

# Teacher's and Reading Notes

Les Murray

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# INTRODUCTION

Les Murray is one of the finest poets now writing in English. His work is distinguished by his ability to combine the high European artistic tradition with Australia's more vernacular culture. It has been translated into many languages and he has received prizes in various countries. His 1998 verse novel, *Fredy Neptune*, was hailed in Britain and America as a masterpiece of twentieth century literature. Below we have provided a timeline of Les's long and varied career, followed by several short autobiographical pieces from his book of selected essays, *A Working Forest* (Duffy & Snellgrove). They provide an introduction to the intensely personal world from which Les Murray's poetry comes.

# CHRONOLOGY

- 1938 Born Nabiac, NSW north coast
- 1957 Sydney University
- 1963-67 Translator of Western European languages at the Australian National University
- 1965 First book of poems (with Geoff Lehmann), *The Ilex Tree*  
Grace Leven Prize for poetry.
- 1971 Becomes full-time poet.
- 1972 *Poems Against Economics*  
Captain Cook Bicentenary Literary Competition Prize (for some poems in the book)
- 1973-79 Edited Poetry Australia magazine
- 1974 *Lunch and Counter Lunch*(prose)  
National Book Council Award
- 1976 *The Vernacular Republic*  
C.J. Dennis Memorial (selected works) Prize
- 1976-91 Poetry Editor at Angus & Robertson
- 1980 *The Boys Who Stole the Funeral*  
Grace Leven Prize for poetry
- 1983 *The People's Otherworld*  
NSW Premier's Literary Award; Canada- Australia Literary Award;  
FAW Christopher Brennan Award; Australian Literature Society's gold medal
- 1986 *New Oxford Book of Australian Verse*
- 1986 Moves from Sydney back to Bunyah
- 1987 *The Daylight Moon*
- 1989 UK Poetry Society choice Australian Creative Fellowship
- 1990 *Dog Fox Field*  
Grace Leven Prize for poetry; UK Poetry Society choice.  
Becomes literary editor of Quadrant magazine
- 1991 Subject of ABC Documentary
- 1992 *Translations from the Natural World*  
Short-listed for T.S. Eliot prize; NSW Premier's Literary Award;  
NBC Banjo Award; Victorian Premier's Literary Award.
- 1995 Wins European Petrarch Award for his life's work
- 1996 Collapses with liver infection which almost kills him (now completely recovered)
- 1996 *Subhuman Redneck Poems*  
UK Poetry Society choice. T.S. Eliot Prize for poetry (London)
- 1997 *A Working Forest* (selected essays)
- 1998 *Fredy Neptune*(a verse novel)  
Queen's Gold Medal for poetry; Queensland Premier's Prize for fiction
- 1998 *New Selected Poems*
- 1999 *Conscious and Verbal*
- 1999 *The Quality of Sprawl*  
Selected essays about Australia

# ON BEING SUBJECT MATTER

If I sometimes boast that I was Subject Matter at my university before I graduated, that is partly a rueful admission of the inordinate time I took in graduating. I entered Sydney University in 1957, stayed there, educating myself and avoiding employment, until the early sixties, and then came back in 1969 to complete the two courses I had left hanging when I ceased going to lectures in 1960. I never got a mark above bare Pass, and my degree of Bachelor of Arts was probably the least distinguished the university ever conferred. I do think, though, that in my case the degree should be called Bachelor of Arts Studies; I am demonstrably married to my art, and it is only towards academic studies that I behave like a bachelor. I have understandably never put the letters BA after my name but I might be tempted to append my true distinction, the degree of Subject Matter. Les Murray Sub.Mat. It is a degree at once distinguished and democratic. In anthropology, sociology, medicine and many other fields, every single human being holds it.

Of course, I would only have been Subject Matter in a very minor way before 1969. It should be remembered that regular courses in Australian literature, especially undergraduate courses, are an innovation. When I drifted out of university in 1962, they were available only, I gather, at the Universities of Toulouse and Leningrad. In Australia, Brian Elliott had pioneered Australian courses at Adelaide and plans were well advanced for a Chair of Australian Literature at Sydney. There may have been other developments in a similar direction elsewhere of which I am not aware. I do know that, in the university as in high school, my generation was never exposed to Australian authors. We had, unknowingly, said goodbye to those in primary school when we finished Dorothea Mackellar's *My Country* and went beyond the excellent, varied old New South Wales *Schools Magazine*.

Poetry, though Scots Australians of my grandfather's generation venerated a limited range of it, was for us a remote and unreal form of writing which referred to the seasons and flora and class-ecology of an archipelago off the north-west coast of Europe, and seemed to deal in sentiments mostly quite unacceptable to boys of the future Third AIF. At least, it seemed sissy on the surface and that was enough for us; we could not be coaxed or driven to look deeper, and most teachers then had too little conviction about – or even understanding of – poetry to force it on us.

It was an option they nearly always allowed us to evade, often not even trying to teach it: 'You won't do the poetry question, so I won't waste my time taking you through it.' I almost managed to get right through high school without any serious engagement with poetry. I had read *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* with some fascination in fourth year; also I had read *Paradise Lost* – indeed, all of Milton – in a single long weekend sometime in my teens, but that was for the science-fiction. I remember being irritated by the wordy, cumbrous manner of the story's telling; the poetry stuff seemed to make it stiff and preachy. In the end, I enjoyed *Samson Agonistes* more. That was a yarn I had enjoyed in the Bible, about a God-favoured Big Bloke who tore the gates off towns and slew enemies wholesale, and ended up as one prepared to pull the factory down rather than work. But I am getting ahead of my story.

I can scarcely have been Subject Matter earlier than the year 1966 because it was only in 1965 that Geoff Lehmann and I published a joint first book, called *The Ilex Tree*, thus giving readers some sort of very early conspectus of our work. We would both thereafter have been mentioned in odd lectures – indeed, we were told this was happening – and part of the impetus for this may have come from a favourable, possibly overgenerous, review of the book by Kenneth Slessor in the *Daily Telegraph*. That, and perhaps the kind review we were given by Roy Fuller in the *London Magazine*. We deserved some such rewards, perhaps: ANU Press, emphasizing its great magnanimity and daring in taking on a pair of young unknowns, had offered us a contract under which we received no royalties. And we were green enough to agree to it.

My work was in its infancy in *The Ilex Tree*, of course, and it is probably surprising that the first Honours thesis on it was written only five years later, by Dianne Ailwood in 1970. This was published in *Southerly* (3/1971). There have been a fair few since, some submitted to universities cosmically remote from my native Bunyah. It gave me special pleasure to hear the brilliant young Teresa Altamore, of Sans Souci and Calabria, formally defend her thesis on Aboriginal art and my debt to it in Ca' Foscari, the University of Venice's palazzo on the Grand Canal, one morning in 1979; it was an excellent piece of work and deservedly got her a *Magna Cum Laude*.

Without any flippancy, I am grateful to all of those who have chosen to study my work. Partly

because of their numbers, I imagine, the Tasmanian education authorities began setting it for study in schools in 1978 and those in my home state followed suit in 1979. This showed considerable magnanimity since I had never been a fashionable writer and had been known to say hard things in print about educators.

Many of the hard things I wrote about educators arose from a campaign to upgrade Federal Government patronage of the arts which began in 1969 with a policy paper I wrote for the Labor Party. In this paper and in an expanded article published in the *Australian Quarterly* in 1972, I pointed out the extreme discrepancy between the wages and conditions of educators and the often-desperate, hand-to-mouth existence of the living authors and artists they taught about. My case for expanded patronage was based on the injustice of treating middlemen handsomely while leaving the primary producers to suffer in irrelevant outside jobs or actual penury. This may have been the last major contribution of genuine old-style Country Party thinking to Australian public life. Many educators were slow to recognize the obligation they incurred by commenting on living authors' texts, and few admit it with any candour even now.

In 1971, desperate for a job of any sort (though also heartsick at the prospect of having one and so losing most of my real working time), I approached Professor Leonie Kramer, of Sydney, and asked her to use her influence to get me some sort of employment around my old university. Not an exalted academic post, of course: research assistant, translator, even trolley-pusher in Fisher Library would do. She refused to help me and I wrote her an intemperate letter demanding that she remove all of my work from the university's Australian literature courses.

Professor Kramer's reaction was to call in the university's lawyers to determine whether I had the right to bar my work from study in this way and, when they concluded that I didn't, she issued a memo to her department ordering that study of it should continue. About fifteen months later, the new Literature Board came into existence, and has since been able to alleviate the lot of many more writers than the old Commonwealth Literary Fund was able to – though the central problem is still far from being solved.

By no means all of my dealings with universities have been unhappy. In late years, I have been Writer-in-Residence at the Universities of New England, Stirling, Newcastle and New South Wales for a term each, and have spent the odd week at a few other tertiary institutions in much the same capacity.

Writerships in Residence are a rather mixed blessing for writers and probably a rather uncomfortable graft within the academic body corporate. They have – or are hoped to have – some public relations value for the institution (Behold, we are patrons of the arts!) and possibly also represent a channel through which unadmitted conscience money can flow, but they draw upon English departments the envy of other scholars competing for scarce funds – 'Here we are, desperate for a new gas chromatograph, and you waste university money on some hairy scribbler who's not even an academic.'

Students' reactions to the writer on campus vary quite unpredictably, but there is always an initial period in which you see very little of them. Those who come along for a talk, at least at first, are usually mature age students or people with only a peripheral connection with the place; young students suss you out for a while before they put in a tentative appearance. And when they do come, the men especially are apt to be highly tentative and defensive until you gain their trust. And that goes double for members of university writers' clubs. At Stirling, I spent two months in seclusion from all but the friendly staff – then, in my final month, a caucus decision seemed to have been taken in my favour, and I found myself yarning with dozens of Scots and English students in the department and the university watering holes alike.

I usually learn a lot from my conversations when I'm at a university; I've always liked learning things by word of mouth. People in English departments like to fill gaps in my literary education – 'Thank you for showing me this Ben Jonson chap: boy, he can write!' – and I gain wondrous knowledge and often wondrous vocabulary from professionals in other fields, though some scientists aren't entirely happy to see the sacred terms of their specialty used like recycled Roman tombstones in the construction of baroque works of art.

There are odd points of discomfort in some residencies. It can be slightly sticky to meet an academic critic who has been busily extracting prose meanings from one's verse in order to refute them and prove that one is a snake-oil doctor, but hypocrite affability will usually defuse that situation. A much worse pitfall, though, and one which the writer may not see at all until he or she has tumbled into it, is caused by the sad envy of those academics who are failed writers and know it. One may earn their savage public wrath merely by existing and writing well – and one may suspect nothing until the lightning crackles out of a clear sky into a critical journal. There is a tiny minority in English depart-

ments (writers often exaggerate its size) who will never feel truly compensated by their regular wage and lush conditions.

Writers who become Subject Matter differ widely in their response to the fact, especially in the degree to which they are prepared to assist students. Some, understandably valuing an often hard-won privacy, decline to make any statements at all about their work; some will give interviews and the odd public address but will avoid the distractions of anything like stumping the country and visiting schools and universities. Judith Wright has increasingly eschewed personal statements, and Patrick White has never made public comments about his writing. And this is perfectly proper. Such people allow their work to speak for itself. Students of geography don't expect a mountain to come into their classroom and explain itself. It simply exists and lets its investigators make their observations and hypotheses, which in turn are replaced by different observations and different hypotheses. Other writers, perhaps more foolishly obliging, perhaps less confident, make themselves more available to those who would or must study them.

I don't accuse Tom Keneally of foolishness or lack of confidence but I know that one year he hired Sydney Town Hall and addressed a vast concourse of school students who were studying a novel of his. Others – and perhaps Tom, too – have talked to students on radio or television, as I have done, and taken opportunities to present themselves and their work in university and college seminars. Given the ambiguous modern entanglement of literature with education, these are forms of publication, and the presence of the author in the flesh can give a fillip of reality to literary studies without which those may never come alive for some students. Particularly for the conscript sort. And there is also, for some of us, the subversive hope of using the institutional set-up to reach and fire potential readers, as it were, over the system's head or behind its back.

The dangers of ego-tripping are of course patent, but there is arguably some value, for other writers as well as oneself, in bearing live witness to the reality and the craft of writing. Without this, many students may go on believing, perhaps only unconsciously, that the whole business of creating literature is somehow remote and a matter of no more than dry intellectual calculation. Or they may be seduced by stereotypes, by some image of trendily disreputable ravers or elegantly asthenic figures with long hair and Parisian berets. And who has ever seen a real poet who looked like that?

My friend Wayne Hooper, who is in adult education, once told me the most educative thing I ever did was to enter a classroom. Stereotypes crumbled to dust at my diffident Clydesdale approach. If only the students knew it, the outward cheerfulness of that approach masked an inner quaking familiar to all fat people with memories of the sort of treatment they endured as fat adolescents in schoolyards long ago. For early training in sensitivity and a balanced view of the nobility of humankind there's nothing like it, but merely crossing a schoolyard, even today, can fill me with muscle-tightening horror. Perhaps an element in my readiness to address school students was a delight in repeatedly facing down a personal demon.

One doesn't, I think, make up one's mind all at once about what one's attitude to making public appearances is going to be. To a considerable extent, one can drift into it. Friends who are teachers invite their friend the writer along to talk to their students. Institutions offer a trip and, usually, a fee – though this isn't an invariable rule: my old school didn't. They also provide a crowd whom they may see as students but whom the writer sees as an audience. Balancing the reading with the teaching, the show business with the education, is one of the strains but also one of the arts of this new field of performance.

The writer must learn the techniques of satisfying both educators and students without currying favour with either. Seeking to play upon tensions he may imagine to be present between teachers and taught is shoddy and self-defeating, and I was never tempted to try it. The tension is not always there and, even when it is, teachers and taught are involved with each other, while the visiting writer is at best a guest, at worst a transient freak show, but always an outsider in the situation. He must never be defensive, but he should not appear unduly assertive, either, and eccentricity only invites the reactions which have kept artists on the margins of life ever since the renegade Plato put us there. I have always found a sort of egalitarian honesty the best approach, partly because I don't have to fake it.

Without sacrificing or glossing over the fact that you are only interested in art of the highest standard – for theories which hold that all people are artists, all attempts at art are valid and of equal dignity, etc., are fraudulent, desolating nonsense and most people of all ages know it – show yourself prepared to talk to young people and their teachers as intelligent people worthy to be told the fascinating ins and outs of a great and ancient profession to which you are wholly committed. And you will usually gain their trust.

Being friendly without unction and genuine without any little lies hidden about you will get you

a hearing and often beneficially change students' perceptions of art itself. This simple recipe may not, of course, be enough when facing doctrinaire groups, but those are not usually encountered in schools or in adult education. They are by no means the rule even in universities, though there the danger of tripping over passionately held theories and shibboleths is notoriously greater. And it is of little use going near venues where the audience has gathered partly to see controversy and fireworks among the artists, rather than art. Unless they have changed a great deal since I gave up attending them, major arts festivals in this country are pretty nearly impossible. Would David Oistrakh take his violin to parliament? And expect ears coarsened by dissension, rhetoric and the noise of competing egos to hear his more delicate nuances? He might beguile them momentarily but at the risk of damaging his instrument and his touch and possibly suffering gross insult to boot.

One further rule I always observe, with groups of all ages, is to prepare nothing in advance. If you are really master of your material – and certainly you should be if the subject is yourself and your own work – you can afford to speak impromptu. That way, you have room to interest and surprise yourself and make discoveries even about things you have discussed dozens of times before. If I developed a spiel, I would disgust and bore myself even possibly before I bored the audience. I am grateful to many students for discoveries they have made or helped me to make about my poems. Any performer – and that is what probably a majority of poets have to be today, at least part-time – is nervous about scenes where the audience is allowed to talk back, but that is the nature of the new education-based variants of the public reading and I have gained benefit from the fact.

As with any performance, there is always at least some 'edge' in facing a class. You quickly learn to size up the potentials. In a school, if all the boys are down the back and all the girls in the front seats you know you are going to have to work hard, because the boys will be inclined to resist you. If there are several teachers in the room and they're all sitting up at the front – or even merely sitting together – all will probably be well. The prospects are grim if they are standing around the walls like warders with invisible truncheons in their hands. Standing teachers are an ominous sign. Even more so if the male ones (it's usually the male ones) wear expressions which suggest that they'd really rather be in the pub, or that they didn't know what to do with their lives but there was this teachers' college scholarship offering.

The size of a class is surprisingly unimportant, though intimacy and real exchanges are naturally more likely if it is small. I have had successful sessions, though, with groups of four or five hundred, good rapport while I was speaking and during question-and-answer sessions. You need to be able to see the whole group without constantly turning your head. Curved seating or any kind of wraparound arrangement plays hell with essential eye contact and other physical cues. Standing to face a class is all right, I suppose, but I usually find it more relaxing, more informal and less suggestive of domination, if I can sit – preferably on a desk or table, so as to gain a little height from which to project my voice.

When you go to a school to address students you enter the classroom as a privileged visitor, often as a welcome diversion from the normal grind, and you are the beneficiary of class control and good behaviour established for you by teachers. None of this will make your visit a success if you bore or disappoint the students, but you do owe the teachers the loyalty of not undermining them with what you tell their students. Teachers bear the long burden of repeating things until they are understood and assimilated, and the misery of never getting through to some at least of their pupils. They can be forgiven if their day-in-day-out performances lack the pizzazz of your single hour or so; they lack the authority you have as the Horse's Mouth. Teachers sometimes have a bumper sticker on their cars which goes: 'If you can read this, thank a teacher.' In my case, I learned to read at home when I was four and didn't enter a school or meet a teacher till I was nine. But it was a teacher who opened my eyes to poetry just before I left school, to such effect that I was set on the course of life I would follow. In class, students will often seek opinions and interpretations from the distinguished visitor which will contradict what their teachers have told them. Often you will not know exactly when this is going on but it pays to be cautious about it. I do warn students against common errors in dealing with poetry – against the still-widespread habit of looking for symbolism in everything, for example. As Freud said, a cigar is sometimes just a cigar. And the subject of a poem or of an image in a poem is frequently more important as itself than as a pointer to something else.

Poetry makes things real, restoring their life and our perception of it, and the ways in which things in a poem refer to the wider world aren't usually as simple as the ordinary school notion of symbolism would suggest: the knack of reading on several levels at once isn't hard to suggest, though, and is usually picked up readily by senior students. I also warn them, as good teachers do, that there is no one Great Golden Interpretation that will get them through their exams. If they want something of that sort, as many sadly do, I give them several. As they warm to me, they will often give me theirs –



which I often can exhort them to trust ... 'Yes, the poem will bear that reading. What is in the poem supports it. It's good. Now, I've sometimes thought this, too ...' When that starts to happen, what may have seemed an onerous and artificial exercise begins to be fun as students catch on and begin to trust their own perceptions.

Shockingly to some, I even admit that I don't really mind analysis of my poems. A good poem, I tell them, should be indestructible and should recover its mystery and resonance as soon as analysis stops. It should be alive and inexhaustible, able to wait when you tire of it and come up fresh and vibrant when you return to it, even years later.

I ask students who don't like school not to take their revenge on poetry just because they first met it in school. I regret that poetry has to be any part of the grading and relegating mechanism which our education so pervasively is, but I tell kids that poetry has to be part of education because it is the very point of education, as exam-passing is not. There was a point in my own schooldays before which I had not 'got' poetry, and before that illumination it was impossible to convey anything to me about it, beyond the most basic rote material and surface fact. After I had twigged, however, everything about the subject would henceforth follow, and I needed no more guidance from teachers. The next help I would need would come from colleagues. I think this moment of illumination is a key thing, perhaps in any field of study, and I always hope to be the one who can somehow cause it to happen or start happening in the students I speak to. In nearly any class, of course, there will be some to whom it has happened already, and those students are easy to spot.

I am not a teacher, and my time with any class is necessarily very brief and concentrated. Giving as little heed as practicable to age or grade or presumptions about my hearers' intelligence, I pay kids and adults alike the compliment of telling them the best I know in one large heap they can sort out for themselves when I am gone. They rarely seem to mind my being very demanding on their powers of assimilation. I tell them how I wrote particular poems, those on their course if their courses are structured around the study of set poems, and surprise some by revealing how imperfectly I usually understand a poem when I first write it; all I have to know is that it is 'right', that it is achieved and has its own life. I might never have thought deeply and, as it were, interpretatively about particular poems if I had not been asked to talk about them to classes of students. Students usually find it illuminating to be told the nodal points, the initial images, thoughts, etc., from which particular poems grow.

I usually tell them a bit about the literary life, about publication, magazines, the book trade and such like and frequently underline the distinction between vocation and employment with the hope that the two will not have to be distinct in their own lives. In all of my talks, I stress the idea of literature as a profession rather than as a mere adjunct to education. I often gently correct prevailing critical misconceptions, such as the belief that Murray hates the city and loves only the bush, and tell them about the relatively few core concerns any writer has – the topics to which he or she will perennially return, as it were, on a spiral of development; moving away from them for a while and then coming back to them with a fresh insight at a later and maybe higher stage of evolving wisdom. Whenever things flag, I read another poem or two – always including some not on their course.

In trying, as it were in one hit, to counter the widespread neglect and disdain of poetry students encounter outside the educational national park in which it shelters and is vivisected these days, I suppose I try at once to normalize it and show how special it is. To do this, I have somehow to separate in the minds of my listeners the ideas of excellence on the one hand and snobbish superiority on the other. Our education does, for complex historical reasons, tend to fuse those ideas together, and the worst obstacle I continually encounter is the dispirited self-regulation of students and teachers alike in all but the poshest schools. This curse is marginally more prevalent, I find, in the country than in the city – though poorer urban areas are as rife with it as any bush town. If there is one quasi-political ( b u t really spiritual) line that I try to push it is opposition to mandarinism and all other forms of consumer hierarchy, opposition to the notion that anything good can be somehow 'too good' for some people or 'over the heads' of a majority.

As I have said, the interaction I have with classes of all ages is usually good. Disruptive behaviour and attempts to stir the distinguished guest are rare. Out of probably hundreds of schools I have visited, I only remember one in which a class rejected me, telling me quite frankly that they hated poetry and would never read it again as soon as they escaped from school. I still smart from that defeat, even though the class was only a dozen pupils strong. I simply failed to click with them, and can't help thinking it must have been my fault. More or less subtle attempts at disconcerting or exploiting the speaker occur very occasionally, as once in a girls' school outside Sydney, where one member of the

class tried, in the midst of a discussion of vernacular culture and the like, to get me to comment about the parliamentarian Ian Sinclair, then under investigation for possible misconduct. Of course I side-stepped the trap, since I knew nothing of Mr Sinclair and since the case was both *sub judice* and quite irrelevant to what we'd been discussing. It turned out, of course, that Mr Sinclair's daughter was a member of the same class. The teacher told me this afterwards, and I'm afraid I described the other girl as a little bitch. Really gormless questions from students are quite rare, and when they come I do my level best to rescue the questioner from embarrassment, by desperately finding some deep point of interest in his query or by almost any other means to hand. I have been a lifelong asker of stupid questions myself, and anyway can't bear to see people laughed at. The only such questioner I remember being unable to rescue from ridicule was the poor boy in one class who asked about my poem 'The Widower in the Country', 'Was his wife dead?' I simply could not, off the cuff, do better than reply sadly, 'That's how you get to be a widower.' Adult classes, of course, contain people with more experience and more ability to talk about it, and sessions with those often become thoroughly enjoyable conversations. Talking about my poem 'The Burning Truck', in which boys who have been hanging around the streets discontentedly go running after the apparently miraculous vehicle that burns but is not consumed and won't stop, a lady who had been through the Blitz in England snorted decisively in one of my classes 'Hmpf! Creatures like that creep into their holes like rats at the first sign of an air raid; you'd never get them back into the streets to follow a burning truck or anything else!' I protested mildly that such things could happen in fiction, surely, and that there were many literal and less literal Burning Trucks people commonly chased after in our time if they were bored with ordinary life, but she was unconvinced. The word 'canaille' burned too hotly in her mind.

I did have a consultative say, over duck casserole in a French restaurant, in the choice of my poems to be set for the New South Wales Higher School Certificate in 1979-80, but I neither had nor wanted any part in marking exams on them. Indeed, I have only ever seen three or four of what must have been thousands of school essays on my work; one, by a boy at Pennant Hills High School in Sydney who had previously preferred the bush ballads to any modern verse, struck me as truly excellent. He said things about my poem 'An Absolutely Ordinary Rainbow' which seemed accurate and which interested me from an artistic point of view. And that is what an artist wants from critics, even more than praise. Approval without real understanding can be a desolating experience. I have had a very good run from the critics, by and large, and have no scores to settle, but the reviews and essays I value and remember are those in which the quality of response answered in some way to the labour, the illumination and the delight which went into writing the poem or poems under discussion. I remember, for example, the illumination that came to me from an essay in which Harry Heseltine pointed out that 'An Absolutely Ordinary Rainbow' was written from the point of view of the crowd rather than the weeping man who stands at its centre, and that perhaps to side, as it were, with the crowd rather than the central figure might be an Australian characteristic. That helped me with my thinking on many Australian things afterwards. Some less helpful forms of criticism are at least amusing. There is that magnanimity, for example, which allows you a triumph but fills the chariot with slaves who whisper dire things in your ear: *You are the last of your line. You will run out of themes. All glory is fleeting.* Or the mild Tiptoe method, for minds eaten out by brilliance and the hard labour of spending the seventies finding some saving virtue in rubbish; such minds have usually lost all recollection of simplicity, and cannot bear to see the obvious. I remember one senior academic who successively asked David Malouf and me what we thought James Dickey had meant by a reference to cattle 'feeding together in the night of the hammer'. When we both told him, quite independently, that it primarily referred to the way cattle are sold by the knock of an auctioneer's hammer and taken to be slaughtered with a hammer-blow to the head at the abattoir, he was amazed. Surely some deeper interpretation was called for. Coarser forms include Fishnet (or Dragnet) criticism, which sees all things in terms of schools, and the Secular Rosary style, which is obsessed with decades.

The least helpful sort of criticism is the kind I call Inquisitorial, which presumes to investigate one's work in terms of an ideology or programme alien to it. Even where this isn't a cloak for ordinary rivalry and jealous ambition, it can tempt people to falsify the work in order to attack it. Tactics used include what I call the Targeting method of criticism, in which epithets are suggested or actually applied to a writer – *conservative, Establishment, reactionary, decadent, Jewish-cosmopolitan* etc.: the inventories of totalitarianism are long and the items remarkably interchangeable – in order to get him or her despised and harassed by activists and fellow travellers who need not look at the evidence for themselves, and may indeed not dare to. A specially cowardly targeting code used by the ABC and many journalists is the word *controversial*. A variant tactic is to drop the target author in the path of an oncom-

ing fashion or Cause. A related technique is the Chain of Presumption, which pretends that the writer's whole range of opinions can be deduced from a specimen position he is seen to hold, or perhaps merely to express: if he believes A, or F, he must also believe B, C, D, E and G. To dislike nudity on the beach is to support racial oppression in South Africa. Application of these methods can already, in Australia, get writers barred from particular magazines, can cause favourable reviews and indeed all reviews of their work to be suppressed, can cost them school and university settings and government funding, can get them defamed and insulted in public, and can provoke professional sanctions against other writers who speak well of them in print. All of these things have happened here. As with so much of criticism, the story which is told is less interesting than the one which might be. The main merit of all such criticism lies in displaying to the public the real implications of the ideologies espoused, and what life would be like for artists and people generally if they came to power. Such criticism is the case law, epitomised in advance, of prospective police systems. More subtly deadening though, are the effects of the received literary sensibility, that pool of assumptions and habits of feelings of the literary-intellectual caste out of which all the ideologies ultimately flow. It is my old enemy, the RLS. It hates my religion, it disdains and patronizes my people, it yearns after aristocracy, it marinades its every word in contempt. If it could, it would make all art its prisoner. I tend to judge the worth of writers and critics alike by the distance they maintain between themselves and the RLS. At the same time, I know that the entrance to literature for most people leads through that sensibility. As we begin learning to write, we assimilate it like tribespeople learning a culture-language, one in which the warmest, most native and homely things cannot be expressed. We have to wrestle with it if we wish to tell any but its prescribed versions of the truth, and it pulls at us like a strange gravitational force, trying to think for us, to snub us out of our most distinctive insights, to proscribe unapproved subject matter, to control and harness unpredictable delight. However extolled, no work written in conformity with the RLS can be better than second rate, and if you are interested in attempting to write supremely well you have to essay a freedom beyond its reach. The joyful surprise there is that such freedom can restore you to the community of a broad readership.

The great secret weapon against the RLS, against Literature with a capital L, is that impenetrable mystery the reading public. Because the RLS cannot fathom or reliably conquer that, it affects to disdain it, and even ascribes class characteristics to it intended to evoke disdain. The dreaded Bourgeois, the unspeakable Mid-Victorian, the despised Housewife. I suspect, though, that the reading public is very much terra incognita, poorly explored and inadequately mapped by anyone. I find it continually surprising. It may in the end be purely a matter of individuals, of myriad singularity, for which all descriptions involving collectivity are inappropriate. The most surprising people, if we give any credence at all to stereotypes, turn out to be readers of literary books – and sometimes of the *Women's Weekly*, *Bugs Bunny* and the *Proceedings of the Australian Institute of Engineers* too, all in the one day. I have had letters from readers of poetry as diverse as station cooks, surgeons and banana growers. An old lady on a train, one of the 'Geriatric' caste so despised by today's Lawrentians, may be seen deeply immersed in T.S. Eliot. A floorwalker from David Jones, his carnation of office still in his buttonhole, may be seen deep in Dostoevsky in his luncheon break. I have seen these phenomena, and had letters from their like. No one even knows what causes people to buy books. We can investigate *who* buys books, but on the matter of which books or why we can only speculate. The Literature Board early in its life, around 1973 or '74, conducted a large study on the matter and arrived at no firm conclusions. Even the effect of reviews remained unknown. Reviewing and advertising must have some effect, we think, and yet we don't know for certain. Scores of books of verse published in the Seventies and extravagantly praised by friendly critics ended up on the remainder tables, having sold twenty to fifty copies in eight or ten years. On the other hand, Kevin Hart's collection *Lines of the Hand*, which was practically sent to Coventry by reviewers, has sold extremely well. Readers seem somehow to have sniffed out its quality in the few bookshops which carried it.

Many publishers, including my own, rely on reviews as free advertising, and yet there seems to be some evidence that advertising as such is more effective. Roger McDonald's excellent *1915* really had quite a lacklustre time with the reviewers when it came out; few praised it unequivocally. On the other hand, it had energetic backing from its publishers, the University of Queensland Press, with large ads for months on end in all the leading publications. It became the book of the moment. People were made conscious of it, to the point where they would look for it, pick it up, dip in – and I have a suspicion, which I can't prove, that the crucial things happen at that point of dipping in. All I can really describe is an almost simultaneous complex of things which happen when I pick up a book in a bookshops. My eye runs over the print, sampling it here and there, inviting it to continue and focus the impulse which made me pick it up, looking for whatever may connect with my interest or surprise

me by extending its range; I even seem to feel my nostrils constrict as I search for the book's tone, its flavour, its likely relations with reality (by which I don't mean just the everyday kind), as well as the quality of its argument, which doesn't have to be high, the quality of its humanity and its quotient of literary devices. All sorts of subliminal, half-physical things are probably also happening, more or less as they happen when we encounter a new person and discover what our attitude to him is. This process of sussing out a book happens in a quick lucid blur, rapidly forgotten if the book fails to grab me, and is really, beyond all reviews or puffery, the chance the book gets. I am probably a quite impure sample, though; after all, I am in the business of writing and publishing books. All the same, I don't think my practices have altered very much since long before I became a writer as well as a reader. The main evolution that has brought in its train is a growing ability to see through Literature to – literature. And to that much-scorned quality of *enjoyment* which may be what other, non-writing readers even more ruthlessly seek from books.

If the Unknown Reader is our best defence against the RLS, it is pleasing to know that in this country, for reasons we can only speculate about, poetry enjoys a much larger readership in proportion to population than in most Western countries. The normal print run of a new book of verse, a slim volume in trade parlance, is the same here as in West Germany, a country with four times our population. When I told people in the United Kingdom about the sales figures our best-known poets attain, figures which I know for most of them from trade sources, they were incredulous. No poet in Britain, not even the most celebrated, could match them. 'So what's the strength,' asked my clansman Glen Murray, editor of the Scots Nationalist magazine *Cencrastus*, 'of this legend about Australia as an uncultured land of illiterate philistines?' 'It is bullshit,' I replied, answering his smile with one of my own. In this late-colonial country, so patronized and excoriated by its ruling literary sensibility, we not only have a better poetry book market than most other Western nations, but our poets often sell better than all but a very few of our novelists.

Having said these things, though, and having praised the Unknown Reader as one of the safeguards of my artistic freedom, I have to pay tribute for my sales also to people driven to read me by the fierce giant Curriculum. As Subject Matter, I have to realize that some of my readership at least is conscripted. I apologize to all conscripts, and fervently hope they find my work such that I can be forgiven. Teachers tell me that they like teaching my work because students seem to enjoy it. I can't imagine they all enjoy it; I have too much faith in human differences to believe that. So long as those who dislike it dislike it on its merits, rather than for any thought-police reasons, I'm pretty well satisfied.

As well as the financial benefits which start to accrue visibly, if not copiously, when one passes from the degree of Subject Matter to that of Set Author, there is this final satisfaction which one has almost from the beginning, even before one is properly accredited as an Occasional Topic. With one's first reviews, there is the thought that, while society may treat writers and other artists as bachelors' children in the matter of worldly rewards, our profession must have some high importance, since it is subject to public scrutiny of a sort granted to no other. It is hard to imagine regular published reviews of barristers, for example, or cardiac surgeons. Think of it: 'With his move to the cardiac field, Mr Brodribb-Cleaver appears to have left behind the timid bourgeois formalism of his earlier appendicectomies and acquired an almost daredevil attack in his incisions. His suturing is as sensitive and finely considered as ever, but his bypass work shows a new insolence, and he brought a neo-*tachiste* profundity to our perception of the mitral valve. With the appearance of this superb stylist, Australian heart surgery has come of age.'

# FROM BULBY BRUSH TO FIGURE CITY

I enjoyed my schooldays, partly, perhaps, because I had comparatively few of them. By accident rather than design, I managed to spend only seven years in schoolrooms. And yet I emerged with my leaving certificate and matriculation to university. Where I grew up, in a part of the country that had remained quite remote, there was initially no local primary school at all. There had been two or three one-teacher schools within walking distance of our farm, but the slump in the birth rate which the Depression brought with it had closed them all down.

It was the late 1940s before Bulby Brush Public School re-opened with an enrolment of fifteen pupils, and by that time I was nine years old. I had learned to read around the age of four, and got into habits of dreamy, bookwormish self-education that would never leave me; I had also done a couple of years of correspondence school by way of the buff envelopes sent out by Blackfriars in Sydney, but those lessons could be done in a day, leaving the other six days of the week for playing down the creek or helping fitfully around the farm. For an only child in the bush, nine is a late age to start socialization, or to start acquiring habits of numeracy and externally imposed discipline. I'm still deficient in all those, and look like never acquiring them now. I'll never be a good employee.

Full of unreal expectations about school, I started off at Bulby Brush on what could have been a disastrously wrong foot. I turned up on the first day with a long essay on the Vikings, written on white butcher's paper I'd lined for myself with a pencil. I was interested in the topic, and thought this was the sort of stuff schools did. The nineteen-year-old teachers' college graduate, whose first posting this was, read the essay in some bewilderment and praised it uncertainly to the other children. In a less innocent place, this would very likely have branded me forever as a 'Brain', a swot and a crawler, but all such terms were unknown to the barefoot farm children who would be my schoolmates for the next three years, and they received it with the same wondering indifference that they gave to most things that happened in that constrained space between eight or so in the morning, when they finished milking and set off for school, and the resumption of real life and farm labour after half-past three. As in Miles Franklin's day, many of them would often go to sleep during class because of the long hours of work they had to do before and after school hours. My own parents were quite indulgent of me in this respect, though I did have my jobs to do, feeding and locking up the fowls, husking and shelling corn, turning the cream separator and many more, and I did my whack of milking on non-school days.

Looking back, I can sympathize with the hellish isolation our teacher must sometimes have felt, among adults who regarded him as a kid and a city weakling, and forgive him for the only four cuts of the strap I ever received in school, although I long resented the fact that two of them came my way on my eleventh birthday.

The Manning-Myall region of NSW now has seven high schools, but in my childhood there was only one, at Taree. I had no sooner started there when my mother died, so I spent the rest of my first year at home, and the following year I entered a school which was much more of a continuation of the ethos of Bulby Brush. This was Nabiac Central School, only twenty-nine kilometres from home, which counted some 150 children of all ages from kindergarten to ninth grade, the stage at which those of us who stayed that long sat for the intermediate certificate. As it was expected by the department that we would all either be farmers or bush workers, or at most enter the bank, our subjects were slanted towards home economics, business principles, woodwork and agricultural biology; glamour subjects such as languages never came our way. On the other hand many of us, probably a majority of the boys in fact, came to school barefoot, prolonging that blessed freedom from foot-distorting constraint which even bush children now lose at the very start of their schooldays.

I travelled to school by milk lorry, working my passage by slinging fifty-kilogram milk cans under the cheerful raillery of the driver's offside. On quite a few days, I would drop off the lorry short of town and find myself a cosy hide down a creek to read or daydream, and an understanding headmaster silently abetted me in this, knowing I could keep up readily by attending two or three days a week and that I never got myself into trouble anyway. I could be relied on to attend on Wednesdays, as that was the day we had educational films; in those pre-television days, I would watch literally anything on a screen, and I've since seen many intense human dramas there which fell short of the sheer wonder

of watching a seed germinate, unscroll and waver upwards to florid maturity in a minute or two, or icebergs calving off looming glaciers in inky Arctic seas. The themes of later movies about humans were all too often only complexified equivalents of these processes anyway and it took a natural solitary a long time to grasp the pathos of that.

I don't remember that we were notably vicious to each other, at Bulby or Nabiac. Anything like outrageous behaviour was constrained by our mostly being related to each other, or at least well within the reach of each other's parents and of community opinion. Real human vileness is safer either in the home or practised on strangers—and anyway it was still easy, in those days before myxomatosis, to take our savagery out on rabbits. Many of us shot them by the hundreds, or trapped them for pocket money in an ecological war which the humans were steadily losing. Earlier, walking the four miles around Deer's high hill to Bulby school, I and George Maurer and my cousin Ray Murray had sometimes caught bunnies by hand, running out wide and then closing in on them from three sides, confusing their poor brains.

Human cruelty only began to come my way as a dreamy fat hillbilly kid at my next and final school, Taree High. That was the first place I learned the nicknames that are used to punish obesity, and the peculiar cultural rituals of townspeople vis-à-vis countryfolk. In my own culture, I had never been persecuted for being fat, or for anything else. Now, almost every sentence addressed to me referred to my figure, and many were uttered only for the derisive nicknames they contained. This went on for two straight years, and I learned to regard as a friend any boy who derided me only in public, to protect himself, and was sensible in private. One miraculous friend, called Colin McCabe, never derided me at all, and even mostly called me by my first name. No girl was ever a friend in any sense; it was made clear, with ornamentations of contempt and frost even by those who didn't go in for loud jeering, that this was unthinkable in my case. It was a firm training in self-sufficiency, and immunized me against any herd-animal leanings I might have developed. The sexes were much farther apart in spirit then, in a way that only misogynists and hardline feminists try to revive nowadays. To be fair, my schoolmates may have found me insufferable in ways they could not express directly. I was an impoverished, deeply naive rural child who lacked all polish, disdained the First Fifteen, talked of sex in medical terminology and tried, by hypothesis, to grasp the Rules by which reality worked. This is always most irritating to those who already know the rules. Looking back, I suppose prolonged mob harassment arises from a counter-evolutionary instinct we share with other animals, a drive to castrate the aberrant individual so that the species isn't changed and its average members made obsolete.

While at Taree High, I boarded first among butter-factory workers who were apt to hold a boy down and 'grease his bearings' with black shoe polish, and then shared a room with a railways' telegraphist who sometimes brought girls home off the late-night trains and romanced them gaspingly in his bed while I tried to stay asleep. That, my final year at school, was the year of Blackboard Jungle and Rock Around the Clock, but I never became a teenager, out of scorn for what would have been denied me anyway. Much more importantly, it was the year in which two English teachers and the sports master introduced me to modern poetry. That fitted in with everything I'd always been, and sealed my fate.