

LES MURRAY'S SACRAMENTAL POETICS

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I want to begin by situating Les Murray's sacramental poetics – that is to say, Murray's sense of himself as a sacramental poet – in the context of the history of attempts to relate poetry and sacrament, which in turn is part of a trend that relates literature and religion (or that sees literature as having assumed the role of religion).

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, as Terry Eagleton and others have persuasively argued, the rise of English Literature as a prominent discipline first in “Mechanics’ Institutes, working men’s colleges and extension learning circuits” (23), and later in universities and at schools, not only related to the slow but steady demise of Classics as a central discipline, but – more importantly – to the decline of religion. As Eagleton writes:

If one were asked to provide a single explanation for the growth of English studies in the later nineteenth century, one could do worse than reply: ‘the failure of religion’. By the mid-Victorian period, this traditionally reliable, immensely powerful ideological form was in deep trouble. It was no longer winning the hearts and minds of the masses, and under the twin impacts of scientific discovery and social change its previous unquestioned dominance was in danger of evaporating... Fortunately, however, another, remarkably similar discourse lay to hand: English literature. George Gordon, early Professor of English Literature at Oxford, commented in his inaugural lecture that ‘England is sick, and... English literature must save it. The Churches (as I understand) having failed, and social remedies being slow, English Literature has now a triple function: still, I suppose, to delight and instruct us, but also, and above all, to save our souls and heal the State.’ Gordon’s words were spoken in our century, but they find a resonance everywhere in Victorian England... As religion progressively ceases to provide the social ‘cement’, affective values and basic mythologies by which a socially turbulent class-society can be wielded together, ‘English’ is constructed as a subject to carry this ideological burden from the Victorian period onwards.¹

1 Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 2008), 20-21.

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Even if, like Peter Barry, “I do not accept the simplistic view that the founders of English were motivated merely by a desire for ideological control”,² nonetheless there is much to be said for Eagleton’s analysis. One can certainly trace from the mid-nineteenth-century through to the mid-twentieth-century, a tendency in the first instance to see an analogy between religion and poetry, and then, over time, the gradual demotion of religion in favour of poetry, where poetry (and imaginative literature more generally) is said to assume the role formerly held by religion, and takes on the properties of religion in communicating moral truths and timeless realities, so much so that it comes to be described in sacramental, liturgical and theological terms. So, for example, in the peroration to his *Lectures on Poetry* delivered in the first half of the nineteenth century, John Keble, the Anglican poet and priest, declared, “Poetry lends religion her wealth of symbols and similes; religion restores them again to poetry, clothed with so splendid a radiance that they appear to be no longer symbols, but to partake (I might almost say) of the nature of sacraments.”³ Almost fifty years later, Matthew Arnold argued that since the “fact” had failed it, the strongest part of religion was the “unconscious poetry” of its rites and rituals.⁴ A hundred years later still, the English novelist and philosopher Iris Murdoch declared that art and poetry fill the void left by sacraments and prayer in an “unreligious age.”⁵ Yet, while Murdoch was paradoxically equating art and sacrament at the very same time as she was sounding the death-knell of religion, the Catholic painter and poet David Jones was coming to the end of a career that had been devoted to reconnecting art with its ancient roots in sacramental practice. Persuaded by Jacques Maritain’s extraordinary claim that “the Eucharistic sacrifice [is] at the heart of poetry,”⁶ Jones related art to the sacramental life with a sophistication and depth that exceeded any before him. For Jones, the sacraments themselves were a form of craftsmanship by which the work of human hands became an incarnation of the Divine. Jones first relates the Eucharist to painting. As the body and blood of Christ are said to exist under the “species” of bread and wine respectively, so a painted object or scene really exists “under the species of paint,” and “as through

2 Peter Barry, *Beginning Theory* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009), 14.

3 John Keble, *Lectures on Poetry: 1832–1841* (Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 2003), 481.

4 Matthew Arnold, *Essays in Criticism* (Second Series) (London: MacMillan, 1903), 1.

5 Iris Murdoch, *The Fire and the Sun* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), 76.

6 Jacques Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism* and *The Frontiers of Poetry*, trans. Joseph W. Evans (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1974), 132.

and by the Son, all creation came into existence and is by that same agency redeemed, so we, who are co-heirs with the Son, extend, in a way, creative and redeeming influences upon the dead works of nature, when we fashion material to our heart's desire."⁷ In his major work, *The Anathemata*, poetry too is subsumed into the Eucharistic sacrifice, where the poet working at his poem is compared with the priest at the altar, "making this thing other."⁸

Contemporary literary criticism has also borne witness to the increased awareness of the relationship between poetry and the sacraments, giving rise to something of a minor genre in critical discourse.⁹ This is particularly noticeable in Hopkins scholarship where some extraordinary claims have been made about Hopkins' intentions for his poetry. Maria Lichtmann, for example, has argued, "The poem, for Hopkins, is the Body of Christ. It is the Eucharist in the sense of bearing the motionless, lifeless Real Presence of Christ, of acting with sacramental, transforming instress on the reader as Hopkins has himself instressed nature."¹⁰ Eleanor McNees is equally daring (and equally vague) in her claim that Hopkins "crafts a poem as a kind of Mass in which all words work to voice the one Word—Christ. The successful poem enacts the Eucharistic process. . . . The moment of sacrifice is the culmination of real presence in the reader."¹¹ Margaret R. Ellsberg, meanwhile, has argued that, for Hopkins, poetry "is the sacrament of flesh, word and spirit charged by their interpenetration with each other."¹²

More recently, connections between art and sacrament have been brought

7 David Jones, *The Dying Gaul and Other Writings* (London: Faber and Faber, 1978), 287.

8 David Jones, *The Anathemata: Fragments of an Attempted Writing* (London: Faber and Faber, 1972), 49.

9 See, for example, David Brown and Ann Loades, eds. *Christ: The Sacramental Word—Incarnation, Sacrament and Poetry* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1996); Theresa DiPasquale, *Literature and Sacrament: The Sacred and the Secular in John Donne* (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co., 2001); Eleanor McNees, *Eucharistic Poetry* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 1992); Kathleen Norris, 'A Word Made Flesh: Incarnational Language and the Writer,' in *The Incarnation: An Interdisciplinary Symposium on the Incarnation of the Son of God*, ed. Stephen T. Davis, et. al (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 303-12.

10 Maria Lichtmann, 'The Incarnational Aesthetic of Gerard Manley Hopkins,' *Religion and Literature* 23, no. 1 (1991): 44.

11 Eleanor McNees, *Eucharistic Poetry: The Search for Presence in the Writings of John Donne, Gerard Manley Hopkins, Dylan Thomas and Geoffrey Hill* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 1992), 77.

12 Margaret R. Ellsberg, *Created to Praise: The Language of Gerard Manley Hopkins* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 45.

to a new point of fusion in the poetry of Les Murray, who argues that the "sacramental is the body, it's the mystery of embodiment [and] words form a body called a poem."¹³

Murray stresses the mystical similarities between poetry and religion:

Religions are poems. They concert
our daylight and dreaming mind, our
emotions, instinct, breath and native gesture
into the only whole thinking: poetry.¹⁴

Yet Murray goes further, advancing an idea of the poet as a priest, an offerer of sacrifice. His view of the poet as priest links him with Jones. Unlike Jones, however, Murray does not stress the relationship between the "re-presentation" of Christ's sacrifice in the Mass as the *representation* of a "thing" under another "species" (paint, clay, or language). For Murray, the poet is rather a hierophant, a speaker for the tribe who offers "unbloody" sacrifices. With respect to his own work, he has spoken in specifically Christological terms: "This quasi-priestly work of poetry is Christ, for me; it's His life as I can live it by my efforts."¹⁵

Like both Hopkins and Jones before him, each of whom also converted to Roman Catholicism in his early twenties, after his reception into the Roman Catholic Church in 1964, the young poet was spiritually and intellectually riveted by the Church's principal ritual:

I identified with the Eucharist. I thought, yes, yes, the absolute transformation of ordinary elements into the divine. I know about that. It didn't strike me as unlikely, and it opened such illimitable prospects of life. Most secular mythologies seem to be anxious to close the possibilities of life down and delimit them. This one opened out.¹⁶

The tenor of this statement closely resembles that of another that Murray made in an interview in 1998, where he addressed a more ideological reason for his conversion. As though in response to the critic who once aligned a dimension of his work (and, by implication, his religion and politics) with

13 William Scammell, 'Les Murray in Conversation,' *PN Review* 25, no. 2 (1998): 31.

14 Les Murray, 'Poetry and Religion,' in *Collected Poems: 1961–2002* (Potts Point: Duffy and Snellgrove, 2002), 265.

15 Quoted in Peter F. Alexander, *Les Murray: A Life in Progress* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 2000), 155.

16 Missy Daniel, 'Poetry is Presence: An Interview with Les Murray,' *Commonweal* 119, no. 10 (1992): 10.

“pinched unadorned belligerence and dogma,”¹⁷ he stated, “My politics are anti-totalitarian. That’s why I became a Catholic. It’s for everybody. It may have a low opinion of sinners, but it’s equally low of all. You’re warned not to be proud, but also assured that you’re of infinite worth.”¹⁸

If it was an attraction to the Eucharist and to the inclusiveness of Catholicism that drew Murray to that faith, it was the work of the poet-priest Hopkins which principally “turned [him] on to poetry”¹⁹ and opened to him a dimension of the craft which, many years later, he would link with the Eucharist. After reading Hopkins, “bang, I suddenly discovered this language with a live electric current through it—you know, powerful stuff. I’d been casting around for an art form for a year or so. I’d gradually been moving away from military fantasies . . . I discovered that poetry was about presence.”²⁰

Certainly, if poetry is about “presence” so is the Eucharist, and if the Eucharist is about the transformation of the ordinary into the divine, so too is poetry concerned with the interaction between the everyday and the absolute. As Kevin Hart has noted, Murray “sometimes follows what he calls ‘an incarnational logic’ in which, as Christ is both God and man, a poem is about the holy and the ordinary at once.”²¹ Similarly, if the Eucharist stands against “secular mythologies” that “close the possibilities of life down,” so too is poetry (in what Murray calls the “celebratory mode”) characterized by a “refusal of alienation and a species of humility” which “doesn’t presume to understand the world, at least never reductively, and so leaves it open and expansive, with unforeclosed potentials.”²² Yet while a poem may be open to “unforeclosed potentials,” it is also “a very contained thing that holds down these tremendous energies.”²³

The “tremendous energies” Murray refers to represent two opposed forces in his work—divine presence, on the one hand, and the need for blood sacrifice on the other:

17 Gig Ryan, “And the Fetid Air and Gritty,” *Heat* 5 (1997): 199.

18 Scammell, ‘Les Murray in Conversation,’ 36.

19 Daniel, ‘Poetry is Presence,’ 10.

20 ‘Poetry is Presence,’ 10.

21 Kevin Hart, “Interest’ in Les A. Murray,’ *Australian Literary Studies* 14, no. 2 (1989): 158.

22 Les Murray, *A Working Forest: Selected Prose* (Potts Point: Duffy and Snellgrove, 1997), 360.

23 Scammell, ‘Les Murray in Conversation,’ 31.

Wait on! Human sacrifice? Surely that's an archaic horror that survives only very marginally in a few Third World groups that anthropologists write about? Surely the holocausts of this century in what we call 'our' civilization can only be called human sacrifices in a very metaphoric sort of way? Surely there's a distinction to be made here between the literal and the metaphorical? My answer is, there may be, but I don't know of one water-tight enough to prevent the blood from seeping through it.²⁴

A poem, for Murray, transforms the desire for sacrifice into a "presence" as Christ on the Cross is simultaneously the victim of the sacrifice and the offerer of His presence. A poem holds down both "energies" within itself:

A poem which stays within the realm of literature completes the trinity of forebrain consciousness, dream wisdom and bodily sympathy—of reason, dream and the dance, really—without needing to embody itself in actual suffering or action, and without the need to demand blood sacrifice from us. It is thus like Christ's Crucifixion, both effectual and vicarious.²⁵

Elsewhere the simile is reversed:

Jesus is like a literal poem, taking these terrible energies that sacrifice people—looking for significance, to underline and stimulate it, by giving it sacrifice. He's saying, that's a superceded principle, I've taken that upon myself, it's all in here, refer to this figure, it's contained. I'm always looking for the containment of human sacrifice.²⁶

Believing that a desire for human sacrifice and "significance" underpins human activity to varying degrees, Murray sets up an opposition between a resolved work of art, such as a poem, and disembodied "idols" which "demand" blood sacrifice "to embody" themselves.²⁷ The need for sacrifice, as such, is either resolved in ritual or art, or actual human sacrifice. Murray aims to craft a poem which is a contemplative site, the point into which human blood-lust is transformed into "a never-murderous skim / distilled," and thus to show how it shares in a Eucharistic identity in the sense that it incarnates a presence which feeds the human desire for sacrifice and therefore, potentially, prevents such sacrifice through catharsis.²⁸ In this

24 Murray, *A Working Forest*, 131–32.

25 *A Working Forest*, 321–22.

26 Scammell, 'Les Murray in Conversation,' 31.

27 See, for example, Murray, 'The Instrument,' in *Collected Poems*, 458.

28 'The Instrument,' 458.

way it is both “effectual and vicarious.” If poetry symbolizes for the poet the completion of his youthful journey away from “military fantasies” (and marks a rejection of them), so the Eucharist, as part of what he calls “The Iliad of peace,”²⁹ stands against and resolves the “human sacrifice . . . at the heart of literature,”³⁰ along with the innate need to offer blood sacrifices that military fantasies represent.

Murray’s first collection of verse, *The Ilex Tree*, was published jointly with his friend Geoffrey Lehmann in 1965. Murray’s contribution to the small collection contains poems that evoke the world of rural farmers and timber workers and celebrate the freshness and regenerative powers of the natural world. “Spring Hail,”³¹ a poem clearly influenced by Hopkins’ “Spring” and Dylan Thomas’ “Fern Hill,” delights in its natural setting where the numinous permeates the physical landscape—“Fresh minted hills / smoked, and the heavens swirled and blew away”—and where the experience of “spring hail” evokes an atmosphere of reverent awe before the mystery of God’s creation, such that the occasion of the poem becomes (through a pun on “hail”) at one with the speaker’s response of praise. It strikes a note that has reverberated throughout Murray’s career, one that can be heard resoundingly in his second collection, *The Weatherboard Cathedral* (1969), whose title suggests the nature of Murray’s project: to craft from his humble origins something beautiful for God, “the transformation of ordinary elements into the divine,” a Cathedral in weatherboard. In Murray’s vision, the natural world is made “vivid” by the Incarnation,³² re-manifesting Christ’s presence in creation so that it can always be turned to for spiritual nourishment:

The things I write about are mainly religious or metaphysical—I’m concerned with relations between human time and eternity at the odd points where they meet and illuminate each other, eg. where matter becomes immortal, or spirit enters time “for a season”. (It happens.) This heirophanic [hierophantic] thinking works both ways of course: calling on men to witness the world of spirit and, almost, calling on that world to witness us. Like Octavia Paz said in a poem I once translated: the Mass is “an incarnate pause between this and timeless time”. Joints and junctions like that, arising in the

29 — ‘Animal Nativity,’ in *Collected Poems*, 374.

30 Les Murray, *The Boys Who Stole the Funeral* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1980), 29.

31 — *Collected Poems*, 8.

32 — ‘Animal Nativity,’ in *Collected Poems*, 374.

oddest places, are my meat.³³

In "Once in a Lifetime, Snow," the poet offers an example of eternity entering time "for a season," and it is interesting to note the response of the farmer to this occurrence. He eats the snow as he recognizes its numinous significance:

A man of farm and fact
he stared to see
the facts of weather raised
to a mystery

white on the world he knew
and all he owned.
Snow? Here? he mused. I see.
High time I learned . . .

perceiving this much, he scuffed
his slippered feet
and scooped a handful up
to taste, and eat

in memory of the fact
that even he
might not have seen the end
of reality . . .³⁴

The numinous snow, a fact of weather "raised to a mystery," assumes by analogy some of the qualities of the Eucharist where the bread and wine are raised to the mystery of Christ's body and blood in "memory" of Christ's passion. The farmer's response is similarly Eucharistic: he tastes and eats the snow "in memory of the fact" that reality exceeds the limits of material existence (anticipating the poet's description of the Incarnation as the making "Godhead a fact").³⁵ Eating the numinous snow is the means by

³³ Quoted in Alexander, *Les Murray*, 91.

³⁴ Murray, *Collected Poems*, 23.

³⁵ — *Collected Poems*, 537.

which the farmer physically responds to the spiritual dimension of what has taken place; he incorporates it into himself both to “taste” and savour the experience as well as its significance. While the phrase “in memory of the fact” recalls Christ’s words “Do this in memory of me,” “Taste, and eat” also echoes part of the Eucharistic words of institution – “Take and eat” – and recalls the scriptural injunction, “O taste, and see that the Lord is sweet.”³⁶ These connections are quite deliberate. By exceeding the limitations of “reality” as understood by the farmer, the event hints at all the spiritual dimensions hitherto ignored by him—the unforeclosed potentials of the natural world. Eating the snow is the means by which that which had previously been beyond the imagination of the farmer—that which had been external to his vision—is incorporated into his imagination without being exhausted by it.

The *Weatherboard Cathedral* reveals the many-sidedness of Murray’s sacramental poetic. As well as depicting a world saturated with God’s presence (a dimension of Murray’s work that reached its apotheosis in the 1992 collection *Translations from the Natural World*), it also shows how the sacramental enlarges to embrace the sacrificial aspects of the human and animal kingdoms. What Bernadette Ward has said of Hopkins applies equally to Murray: “to look for the intellectual core of his work is to move . . . well beyond a mere generalized feeling about something spiritually nourishing in the beauty of the world. Sacramentality is sacrificial, having to do with loss as well as joy; it perceives God’s action in scenes not at all attractive to the senses.”³⁷ In poems like “Blood” and “The Abomination,” Murray uncovers the need for sacrifice at the heart of the animal kingdom. In “Blood,” the speaker describes himself walking

back up the trail of crowding flies,
back to the knife which pours deep blood, and frees
sun, fence and hill, each to its holy place . . .

And notes:

A world I thought sky-lost by leaning ships

36 Psalm 33:8.

37 Bernadette Ward, *World as Word: Philosophical Theology in Gerard Manley Hopkins* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2002), 131–32.

in the depth of our life—I'm in that world once more.

Looking down, we praise for its firm flesh

the creature killed according to the Law.

The pig killed according to the “Law” is an imperfect type of the true sacrifice, held aloft to the sun in a manner that recalls the elevation of the Host in the Mass. Like the snow in “Once in a Lifetime, Snow,” this meat will be eaten, and the idea of “eating” in response to revelatory moments, as a means of reinforcing a sense of communion among individuals and the spiritual world, figures strongly in Murray’s sacramental vision. It becomes a prominent theme in *Poems Against Economics* (1972), his third collection. “Towards the Imminent Days” celebrates the sacrament of marriage,³⁸ the union of lovers which “will heal the twentieth century.” Set in a landscape of houses and “loved fields, all wearing away into Heaven,” it delights also in the earthy, hearty rituals of a country wedding: champagne and chicken suppers, whiskey, pumpkins, and “poddy calves,” as the animal, human, and divine realms—flesh, intellect, and spirit—interconnect in a consciously incarnational celebration of love. More darkly, *Poems Against Economics* questions the obverse drive in humanity, the need to make war, in “Lament for the Country Soldiers.”³⁹ “Vindaloo in Merthyr Tydfil,”⁴⁰ by contrast, takes a humorous view of a mystical experience resulting from the eating of a hot curry (reverently mocking the then-fashionable glances to the Hindu East of many western intellectuals). “Walking to the Cattle Place,”⁴¹ meanwhile, a major sequence of fifteen poems, fuses the central ideas of the collection as it engages with the genuine connections—of language and cattle—between Indian and European civilizations.

In Murray’s work, natural food frequently parallels supernatural food, most famously in “The Broad Bean Sermon”⁴² from *Lunch and Counter Lunch* (1974), his fourth collection. In this poem, the poet explores another one of the “oddest places” – which is, at the same time, one of the most “ordinary” – where natural fecundity discloses its own inexhaustibility and invites the poet to explore the variety of its minutiae. As the title suggests,

38 Murray, *Collected Poems*, 37.

39 *Collected Poems*, 43.

40 *Collected Poems*, 54.

41 *Collected Poems*, 55.

42 *Collected Poems*, 112.

the poem is concerned with the way in which the natural world can become an unassuming voice preaching a “sermon.” The title is partly ironic, for the first image the poet uses to describe the broad beans is that of “a slack church parade / without belief, saying *trespass against us* in unison.” This image illustrates the way in which, at first glance, the broad beans are a mass of seemingly indistinguishable vegetation—yet the ensuing succession of metaphors and similes belies this impression, as the poet is drawn deeper and deeper into the world that holds his attention, and deeper and deeper into his own imaginative and linguistic resources. In the second stanza, the broad beans are still discussed as a collective, while in the third the poet describes the world above “a thin bean forest.” From the fourth stanza until the conclusion, however, the poem explores the relationship between the universal “you” of the poem who goes to pick the beans and the inexhaustible diversity of the beans themselves. This plenitude keeps disclosing more and more variety and difference, which both the bean picker and poet seek to rein in. The rapid succession of compound images is typical of Murray at his exuberant best:

At every hour of daylight

appear more that you missed: ripe, knobbly ones, fleshy-sided,
thin-straight, thin-crescent, frown-shaped, bird-shouldered, boat-
keeled ones,

beans knuckled and single-bulged, minute green dolphins at suck.⁴³

Lunch and Counter Lunch was followed by *Ethnic Radio* (1977) and *The Boys Who Stole the Funeral* (1980), the first of Murray’s two verse novels. The Eucharist, described by the poet as “food that solves the world,”⁴⁴ stands at the heart of this work, which describes an unlikely incident in which two friends, Kevin Forbutt and Cameron Reeby, sensing that Forbutt’s uncle will not receive a proper funeral, steal his body. The crime propels a series of adventures during which the protagonists confront their own inadequacies and approach spiritual enlightenment, recognizing the sacred in the everyday realities of work, family, and nature. Sacrifice, again, is

43 *Collected Poems*, 112.

44 — *The Boys Who Stole the Funeral*, 35.

the dominant theme: human sacrifice—which takes the form of war, murder, abortion, and ritualized attacks on individuals—is explicitly set against God's sacrifice ("The true god / gives his flesh and blood. Idols demand yours off you"⁴⁵). In one key episode, the boys pick up a hitchhiker who elaborates what is later referred to as "his blood theology":

It was all resolved once: this is My Body, My Blood.

*It's coming unsolved now.*⁴⁶

The work argues, imaginatively and forcefully, that it is not possible to ignore Christ's sacrifice without reverting to more ancient, pagan forms of sacrifice, even if these are disguised in the modern age (in the case of abortion, for example) under the veil of "progress". As Murray writes elsewhere, paraphrasing Chesterton: "who lose belief in God will not only believe / in anything. They will bring blood offerings to it."⁴⁷

The question of "sacrifice" looms large in Murray's second verse novel, *Fredy Neptune* (1998). *Fredy Neptune* tells the tale of Fredy Boettcher, a German-Australian sailor who, after witnessing the genocide of Armenian women at the hands of Turkish nationalists in 1917, loses feeling in his body, only to recover it when he learns to forgive his enemies. It is the poet's grand, Homeric exploration of the Enlightenment's disembodiment of humanity and the Christian alternative—the reception of a body (analogous to the reception of the Eucharist) which makes a person whole. The work forms a key part of Murray's career-long attempt to make sense of the relationship between poetry, religion, and ideology, and to find meaningful distinctions between artistic, religious, and political efforts to map experience. By an analogy evident throughout the work, the acceptance of Christ and the regaining of the body are linked with poetry, while totalitarian ideologies are linked with disembodied "poems" (which stand to true poetry as idols stand to the true God) that seek to close people inside them.

After 265 pages of poetic narrative divided into five books of dense eight line stanzas; after having described his journeys through the Middle East, Asia, North America, Europe and Australia, through two world wars and

45 *The Boys Who Stole the Funeral*, 44. These lines reappear in 'The Muddy Trench' at the end of the 2002 Australian edition of the *Collected Poems*, and in 'Church,' a poem dedicated to the memory of Joseph Brodsky, in Murray's collection, *The Biplane Houses* (2006). Their reappearance suggests their centrality to Murray's vision.

46 — *The Boys Who Stole the Funeral*, 9.

47 — 'The Craze Field,' in *Collected Poems*, 161.

the Great Depression; after having saved the lives of numerous people either from accidents or from murderous regimes; after having worked in circuses, a “strong man” asylum, on Hollywood films, on boats, an airship, for corrupt politicians, for Banjo Paterson and Lawrence of Arabia; after having dined with Marlene Dietrich and spoken with Charlie Chaplin; after having been in more adventures than any comic book character and – finally – after having recovered his sensate flesh, Fred concludes his story thus:

nothing

would bring my null-body back. It was gone forever.

The limelight goes off me with it. We went on living:

Joe got married next year, which filled his dimples with grins.

Lou went to high school. I backed Norrie when I’d make extra cash and some people picked I was different. *Not up in your point-shoes, Fred?* as Ron asked me, getting back into his, after the war.

Later on we travelled – I paid to sleep! – and people died of old age. But there’s too much in life: you can’t describe it. (*FN*, p. 265).

As the theologian Michael G. Michael pointed out to me in a conversation about this passage, the last line echoes the final words of John’s Gospel: “Jesus did many things; if one were to write them down one by one, the whole world, I believe, could not contain the books one would write about them”.⁴⁸ It is interesting to recall here Murray’s words on the “celebratory mode in poetry”, characterised by a “refusal of alienation and a species of humility” which “doesn’t presume to understand the world, at least never reductively, and so leaves it open and expansive, with unforeclosed potentials”.⁴⁹ By deferring to silence, Fred defers to the example of the great apostle of the Incarnation. The work enacts the restoration of Fred’s body, making it present, but it is the presence of individual mystery restored to wholeness and completeness and therefore, paradoxically, to that which is unforeclosed – contained but not reducible to its confinement in language.

Like the farmer in “Once in a Lifetime, Snow”, Fred realises that reality

⁴⁸ John 21: 25. In conversation at Tory’s Hotel, Kiama. December 2004.

⁴⁹ *A Working Forest*, 360.

exceeds the limits even of his incredible experience. The text – which has become his “body”, the book called *Fredy Neptune* without which we could not know him and through which he exists – contains but does not limit the existence it maps, any more than the books of Scripture or the sacraments can limit the life of God. God remains an ungraspable trace and yet he mediates his life through the textual, concrete and particular facts of material existence. Art – whether this book or any other – is inexhaustible because life is inexhaustible. This does not mean that the text has no relationship to life, or that the text has no existence outside of itself, for as Murray writes elsewhere: “nothing’s true that figures in words only” (“Poetry and Religion”, *CP*, p. 265). On the contrary it confirms such existence because it confirms that it derives its life *from* outside of itself, from grace, and mediates that life to (as it receives it through) the reader’s touch.

Fred’s humility before the enormity of life and of human existence, his *apophatic* refusal to totalise by summary and generalisation, sets him apart from the purveyors of racial and class theory depicted in the book, whose poems “burn women”. What distinguishes Fred’s response to illness from those who become murderers for a cause, is Christ. Christ as God is the law against closure, the guarantee of diversity and the protector of individual integrity and worth. Fred acquires the internal authority of the Logos by agreeing to accept his body, thus becoming a true individual. With his body back, he is no longer like a disembodied and abstract concept. The centre, as Murray has said, is where any living thing is, and Fred becomes a centre by becoming a fully living thing. The centre of the world can no longer be understood exclusively as a geographical place (home, the city, or a Nation); rather it becomes the personal integrity of the individual, actualised in the combined workings of the dreaming and rational minds embodied in time and space. A key part of Fred’s learning to pray with a single heart is learning that he is not beneath being a “centre” of the universe, nor beneath being a concrete realisation of God’s ‘poem’ that makes the centre complete and present at every point, including the periphery.

Throughout the work Fred always acknowledges and protects the rights of others to their place in life – writing them, as it were, into his own book of life. Unlike the Communists’ red book and Hitler’s *Mein Kampf* (which is described as “his dead body...that he’d enclosed my people in”, *FN*, p. 207), Fredy Neptune, both character and book, is alive – *his* once “dead body”

resurrected by God's grace. When Fred receives his body back and becomes fully himself, the silence that soon follows reveals that it is the very open-ended-ness of the work (representing Fred's humility) that places it within the divine economy articulated during one of his theological discussions:

At speed after there I asked Iowa: *What about it? God saving us?* –

It's a promise...Buy it, and nobody's a failure. No one's book is closed. (*FN*, p. 158)

The book is finished but not “closed” for “like any poem, it must be inexhaustible and complete”, as Murray writes in “Poetry and Religion”. And God, as Murray writes in the same poem, is the law against its closure, the one who cannot ultimately be quantified by the univocal urge to transform the other into the self. He is thus, in Christ, the only answer, the only point of resolution who can be found everywhere. In accepting this, Fred places the eucharistic sacrifice at the heart of his poem, a sacrifice that *is* human with the crucial difference that it is also divine.

Murray's images of sacrifice, his theory of the importance of the body for an understanding of the whole person, and his explorations of all the places where God is “caught, not imprisoned,” have extended the possibilities of a sacramental poetic by showing how aesthetics embraces ethics. What Tom D'Evelyn said of *Fredy Neptune* in the *Providence Sunday Journal* applies to Murray's work as a whole: “[it] embodies the hope of a human order in an inhuman and disordered time.”⁵⁰

50 Quoted on back cover of Les Murray, *Fredy Neptune* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999).