humankind becomes an "afterlife on earth" (*Idyll*). The forgiveness, rescue and redemption he won is there realised, is felt, in healing and is "of infinite detailed extent like God's attention" (*Equanimity*).

In fact, salvation is already enjoyed in its pre-eminent experiences depicted in poetic images, like "Marriage and Holiday" when one is "walking knee-deep in ferns" (*Noonday*), wading "deep in butter-thick native broom" or "sitting down near ferns" (*Buladelah*) and indeed when "too merry with farms" (*Imminent*). In these poems' rich images of his underlying value framework, Murray's "inspired imaginings" do grant us an inspired

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<sup>68</sup> "Toward Imminent Days," lines 61-62, *Collected Poems, 1961-2002*, 39.

access to a spirituality of salvation in terms of life experiences, memories and values. They reminds us of those anthropological constants that do structure a fulfilled life.

So we may fairly conclude that Murray's poetry is not moral or didactic but its illuminative primary expressions read earthly reality for its divine significance. It does not strive to extol or persuade or impose, but more generously to illuminate, to shed light upon ambiguities, human helplessness or ignorance so as to enhance the positives that life can bring. Like life, his "poems require us to complete them."<sup>69</sup>

Murray's poetry celebrates an incarnational faith based on the life of the body ("I am only interested in a God who is embodied"),<sup>70</sup> and so events and life experience are to be valued markers on one's spiritual journey. He says we "live by touches"<sup>71</sup> and so it is not surprising in his poetry to find ready contiguities with the divine, touches with belief, brief contacts with an Otherworld framework of creation and divine love. He finds in rituals some earthly continuities (and negatives in real discontinuities at times).

Such experiences recorded in his poetry reveal his secret for discerning continuity and meaning, a faith-valuing framework underlies experience. That faith is dynamic and endless, alert to broad possibilities within a "blue dimensionlessness as an ideal."<sup>72</sup> Whispers of the sacred and hints of heaven suffuse his poems. Consequently Murray's poetry is best read from within the interpretative community of faith. More fully read in this social context, his "substantial inspired imaginings"<sup>73</sup> can be seen as illuminatory sallies into salvation.

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<sup>69</sup> Quoted at Regent's Park College book signing (October 2000), [http://www.rpc.ox.ac.uk/rn/rn\\_01\\_03.htm#windows-link](http://www.rpc.ox.ac.uk/rn/rn_01_03.htm#windows-link), accessed 25 March 2003.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Line 40, "The Idyll Wheel," in *Collected Poems, 1961-2002*, 301.

<sup>72</sup> "The Idyll Wheel," line 9, *Collected Poems, 1961-2002*, 300.

<sup>73</sup> Cited in Kane, *Australian Poetry*, 189.