

# Les Murray's Black Dog and Sunflowers

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Les Murray, Australia's leading contemporary poet, has in recent years put on record the 'dark side' of human existence in a way that is both harrowing and creative. On the one hand, his poetry and prose from the late 1980s has depicted his own personal breakdown. On the other hand – and amazingly at the same time – he was writing poems of spiritual affirmation, his 'presence' poems, poems which in realistic and naturalistic terms glorify Nature through the poet's awareness of a world that is good.

First, Murray's 'black dog'. It was a term he took from Winston Churchill who used it to refer to his own severe depression. Murray notes that the condition he calls his 'black dog' has been known for centuries: medieval demonologies list it, and Goethe's *Faust* has Mephistopheles acting it out in disguise. What happened with Murray was that from the late 1980s he began to suffer a long drawn-out breakdown, leading to a physical collapse and near-death experience from a liver abscess in 1996. Emergency surgery and a dramatic hundred kilometre dash from Taree to Newcastle made national and international news, and Murray found himself the centre of widespread attention and expressions of admiration and affection. The 'black dog', as if miraculously, disappeared with the trauma.

Murray wrote about his experiences in *Killing the Black Dog*.<sup>1</sup> It is a book of prose followed by poems, and what is remarkable about it is not so much the quality of the writing as the way it fed into a more general creativity for him at this period. *Fredy Neptune*, a long verse- or poem- novel, was published in 1998;<sup>2</sup> and since then at least three volumes of poetry have appeared in Australia and overseas. When set alongside the account Murray gives of his depression, his productivity on recovering from his illness is something worth pondering over. But even more remarkable, in retrospect, was that while Murray was in the worst of his spells of depression, he found a way of reaching out beyond himself to Nature and to expressions of 'interest' in creaturely things that acted as a kind of saving grace for himself and his writing.

In *Les Murray: A Life in Progress*, Peter Alexander, Murray's biographer, adds graphic detail of the personal difficulties the poet

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<sup>1</sup> Les Murray, *Killing the Black Dog: Essays and Poems*, (Leichhardt, 1997).

<sup>2</sup> Les Murray, *Fredy Neptune*, (Sydney, 1998).

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was having during these years.<sup>1</sup> In chapters such as 'The Power of the Dog' and 'Fighting the Black Dog', Alexander points to the personal and social problems Murray was experiencing at this time. In 1985 Murray had returned from Sydney to his mid north coast farming community to live, only to find that old memories were haunting him.

Recollections of his mother's death, which he had after thirty years finally been able to tell in poetry, were still hurting him. He blamed himself and the difficulty his mother went through at the time of his birth for her later loss of health. He had also become grossly overweight himself. His son Alex was growing up autistic. Sadly, too, his visit to the Taree High School and meeting old classmates triggered off a collapse for him in recollecting adolescent mockery and persecution. But beyond these personal and local difficulties there were numerous public wrangles and controversies in which Murray was involved. He took unpopular stands in relation to the way the Literature Board funded writers, and his views on the Aids question brought him into fierce arguments.

When asked by Peter Alexander if he believed in Hell, Murray replied soberly: 'I've been there. I've had depression. There is nothing worse. You know, when your brain boils in your head. Misery beyond all bloody description. It's fearsome and you don't deserve any of it.'<sup>2</sup> Or, as Murray wrote in *Killing the Black Dog*:

Every day, though, sometimes more than once a day, sometimes all day, a coppery taste in my mouth, which I termed intense insipidity, heralded a session of helpless, bottomless misery in which I would lie curled in a foetal position on the sofa with tears leaking from my eyes, my brain boiling with the confusion of stuff not worth calling thought or imagery: it was more like shredded mental kelp marinated in pure pain. During and after such attacks, I would be prostrate with inertia, as if all my energy had gone into a black hole<sup>3</sup>

There is something both raw and remote in the way Murray speaks about his depression. Other writers in the twentieth century have spoken of depression from the inside in more dramatic ways. The Russian poets under Stalin such as Mandelstam, Akhmatova and

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<sup>1</sup> Peter F. Alexander, *Les Murray A Life in Progress*, (South Melbourne, 2000).

<sup>2</sup> Alexander, *op cit*, p229.

<sup>3</sup> Murray, *op cit* (1997), p6.

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Pasternak, and the Americans Lowell, Berryman, Plath and Sexton, have internalised with clear-eyed understandings their vulnerabilities and suicidal tendencies. Few Australian writers venture into this intense subjectivity; a kind of stoicism makes them keep their distance. Murray is a strong example of this reserve, which confronts and resists the material in its awkward and embarrassing pressures. He keeps his distance and a certain detachment when he writes of his traumas. As in 'Corniche', one of the best of the poems in *Killing the Black Dog*:

I work all day and hardly drink at all.  
I can reach down and feel if I'm depressed.  
I adore the Creator because I made myself  
and a few times a week a wire jags in my chest.  
The first time, I'd been coming apart all year,  
weeping, incoherent; cigars had given me up;  
any road around a cliff edge I'd whimper along in low gear  
then: cardiac horror.  
Masking my pulse's calm lub-dub.  
It was the victim-sickness.  
Adrenalin howling in my head, the black dog was my brain.  
Come to drown me in my breath was energy's black hole,  
depression, compere of the predawn show when, returned from a  
pee, you stew and welter in your death<sup>1</sup>

'Corniche' has a cartoon-like clarity. But what it lacks in dramatic intensity it gains in keeping the poet open to more general reflections upon his illness. It allows Murray to move on from the world of his own ego to the wider subject of the history of suffering in the modern world, which is what he has done in *Fredy Neptune*, a book that has won international attention and placed him alongside Derek Walcott and Seamus Heaney among modern poets, a ranking of Nobel Prize potential.

*Fredy Neptune* follows the fortunes of Fredy Boettcher, a German-Australian, who becomes the observer of some of the great catastrophes of the twentieth century. Witnessing the massacre of Armenian women in 1918, he loses all sense of feeling and becomes a vantage point for Murray's survey of human atrocities in World War II and Hiroshima as well as experiences in the United States. Murray sees German experience as central, yet wisely links

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<sup>1</sup> Murray, *op cit* (1997), p34.

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Australia into his story, since during World War I Germans were persecuted here. As he states his subject himself:

It is the story of the Twentieth Century, it is the big story, the fate of the Germans and the fate they then visited on others. I'm telling it from way out on the periphery. A man who was in the German orbit but was well out towards the edge and was occasionally spun in towards the centre a bit and spun off again and had this intricate destiny of his own<sup>1</sup>

Murray sees almost a conspiracy of silence about mass killings. Writing to friends in 1994, he exclaims

[t]hat the world keeps rather determinedly quiet about e.g. 7 million Ukrainians, perhaps 10 million Russian small farmers, millions of Chinese under Japan and Mao. And perhaps 4-5 million Indians at Partition, and the Armenians, and the native Formosans etc etc. We may need a term besides genocide, for Very Big Slaughters that aren't primarily racial. A larger term that includes genocide. Myriocide? Democide?<sup>2</sup>

In *The Poetry of Les Murray: Critical Essays* (2001), a number of Danish scholars are drawn to respond to this vision of blackness which Murray is offering. Sympathetic to, but not uncritical of, this 'big, dangerous, baggy' poem with its unfeeling narrator who yet possesses immense physical strength, writers such as Line Henriksen find Murray's position on suffering peculiar and challenging. Far from passing judgment on the persecutors, Murray seems committed to offering forgiveness to the victims. In Murray's reading it is on the forgiveness of the witness, the anti-heroic sailor who becomes a strongman against his will and longs for the return of vulnerability, that healing depends.<sup>3</sup>

Peter Alexander pursues this point directly with Murray in the conclusion of his biography, observing how 'the poem ends with an extraordinary realisation that he must forgive the innocent,

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<sup>1</sup> Alexander, *op cit*, p290.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, pp291-2.

<sup>3</sup> Laurie Hergenhan and Bruce Clunies Ross, (eds) *The Poetry of Les Murray: Critical Essays*, A Special Issue of Australian Literary Studies, Vol. 20, No. 2, (St Lucia, Queensland, 2001) pp106-7.

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forgive those whose suffering he had on his conscience'.<sup>1</sup> Murray's response was to remark:

My contribution to religious thought has been that God has to share in our disaster and to be punished for what had been done. To take on our nature including the dreadful things we do to each other ... If a great deal of pain is involved – the pain of the innocent – then He who provided the opportunity for it to happen has some responsibility for it as well.<sup>2</sup>

Murray admitted to Alexander 'that this erosion of God's righteousness was close to heresy' ('It skates along the edge'), but he defended it. 'God has to be punished by humans not least because He alone can bear the punishment'.<sup>3</sup>

It is a moot point whether the doctrinal issue is as important to Murray as the human one. It is possible that he is more concerned with Fredy Boettcher's absence of feeling as his subject. 'Having forgiven Aborigines, Jews and women...' Alexander writes, 'Fredy is told to forgive God', and goes on to quote from the poem:

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,  
And my prayer was prayed and sent, already as I chose it.<sup>4</sup>

There is something wilful in the way Murray gets himself into these moral dilemmas, and equally in the way he gets himself out of them. He seems to emerge out of and through the 'dark side' almost by a sheer act of will. It seems a minor moment of insight in *Fredy Neptune*, but it is apparently a major point in Murray's spirituality. To recover a 'sense of feeling', 'to pray with a whole heart,' to move beyond a benumbed moral conscience in the face of modern horrors is the option Murray claims for himself. Yet it is one where he has had to go through the horrors to see the world right again.

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<sup>1</sup> Alexander, *op cit*, p292.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, p293.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, p294

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, p293.

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What gives substance to Murray's distinctiveness in religious terms is his effort to hold to a sense of the goodness of the world throughout his 'black dog' days of the 1990s. He would move away from the writing of *Fredy Neptune*, and go outside in the farmyard and study simple creatures. His series of short poems *Presence: Translations from the Natural World*<sup>1</sup> is a set of studies of animals, his interest in them being equally objective and subjective. It is as though, for him, botanical and biological concentration is a form of prayer, a kind of spirituality informing a materialism.

The poems are as difficult as any of Murray's poems. To take a single example, 'Sunflowers', which moves from close observation to wide cosmic concerns, the poem reads like a conversation between flowers and the sun, abstracted beyond botanical details yet powerfully full of meaning and feeling. The term 'presence' seems a code word for 'sacred', and we might encounter a mystical set of apprehensions of creaturely life which penetrate into the dynamism and origin of life itself as embodied in the sun's relations to earth's living things.

The more presence, the more apart. And the more lives circling  
you.

Falling, I gathered such presence that I fused to Star, beyond all  
fission -

We face our leaves and ever-successive genitals toward you.

Presence is why we love what we cannot eat or mate with -

We are fed from attachment and you, our futures draw weight  
from both, and droop.

All of my detached life lives on death or sexual casings -

The studded array of our worship struggles in the noon not to  
lose you.

I pumped water to erect its turning, weighted its combs with  
floury oil -

You are more intense than God, and fiercely dopey, and we  
adore you.

Presence matches our speed; thus it seems not flow but all  
arrivals -

We love your overbalance, your plunge into utterness - but what  
is presence?

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<sup>1</sup> Les Murray, *Translations from the Natural World* (Paddington, 1992).

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The beginning, mirrored everywhere. The true indictment. The end all through the story.<sup>1</sup>

What is there to say about such mystical writing and experience?

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<sup>1</sup> *Ibid*, p42.