

## CLEARLY CRASS



*John Redmond*

LES MURRAY, *Subhuman Redneck Poems*. Carcanet, £7.95

In his pugnacious new book, *Subhuman Redneck Poems*, Les Murray makes a point of confronting us with his bulk. A round, bald man, now in late middle age, Murray is intensely conscious of his lack of physical appeal. At school, he tells us, he had a miserable time mainly because other children mocked his size:

... all my names were fat-names, at my new town school.  
Between classes, kids did erocide: destruction of sexual morale.  
Mass refusal of unasked love; that works. Boys cheered as seventeen-year-old girls came on to me, then ran back whinnying ridicule.

Many of the poems in the book deal with the various ways that people can be dehumanised and the author's own experiences—apart from being an obsessive concern—are meant to be a central example. The theme of suffering which they introduce is extended to the group from which Murray springs—white, rural, working-class Australians—what he, with a kind of sarcastic pride, calls “Rednecks”. “Redneck” is a powerful term of abuse—most of the media are middle-class and metropolitan and it is mainly targeted at the rural poor. Irish readers will know the term from our own overheated conversations about culture and politics (examples are such political books as Desmond Fennell's *Nice People and Rednecks* and John Waters' *Jiving at the Crossroads*). Murray's Irish-Australian background means that many of his cultural attitudes run along similar lines to those which proceeded from the Celtic Revival and its aftermath. Compared with Yeats's noble peasant, however, Murray's redneck is less ambiguously, and much more aggressively presented. He is a cultural hero—misunderstood but straightforward, embattled but dignified—a cross between a Redskin and a refusenik.

A pronounced communalist strain, of the kind one often finds in old-fashioned Catholic writers, runs through Murray's work. He is against big economics, big government, big media and especially against the city-

slickers who work on their behalf. He is for Catholicism, Aboriginals, Rednecks, farming, deserts, water-gardening, eccentric learning, and cows. He is fiercely territorial, always talking about coming into his own kingdom, returning to a place from which he draws physical and spiritual sustenance—"Our croft, our Downs / our sober, shining land". Murray's view of the world has a cartoon-like naïveté. Against the Australian government, political correctness and the mainstream media, his plain-speaking, Christian water-gardeners bravely battle away. Murray's enemies are never believable as people. Monarchists, in the poem "The Swarm" are pictured as a bunch of thoughtless drone-bees, whereas Murray's side, the Republicans, are pictured sailing by on an altogether higher plane: "We must love and bypass them, like Nature".

In the modern world many people feel embattled and besieged, and there are many who would agree with Murray's particular choice of enemies. But that is not the point. What matters is the way in which one's grievances are expressed and Murray's satire is nearly always vulgar:

Higamus hogamus  
Western intellectuals  
never praise Auschwitz.  
Most ungenerous. Most odd,  
when they claim it's what finally  
won them their centuries-  
long war against God.

What would—what could—a Jewish atheist make of this? The reference to Auschwitz seems to be deliberately provocative, deliberately politically incorrect, as if saying "I know I'm not supposed to say this—and isn't it brave of me!" But to write a poem about something so serious, partly so that one will be admired in this way, is clearly crass—a poem should be mean not be, is the implied message.

What we see here, and what is typical of the book as a whole, is a misjudged handling of "shocking" material. Every half-bright school-child learns the value of startling juxtapositions in poems. Murray, at times, seems to have learned of no other kind of juxtaposition. This is why the book contains lots of ill-tempered references to people being "Fascists". Anything or anyone who looks at Murray sideways gets tarred with the Nazi brush—indeed, one gets the impression that if his car refused to start he would spray swastikas over it. In the poem "Rock Music", for instance, he elides sex, music and fascism in a manner which is all but incoherent: "For the truth, we are silent. For the flattering dream / in massed farting reassurance, we spasm and scream, / but what

is a Nazi but sex pitched for crowds?"

With its opening sentence "Sex is a Nazi", the poem seems to aim for the kind of shocking colloquialism of Larkin's "This Be The Verse". Even if we ignore that terrible repetition of "but", "Sex pitched for crowds" is hardly the most ringing definition of Nazism (which would me more appropriate) and certainly not of a Nazi.

Many of the other satirical poems are just as sour and sloppy. When he is trying to argue a point Murray's elisions and conceits often confuse the sense: "All of people's Australia, its churches and lore / are gang-raped by satire self-righteous as war /and, from trawling fresh victims to set on the poor, / our mandarins now, in one more evasion / of love and themselves, declare us Asian."

War is not self-righteous though the warriors engaged in its may be, so the simile misfires. Satire cannot form a gang, although satirists can. And from the point of view of sound the expression "People's Australia" might better be replaced with "Peopled".

Murray likes to let his favourite words (God, Truth, Presence, Grace) stand in for the articulation of ideas, like imposing Stonehenge slabs, which he plonks into poems with gay abandon. The intention is to create an impression of weight, but the actual effect is jarring: "Here is too narrow and brief: / equality and justice, to be real, / require the timeless. It argues / afterlife even to name them."

Here, after the portentous first line, we get a very shallow variation on the argument from design. This variation makes no attempt to be plausible, although it makes a considerable effort to sound plausible. Instead it arranges some of the more emotive surface aspects of the argument until one is left with a loose configuration of important-sounding words. All sorts of objection can be raised to it—why should an afterlife be timeless? Do inequality and injustice also require the timeless? In what sense do they require it? In what sense is the term "real" being used? And so on.

Murray is a much stronger writer when he is simply observing and describing. Probably the most winning poem in the book is "It Allows a Portrait in Line Scan at Fifteen", which takes as its subject his autistic child and simply catalogues, with a real sense of expertise, the unusual ways in which the child behaves:

When he worshipped fruit, he screamed as if poisoned when it was  
fed to him.

A one-word first conversation: *Blane*.—*Yes! Plane, that's right baby!*—  
*Blane*.

He has forgotten nothing and remembers the precise quality of  
experiences.

It requires rulings: *Is stealing very playing up, as bad as murder?*  
He counts at a glance not looking. And he has never been lost.

What Murray best likes to describe is water for which he can usually kind any number of adjectives (“Wash water, cattle water, irrigation-pipe-tang water / and water of the Kyle”) and which is a feature of two of the book’s more impressive poem, “Water-gardening in an Old Farm Dam” and “The Warm Rain”. Both of these are catalogues of warm observations and both have a sharply circumscribed subject. The second is probably preferable because the first person narrator is relatively anonymous—in a Murray poem the “I” is usually a herald of self-pity and sentimentality. Nevertheless in each poem the narrator interjects with a deliberately naive exclamation of the kind which the later Heaney sometimes uses: “I love green, humanised water”; “I love it all, I agree with it”. Objects and situations receive, whether they like it or not, a kind of bardic imprimatur. One is perhaps supposed to celebrate this as some kind of hard-won simplicity. A lot of the time it just sounds like babytalk.

Murray’s good reputation did not come out of thin air. The much more impressive early poems from the 60s and 70s are cooler in tone, moving through long stately sentences with a more conventional and careful use of grammar. He showed a capacity (long since lost or repressed) for formal ingenuity in the fine sequence “Walking To The Cattle Place”. An example of the attractive sound-patterns the early style sometimes created is the beginning of “The Fire Autumn” from 1969’s *The Weatherboard Cathedral*:

The walls of the country this year, the forest escarpments,  
the seacoast stump-mountains are fired with amber and buff  
like autumn in the Jura, October legends of fall,  
some hilltops are sailing the storm-rains with almost bare poles  
and the logs that still smoulder in gullies are not far from mist.

Sonorous though they are these early works never give the impression of total mastery, and when they try to be satirical, they can be as crude and ugly as his later material. Early or late, Murray never quite attains a stable, original voice and one is always uncomfortably aware that he is sounding like someone else:

Watching from the barn the seedlight and nearly-all-down  
currents of a spring day, I see the only lines bearing  
consistent strain are the straight ones: fence, house corner,  
outermost furrows. The drifts of grass coming and canes  
are whorled and sod-bunching, are issuant with dusts.

The wind-lap outlines of lagoon are pollen-concurred  
and the light rising out of them stretches in figments and wings.

Beneath the quasi-Yeatsian title of this ("Thinking About Aboriginal Land Rights I Visit The Farm I Will Not Inherit") this shunts pleasantly along the same grooves of diction as one finds in sixties Heaney. This is because the Irish and Australian poets both owe a lot to the outlook of Wordsworth, the diction of Hopkins and the rhythms of Dylan Thomas.

Even in these mostly descriptive poems, with their defiantly rural subject matter, Murray's habit of creating awful neologisms is to be found. In the course of his career he has created "moveless", "abolishment", "alma-matricide", "mattressphere", "Neverwhere", "sound-proletariat", "ever-dive", "unsmell", and, best of all perhaps, "pee-submissive". In a related way, his aphorisms can be remarkably daft: "Modernism's not modern: it's police and despair", "The horror of time is, that people don't snap out of it", "an idea is always a social climb", "We're remarkable and we're not; / we're the ordinary discovered on a strange planet", "A human is a comet streamed in language far down time". "Suspended vessels", for example, ends with some typically twisted language:

I look at coloured cash and plastic  
and toddlerhood's vehement equities  
that are never quite silenced.  
Indeed, it prickles, and soon glares  
if people do not voice them.

Murray now seems to conceive of poetry as a mildly transparent code, a way of recasting something ordinary ("it's raining out") in a peculiar way ("now is wetfall"). As a conception of poetry this is not the worst. But against other notions of what poetry might be about (for example: precision, compression, truth, beauty) it looks weak. Speaking for myself, I don't want "childhood" to be transformed into "toddlerhood" without a very good explanation.

The reason why poetry as code appeals to Murray is that his brand of well-spoken Redneckery requires a language of exclusion, even if Murray is the only one who really speaks it. He affects the satirical manner of public poet in a book which is really motivated by a deep longing for withdrawal—for backing into the Outback. It is not an attempt to persuade anybody to come on to his side—the only persuasion going on here is that of Murray by Murray. He is not trying to convert me, or anyone else, to Redneckery, since he isn't even trying to connect with me or anyone else. I suspect, therefore, that this is a bad book. I know it leaves me "moveless".