

James Tulip

TAUT AND VISIONARY: THE POETRY OF GEOFF PAGE AND LES MURRAY

Geoff Page, *Darker and Lighter*, Five Islands Press, 2001. ISBN 0 86418 723 8
Laurie Hergenhan & Bruce Clunies Ross (eds), *The Poetry of Les Murray: Critical Essays*, UQP, 2001. ISBN 0 7022 3291 2
Les Murray, recorded on October 22nd 2001 at The Audio Workshop, London. The Poetry Archive Ltd, Ball's Green House, Minchinhampton, Gloucestershire, GL6 9AR, England.

A friend of mine recently pointed to a Geoff Page poem which the *Sydney Morning Herald* published as part of an Anzac feature (18.5.02). He asked me what I thought of it. The poem was called "Christ at Gallipoli," and ended with these three lines:

Seeing him wave that blood-red bayonet,
I reckoned we were glad
To have him on the side.

"Yuk!" I said. My friend queried, "Irony?" "Irony!" I exclaimed. "Geoff Page ... Irony?!" I looked again. Too true. The whole text made the poem ironic. An epigraph from the Anglican Synod, Melbourne, 1916, eulogising Anzacs as angels ought to have warned me. Page's gnarled imagistic style as a macho David Williamson scenario had excluded attitude from the poem, and let the clash of contents—poem and epigraph and title—do the work.

I don't know that I admired the poem much more for seeing it whole. It seemed something of a trick, the subject asking for more seriousness since Australian feelings on this matter have matured interestingly in the past decade. It led me to wonder if Geoff Page is not now captive to his own gifts and strengths. Perhaps he is all too ironic. The William Carlos Williams' surface to his poems has become a kind of mask—an iron-bark mask—that suits his laconic, non-nonsense avoidance of affect but is showing itself as limited when dealing with the generally sombre material which his new book of poems has to offer.

There are some 100 poems here in *Darker and Lighter*. Short, occasional, epigrammatic, often sardonic, they range around subjects from daily living, family, marriage, new relationships and places to live, and reflections on poetry. Memories of parents and recollections of the family home are

intelligently presented, and in a way that few other contemporary Australian writers can capture. There is a kind of respect Geoff Page pays his subjects which makes for a level playing field in personal relationships. He is open, personable and modest in the way he approaches his material. Yet some of the material suggests he is repressing feeling. Quite often a poem will end with a lament: "Why is it that I need to have // my ashes in the river?" The dying fall at the end of his poems is intriguing.

"A poem is a small machine," he quotes from William Carlos Williams, and so many of the poems in *Darker and Lighter* work like that. Proficient, neat and secure in the steps they take, they have, so to speak, an appropriate energy. It makes me think of a 4 to 6 HP outboard motor, ideal for estuary fishing but careful not to cross the bar. It sits oddly alongside the perspective of great power that Page can entertain from time to time. As in "The Analogues":

Those speedboats on the Boobera
As if along an ancient spine
Wincing under water

Or Harley Davidsons in church
Throaty on the sacred tiles
And heading for the altar.

Les Murray, for his part, has been putting out to sea, metaphorically as well as almost literally, for the past decade or so. It has been such a mixed time for him. Triumphs, tragedies—*Dog Fox Field*, *Killing the Black Dog*, *Subhuman Redneck Poems*, and *Fredy Neptune*—Murray has plunged into suffering: his own, his family's, the world's. Peter Alexander, in his recent biography, sees Murray at the end confronting and challenging God for allowing so much suffering in the world. It is the opposite of Geoff Page's modesty.

The Poetry of Les Murray: Critical Essays is, however, a tribute to Murray's genius. Laurie Hergenhan and Bruce Clunies Ross have collected for University of Queensland Press a highly readable set of ten essays drawn largely from a circle of academics at the University of Copenhagen in Denmark. It appears there is something of a "School of Les Murray Studies" there! The level of discourse is very high. Murray is seen internationally as belonging with Derek Walcott, Seamus Heaney and Joseph Brodsky as writing globally, while thinking locally. It is a remarkable connection. Murray has been perpetually surprising us by digging deep into Australian soils, and now is being celebrated abroad for the power of his vision. It is Laurie Hergenhan's achievement to bring this collection of essays together as his final contribution to Australian Literary Studies.

Martin Leer's essay "This Country is My Mind: Les Murray's Poetics of Place" holds the two poles of discourse together well, going closely into "Evening Alone at Bunyah", "The Idyll Wheel", "The China Pear Trees", "Walking to a Cattle Place" among other poems, and developing from them and the ideas of his Copenhagen colleagues, a sense of chiasmus as a figure appropriate to Murray's approach to his world.

Chiastic embodiment is also a substantiation of the physical nature of the meditation: the walking, driving or other forms of physical movement in Murray's poems. With the reciprocal movement in thought through the landscape, the expansion from within which might transcend into metaphor and symbol is placed. (31)

It is a complex but rewarding long line of argument by Leer, full of rich insight and keen knowledge of Murray's work. It comes close to laying claim to Murray's spirituality as a double helix. Yet in this it suggests also the dimension of Murray which is not explored sufficiently in this book, his serious position as a religious person. The weight of emphasis given to Fredy Neptune is another of the book's strengths, but it too takes us to the edge of prophetic awareness in Murray without finally assessing what is in Australian terms a surprising response to "the power of blackness." Peter Steele, Peter Pierce, Christopher Pollnitz and Noel Rowe are local contributors who show how lively is the interest here in Murray's many-sided achievement, and Carol Hetherington reinforces this fact with a selective, but very useful, bibliography.

Murray is amazing with the sheer proliferation of his poems. I was surprised going through the list of the ones he recently recorded in the United Kingdom, and finding I did not know most of them—and this after thirty years of reviewing him! The CD is one of the best performances Murray has given as a reader. He seems to like a microphone more than an audience. His voice is full and deep, and there is enough affect for effect. I had hoped to hear him do "Bats' Ultrasound" with its vowels and semi-vowels in some high-pitched mysterious way. But no. It is the "absolutely ordinary" Les Murray that we get.